

Shadow & Light Magazine

The Art of Photography

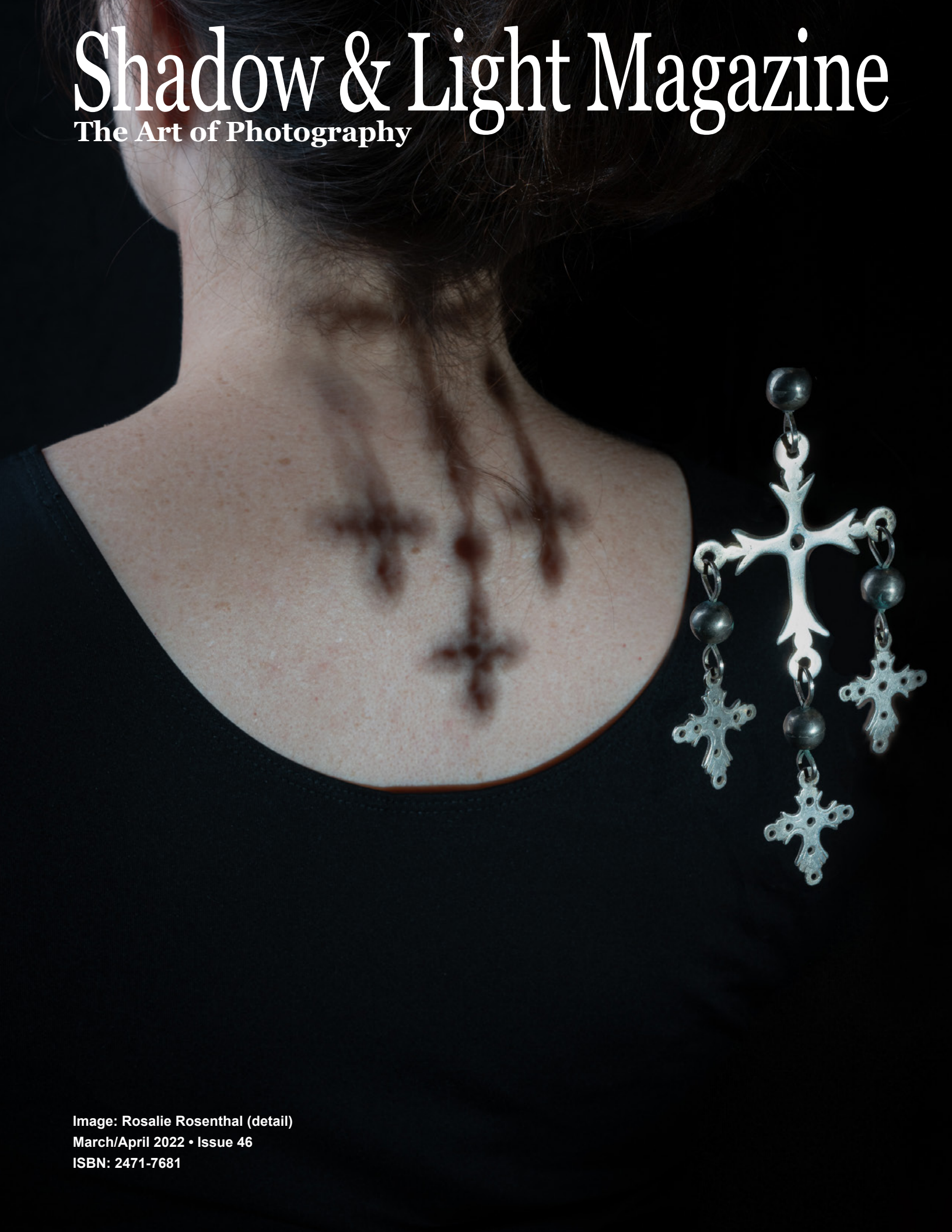


Image: Rosalie Rosenthal (detail)

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Showcase Portfolio

Richard S. Chow: *Distant Memories*



EMc: Tell us a little about your background—your life and your art training.

RSC: : I am a photographer based in Los Angeles, California, who immigrated to the United States when I was 16 years old. I was born in Hong Kong, then a British colony.

