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Katvan Studios

By Louisa J. Curtis



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When you first enter [Katvan Studios](#), you instantly sense that you are not just in a beautiful workspace, but that you are in a delightful and welcoming home as well. And for Moshe and [Rivka Katvan](#), along with their daughter Danielle, the space has indeed served as both since 1983. The two met 35 years ago while attending the School of Visual Arts here in New York City. Moshe confessed that while in class, he already had his eye on Rivka, but once he discovered that she too was from Israel, it was truly "love at first sight!" With both their culture and their passion for photography in common, these two combined forces and have been together ever since. I asked them what are the good aspects of being a couple and working together. *"Sharing ideas, helping each other and being happy for each other when we produce creative work."* And the not-so good aspects, *"Since we are together 24/7, sometimes there are disagreements about ideas, personal space and style of execution!"*

It is clear that each one of them certainly brings something different to the table which, when combined creates a wonderful ensemble of both technical and creative energy. On their Web site, www.katvan.com they rightly describe themselves and the "Yin and Yang" of the studio. And once you have spent some time with them, you can easily sense a genuine unity and a natural harmony between these two. Their partnership is all about mutual support and does not feel at all competitive. But look a little closer and you start to sense just how "opposite" these two halves are that make up the harmonious "whole." To begin with, the differences can be seen right away by the division of labor. *"Moshe is the Still Life and Advertising photographer, mostly in the studio as well as on location. Rivka manages the "business" aspect and collaborates on the studio shoots, while also doing her Fine Art photography."* How perfect that Moshe, a Virgo and a natural "perfectionist" should be the one to shoot all of the studio and still life work? Rivka meanwhile is a Taurus and therefore naturally drawn to dealing with the money as well as feeding her creative side and love of beautiful things. They say Taurus is the sign connected with possessions and if ever a Taurus were to demonstrate that particular trait, it is right there in that lovely loft. Rivka is a self-confessed collector and unashamedly addicted to flea markets and their contents.

And then, when I witnessed each of their separate work areas in the loft, the contrast was even more apparent. Moshe's work area is pristine, minimal and very tidy. Rivka's space is in what used to be her precious darkroom and still bears the "Black & White Whiskey" sign on the door. Instead of developing tanks and fixer, this little room is where she now creates her jewelry. And where Moshe is minimal, Rivka, in blissful contrast, has acquired more antique buttons than you can possibly conceive of, and created a myriad of unique, one-of-a-kind antique bracelets. Although she sells her bracelets as a side business, essentially it is something she enjoys doing when she is not taking photographs. When I asked each one of them what they would like to be if they were not photographers, not surprisingly, Moshe would be an architect and Rivka a jewelry designer.

I asked them to give me the "funniest" moment from a photo shoot, and Rivka recounted one of those perfect "only-in-New-York" stories, a story from back in the day when she was shooting all B&W and developing her own film in that little darkroom. They had been asked to shoot a wedding, and although it was not something they would ever normally consider, as a favor to their friend and for a reasonable amount of money they flew to North Carolina. Rivka had her first assistant shoot the more traditional wedding imagery while she did her own thing and proceeded to document the unscripted moments. 100 rolls of film later, Rivka rushed to the airport to fly back to New York in time to shoot backstage at the Tony Awards. A few days later, she was in her darkroom with two developing tanks, one in each hand, containing multiple rolls of film from the wedding shoot that she expected to contain her best shots, when the phone rang. It was her agent wanting to update her on her book project, and she became so distracted by his call that without thinking she opened the tops of the developing tanks and let the light in. Convinced that she may have ruined the film completely, she slammed the lids back on as quickly as she could and then proceeded to lie on her darkroom floor sobbing hysterically and screaming at the top of her lungs, *"I'm dead, I'm dead!"*

A few minutes later, Moshe, who was on the other side of the loft listening helplessly to his wife's cries, heard the front door bell ring. But when he opened it, he was unexpectedly confronted by several of New York's finest and an entire S.W.A.T. team, one of whom was pointing a gun right at his head. They grabbed him, handcuffed him and took him out of the loft. When Rivka finally emerged from the darkroom, she found her living room full of armed police and her husband nowhere in sight! *"What have you done with my husband?"* she cried in horror? And then the pieces started to fall into the place and the real story came out. Well, turns out that the relatively new tenants who lived next door in the adjacent loft, when they heard Rivka's "death" cries, were so terrified and convinced that they could be listening to some brutal murder and so they called the cops! Of course, the neighbors were most apologetic afterwards for having incorrectly identified the circumstances, but Rivka agreed wholeheartedly that in fact, they had done the right thing because it could have been real, and it is better to be safe than sorry. And, as luck would have it, Rivka lost maybe a couple of the 100 rolls from the wedding, and of course, the pictures were beautiful and the bride was thrilled! Phew!

