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## Lori Nix

By Louisa J. Curtis



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Each month after I have submitted my latest article, Barbara asks me whom I'm going to interview next, and each month I generally have no clue! What has started to happen over time though, is that someone will send me an email, or I run into a photographer I haven't seen in a while, and my next subject always effortlessly presents him or herself to me. So last month, I was walking round AIPAD, as I do every year, and I ran into one of my favorite photographers, [Lori Nix](#) of Brooklyn, NY, who I originally met at the monthly photo salon a few years back. I loved her work from the start, so after I ran into her, I had an epiphany and realized I could ask her to be my next interview for PhotoServe! They say timing is everything, and as luck would have it, Lori was not only willing, but was also giving a lecture on her work at CAP (The Center of Alternative Photography) which I was able to attend as well.

You may recall last month when I spoke with Art Murphy, he talked about the Hudson River painters – so imagine my amazement when I read on the “About” page of Lori’s website: *“I am greatly influenced by landscape painting, particularly the Hudson River School of Painting which included the artists Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, Frederich Edwin Church, Martin Johnson Heade, and the Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich. Each of these painters possessed characteristics of romanticism and the Sublime and it's ability to create a state of mind and express intense emotions either through beauty or horror.”* How’s that for perfect synergy, and, as an Aries born on April 13th, Lori is a perfect subject for this month, April’s article! Where to begin? Lori is a true artist, an artist whose work process both includes and concludes with photography, but essentially what she creates is much, much more than just a photograph. Lori specializes in dioramas, or miniatures. She has no desire to simply be a photographer, in fact she admits, she’s so bad at “in the moment” shooting, she doesn’t even take a camera with her when she goes on vacation. So what exactly does she do and how does she do it?

Let me take you into the wonderful, wild and whacky world of Lori’s creative process, and I bet you’ll fall in love with her work too! Every single photograph is a miniature set, ranging from the smallest at 11x14 inches, to the largest at 5x6 feet! And every single set is built in her living room, in her apartment in Brooklyn. I asked if she would like to be working in a separate studio space, and she said she likes working at home because it is very much an ongoing process. She can glue something on a set, and then go and check her emails while it dries, that sort of thing. The only thing she wouldn’t mind is having more space as she can only work on 1 or 2 sets at the same time – and as someone who also works from her tiny living room, in Manhattan, I agree wholeheartedly, more space would be great! So Lori’s life continues in and around each diorama, as it does also for her partner Kathleen, who also assists and collaborates with her, and their fabulous felines, their 2 (or was it 3?) cats, who like to get involved by exploring the sets while under construction, and doing cute things like eating the yummy carrot tops that had been carefully placed as miniature “foliage” in a particular diorama. Often Lori acquires a particular prop or model, usually from the Internet, and then she builds the entire set to scale around that one item. She has learned over the years that sometimes it is easier to do it that way around instead of attempting to make a perfect model dinosaur to scale!

I asked Lori what exactly is the attraction for her to make these intensely elaborate sets and she said, *“To begin with, they are quite fun to build. I’m also a bit of a control freak, so I need to control just about every aspect of the process. I’m not the kind of photographer who goes in search of interesting images; I’m too wrapped up in my head to see the forest through the trees. I’m not a street shooter, I’m not much of a traveler - so roaming with my camera is just not the way I work. I have a lot of respect for these kinds of photographers, such as Diane Arbus, Joel Sternfeld, Bill Owens, Garry Winogrand. The list goes on and on. I don’t think I could compose an interesting photograph while on the move.”*

And do they always turn out as planned, or do they assume a life of their own once you begin to construct them? *“They never look how I envision them. They always take on a life of their own. Usually after I’m done with the scene, I can’t remember what they were supposed to look like from the get go.”* I asked her what inspires her and how she comes up with her ideas, and she said, *“I’ve always taken inspiration from my surroundings, and since I’ve lived here for almost twelve years, the city has become my inspiration. I usually get my ideas during the morning commute on the subway ride between Brooklyn and Manhattan. It has to be a combination of still being slightly asleep, the light that hits me when we come out of the tunnel and go over the Manhattan Bridge, and trying to maintain my sense of space while riding in a packed subway car. I kind of just drift off and let my mind wander. I don’t keep a journal, but rather a list of potential subjects on my phone. Some ideas I sit on for years, others I like to start immediately.”*