My work spans many genres including documentary, fine art, street shooting, alternative photography and photo objects. My visual arts training began with photography classes in high school, aided by an amazing teacher who shared all his knowledge for which I am eternally grateful. Thinking back, the dark-room lab after school was thoroughly enjoyable during my formative years, providing an escape from the challenges of assimilating into a newly-adopted homeland. I was definitely surprised to receive an Outstanding Achievement Award in Photography at graduation. After that, the pressures of college and establishing a career caused me to put my art on hold. Fast forward to around 2010 when I jumped back into photography with a focus on fine art portfolios.

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EMc: What was your first exposure to photography? And art in general?

RSC: At 13, I purchased a Russian made SLR, along with a 300mm telephoto lens, from savings of “red lucky envelopes” and my allowance. It was a major investment requiring me to save for a few years. I still remember the excitement of taking it out of the box. It was heavy, felt good in my hands, and the journey began. I still have that camera today. Similar to youth programs in the States, I joined the Red Cross Association and learned darkroom processing. The chemical smell was a bit odd at the beginning, but I grew to accept the aroma, and even enjoyed it. My formal exposure to art was not until high school and college with courses on photography, art history and appreciation.

EMc: The images in this issue come from a series called *Distant Memories*. Can you tell us how this project came about, the process of making those images, and what the images explore?

RSC: The *Distant Memories* series is one of my first personal works with the focus of family, memories of childhood, and how these experiences shape one’s outlook, attitude, acceptance and subsequent life adventures.

After moving to Los Angeles, those first years were difficult for an immigrant teenager due to language and culture shifts, and at times were overwhelming as I tried to find my place in this new world. From discovery, insight, and serendipity, American culture was slowly absorbed. More specific to Southern California, the beach archetype is ingrained in the lifestyle, and I quickly learned that it was a place that provided comfort and inspiration to me as a young man. I now frequent the beach regularly with my family as a place for relaxation and observation. With this series, *Distant Memories*, I capture the childhood that I could have experienced, those weekend forays to museums, outings to the water's edge, with family, friends and a picnic basket filled with the ingredients for a perfect day. Like finding shells on the shore, I am collecting visual memories. And while they might not be my memories, they allow me to imagine a childhood in a place I now call home.

EMc: We talked here about a sense of distance and longing in the photos. The photographs are scenes of ordinary, daily life. Why did you pick this?

RSC: My intent is to portray timeless, universal memories, in a way that would resonate with the viewers, further emphasized by images of ordinary daily life and events that are the common denominator. I also insisted on images that are somewhat dreamy, as most of our recollections are not truly precise. The passage of time erodes our remembrances and even skews facts. The sense of distance instilled in the images aims to entice the viewers to reach far back in their minds to associate their unique experiences while examining these images that may serve as triggers.





EMc: We don't really make contact with the people in the images. They remain at a distance and are anonymous. What was your intent with this approach?

RSC: The notions of distance and anonymity are central themes in this body of work conceptually, figuratively, and technically.

Conceptually, memories are typically something from our distant past, so artistically I composed these images looking far into the distance in most instances. Because I am capturing and preserving the memories of others but re-imagining them as my own memories that could have been, it felt important to create a sense of ambiguity. I wanted these memories I have curated to belong to the viewer, not the individual in the photograph. I am looking to create a shared and unifying experience in this body of work. I am celebrating the idea of family, special moments, those things we look back on and cherish, that aspect of our being that makes us uniquely human and able to connect with others on a personal level. The distance in the photographs is a metaphor for the way we are able to reach back and access memories, even from our early childhood, then connect them to the shared experiences with others.

EMc: What was the technical process you used for making these photographs? The way in which the images were made seems to be an important part of them.



RSC: I have attempted various techniques in order to create dreamy, reflective, and vague or indistinct imaginaries, something that resembles memories or reminiscences of the past. These images are shot through a binocular, essentially through two lenses. The faint circular artifacts are most times the (out of focus) round casing of the binocular/monocular itself. This necessitates the manual focusing of the binocular and the camera simultaneously. Holding both at the same time is definitely a trick, but with practice it was really a good way to capturing unique images with the aesthetics I was striving for. Many have suggested these are pin-hole images but they are really not, however, they do share a common mien.

EMc: You really wish to engage the viewer with these images and for them to have an experience with their own memories. Can you tell us about what you hope the images will stimulate in the viewer?