One of the many questions I asked them about how they work was whether they tended to cast agency models or real people. *"Both,"* they replied, and then Rivka proceeded to give me the background on one of my favorite images entitled, "The French Sisters" which is also the image I chose for this article and for my recent June ChatterBulletin. The two women in the photograph are indeed "French" and "Sisters," but when I asked where she had found them (thinking her answer would be a "village in Normandy" or something) she said simply, *"I found them at the gym."* "You mean your gym, in New York?" I asked incredulously. "Yes," she insisted, *"I saw them at the gym, I had been watching them for a while and then asked if they would let me photograph them."* Obviously they agreed and even better, they came to the photo shoot all prepared with their own wardrobe and sense of style. Those French always seem to possess that "Je ne sais quoi" when it comes to dressing! After they took the portraits, they added in the background with Photoshop. The result is such a charming, funny and beautiful portrait.

What is clear after speaking with these two is that they are willing to "ride the storm." *"We're not going away,"* they said. *"We are going to adapt."* For example, Rivka was a die-hard film person and extremely resistant to shooting digital at first. However, once she finally saw what it could do, a whole new world opened up for her and she now shoots 100 percent digital. They are not afraid to change, they are willing to go with the flow. Rivka takes her camera everywhere and Moshe follows. They like to talk with younger people and ask them for their opinions. They understand it is important to embrace the next generation and not just talk about their own ideas and thoughts. Rivka adamantly declares, *"Don't put me in a box!"* And looking at her work, it is evident why she would not want that. A great artist is not necessarily limited to one genre - look at Picasso and all of the different "periods" he went through. And so it is for these two, they adapt and they shoot what inspires them. From her many years of shooting Broadway backstage, to his precise and conceptual still life, to one of her latest and favorite series (because the models require no releases) of "mannequins and reflections." It is all part of their creative expression and life together as a pair of artists.

And here are some **ChatterDozen** quickie questions to give us even more insight into this pair!

- 1) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, where would you fly to and why? RIVKA: *Albania, Romania, and other post-communist countries... People are still under communist influence, and it would be interesting to see their way of life, and adjusting to a different way of life.* MOSHE: *South America.*
- 2) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? RIVKA: *Paris in the early 20's.* MOSHE: *New York in the year 3000!*
- 3) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? RIVKA: *My parents.* MOSHE: *My daughter.*
- 4) Who is your favorite photographer? RIVKA: *Henri Cartier-Bresson.* MOSHE: *Ansel Adams.*
- 5) What was the last movie you saw? RIVKA: *The White Ribbon.* MOSHE: *Avatar.*
- 6) What is your favorite food? RIVKA: *Israeli salad and spicy Middle Eastern food.* MOSHE: *Coffee and a pastry.*
- 8) Where do you both get your inspiration and ideas? *From other works of art, observing the world, and experiencing life.*
- 9) Do either of you have any specific pre-shoot rituals? *Moshe likes to do an extensive pre-shoot test, while Rivka just falls into it.*
- 10) What is it about New York that keeps you here? *The exposure to many cultures, art, people, experience, etc., and the energy of the city.*
- 11) If I handed you an Oscar for photography whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? RIVKA: *My parents, Bill Broecker (my mentor and teacher), Moshe, and Danielle my daughter.* MOSHE: *Rivka and my daughter, Danielle.*
- 12) And finally I asked each of them to give me three words that summed up their individual style: RIVKA: *Dramatic, natural and emotional.* MOSHE: *Conceptual, humorous and contemporary.*

Pretty accurate, I'd say. See much more of the Katvan's work at www.katvan.com and at www.rivkakatvan.artspan.com.

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