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But let’s go back for a second to where it all began and a childhood growing up in rural western Kansas, in a small town called Norton, which boasts just two stoplights, one of which didn’t work. When I attended Lori’s lecture, I learned more about her background and heard the origin behind many of her ideas. For instance, she spoke about her first series in 1998, “Accidentally Kansas,” based on her childhood experiences living in a place where weather, wind and tornadoes were regular occurrences that became a major source of entertainment. Lori confesses to enjoying a rather deliciously “dark sense of humor” so I asked her where it came from? *“I was born with it. As you may know, I grew up in rural western Kansas, where natural disasters and Mother Nature were a seasonal occurrence. I’ve been in a tornado, several floods, blizzards, and survived various insect infestations. This was all quite exciting from a child’s point of view. As I’ve grown older, I try to use my sense of humor to combat these types of experiences. I’m also a product of the 1970s cinema, where dystopian themes were quite popular in movies of that era. I cut my teeth on disaster flicks like Towering Inferno, Planet of the Apes, Earthquake and Logan’s Run. I love these types of dramas and explore some of the same issues in my work.”*

The meaning of the word dystopia is “an imaginary place where everything is as bad as it can be” and is the opposite of the word “utopia” – look at Lori’s work and you can see that this is certainly a very apt description, but what Lori does so cleverly is bring a sense of beauty to the tragedy. Unfortunately we only had room to show one image at the top of this article, so be sure to view all of her incredible work at her Web site at: <http://www.lorinix.net>



© Lori Nix, Mall

So after weeks, maybe months of building and gluing and painting, the focus of the process shifts to the final image and the photograph itself. Lori may take up to two weeks figuring out exactly how she wants the photograph to look, spending hours on the lighting (which she has taught herself) and depth of field, so everything is believable and to scale, and making multiple test prints until she is satisfied. Oh yes, I forgot to mention that Lori is a professional color printer, by trade, so she knows what she’s doing in that department as well. Everything is in camera, she does not use PhotoShop at all! And, once each scene has been completed and photographed, the set is then dismantled with some of the materials being recycled for future dioramas. I asked her how long the process usually takes, and she said it could range from as little as a month (the shortest) to 15 months (her longest so far!) I wondered if Lori is content to remain in this world of miniature or did she think she might work differently at some point, and she replied, *"I'm pretty content to remain with this way of working. These dioramas range in size, so one might be 20x24 inches and the next one might be nine feet across."* So what is the most enjoyable part of your creative process, and the most difficult or frustrating part? *"All of it is enjoyable, otherwise I wouldn't work this way. I think I enjoy coming up with the ideas the most. It's by far the most painful part of the process because there are so many options and ideas floating around. I could do a model this way, or another way, or something completely different altogether. It gets filtered through my brain and out my hands and somehow ends up looking like it does. The most frustrating part is how long everything takes. I think a project should only take a month, and seven months later I'm putting the finishing touches on something. When I start a new diorama I have to take a deep breath because I know there's a long road ahead of me."*



And here are my **ChatterDozen** quick fire questions with Lori's responses:

- 1) What 3 words best describe your photography/work? *"Intricate, believable, unbelievable."*
- 2) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? *"Amelia Earhardt."*
- 3) What was the last movie you saw? *"Movie theater: Black Swan, and I was coming down with the stomach flu while watching it! Movie at home: 12 Monkeys."*
- 4) What is your favorite TV show? *"Oh my god, this is so embarrassing but I love Cougar Town!"*
- 5) What is your favorite food? *"Beer and sausage."*
- 6) What is your favorite animal? *"I don't have a favorite animal, but my animal spirit is the squirrel. I also like birds, but no one particular bird. The world's largest pigeon lives outside my bedroom window because I can hear the cooing. It shakes the building - I love waking up and hearing it."*
- 7) What is your favorite color? *"Olive green."*
- 8) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? *"Sunday. I sleep in a little bit, I make sure I don't have to go into Manhattan, I have a nice breakfast, then might spend the early afternoon outside, getting a little sunshine, take an afternoon nap, then seriously consider getting some studio work done. The idea is to feel relaxed while also feeling like I'm accomplishing something as well."*
- 9) What would you do if you weren't a photographer? *"I would probably work in a hardware store. But my dream would be to run my own microbrewery and make artisanal sausage."*
- 10) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? *"I like science fiction, so I would choose to go into the future, maybe five hundred years or so and see how humanity has survived, changed, evolved."*
- 11) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, perhaps to somewhere you have never been to before, where would you fly to and why? *"I would go to Turkey. I want to see the Hagia Sophia, to stand beneath the great dome and feel small."*
- 12) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? *"My partner Kathleen, Richard Misrach for inspiring me to start on this path of dioramas (it's a whole 'nother story) and my friend Mitra Abbaspour for all the encouragement she whispers in my ear."*

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