RSC: As a photographer, I always strive to encourage a dialog between the work and the viewers. This series takes it a step further. Most importantly when these images resonate with others who can trigger their own memories and experiences, the ability to associate them in some ways—be it happy, melancholy, reflective, or otherwise, I consider that a success.

EMc: You have asked viewers to share what memories came to them as they viewed your work. What was the



process and what have viewers' responses been like?

RSC: Because memories are deeply personal and individual, my goal was to engage with the viewer on a deeper level, inviting them to explore not just an emotional response, but why the image triggered that reaction. I have asked visitors at museums and galleries, who have seen my exhibit, to share their own narratives. I have laid out 4x6-inch post cards, requesting a first name, with last name and city/state optional. To my surprise, I have received many responses. They run the emotional spectrum and are always deeply personal and poignant. While some are light-hearted, and happy recollections, others are sad or tragic. Most touched upon their childhood recollections. I even received a few drawings from younger kids who visited! Quite interestingly, responses from museum visitors are much stronger than at galleries, perhaps it is because of the institutional nature where they are more apt to share or where there is a culture of engaging with art on a different level. To each individual who was willing to engage with the work, I am truly grateful, feel very fortunate, and I will forever treasure the postcards.

(If you'd like to share your own memories, please click to <http://richardschow.com/about/share-your-memories/>) - optional.

EMc: You are also interested in presenting this body of work in book form, including viewers' memories that were stimulated by the images.

RSC: I created an independently published book as a catalog for a solo exhibit. My goal is a second edition monogram housed with the latest images, along with all the shared memories from viewers. I truly believe this is a brilliant marriage of images and words, providing a great visual read, hopefully it creates yet another unique experience in book form. Currently, I am looking for an awesome publishing house.

EMc: Would you describe how this body of work has been presented in galleries and how you made the decisions about size, arrangement, and so forth.

In the curation and installation perspective, I have an idea that these images should be presented in small footprints, thinking that when a mind reaches back for recollections, there will be many random mental pictures, often with gaps, that represent small flashes of life. The series was a dramatic departure from my earlier work, which are presented quite large.

RSC: These images are printed on photographic paper and mounted on a 4x4-inch solid wood block, one inch thick. They are similar to 3D photo objects and I like how the light creates shadows of the pieces that makes them seem more ethereal. The earlier version of this series was presented each in 10-inch square wood frames. I arrange them in grid forms (e.g. 12 rows by 12 columns); or in a linear fashion when I have the luxury of wall space. As an example, at the Lancaster Museum of Art and History (MOAH) solo exhibit, they were installed in 4 rows and 26 columns spanning about 16 feet.

The type of installation creates a different experience for the viewers—in the grid fashion, they often linger in front of the exhibit for quite a long time, as the eyes are moving from one image to the next, back and forth to adjacent images thus allowing them to associate certain simulations. For the linear arrangement, it triggers more of a story-based reception, akin to watching super 8 film, or a carousel-slide projections, one frame at a time.

EMc: What photographers are you currently viewing whose work you find stimulating? How do other media influence you—books, music, painting, etc.

RSC: Los Angeles has a vibrant art culture, and I am fortunate to know many artists who practice in all mediums, and very pleased to be a member in a couple of well-known art associations, whose programs and collaborations continually broaden my art appreciation. I think in some ways, they all help me grow in the development of my own visual art space. Now that I thought about it I realized that I don't focus on a single genre... since all new discoveries excite me and to try new things.

EMc: Anything else that you would like our readers to know about *Distant Memories* and about your work in general?

RSC: I began the journey with *Distant Memories* several years ago, but I am continuously drawn to expand the portfolio, even when I am in the midst of new projects. The core of this series is autobiographical in nature, and for me the opportunity to add to the portfolio is a recognition of growth artistically and as a human being. Central themes of family, friendship and learning to embrace emotions resonate for me as a father, as an artist and as a student of life. Artistically, I have always been interested first and foremost in the dialogue with those who view my work. This series is particularly rewarding, in that I believe it offers a platform for others to explore and reconcile their own memories of a perhaps less idyllic childhood with societal notions of a what constitutes family. I also look forward to creating new series that explore these concepts of family and self in greater depth. ○

