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Inner Journey

The Photography Of Joyce Tenneson



Sunflower from the book *Intimacy*.

Joyce Tenneson's photographs are thought-provoking and deeply moving. Her portraits provide insight into the soul and spirit of her subjects. Perhaps this is why Tenneson has enjoyed such a long and successful career.

"I started photographing in my 20s—I feel I have lived at least four lifetimes! My work has evolved as I have, and looking back on it makes me feel like I am reading a personal diary. Jung said, 'What is most personal is the most universal.' I have always believed if an artist works from their center, the work will speak to many people. In the end, we are all more alike than we are different.

"In my 20s and early 30s, I was compelled to do self-portraits. Those images came effortlessly. I didn't have to discipline myself to go out and do the work. It flowed from my own sense of moving forward as well as a desire to be authentic and true to my own inner

voice. I believe if photographers really go deep within themselves they will be working with material that touches on the universal.

"When I photographed Maya Angelou I asked her what she felt was important in life and she answered, 'The journey. If you're not on the journey, you're not alive.' This is what photography is about for me—recording the journey and providing a light on the path for others."

When Tenneson was 18 she was hired by Polaroid to model. She remembers sitting in their studio wearing primary colors so that the technicians could test the new SX-70 film. She fell in love with photography while working for Polaroid—they gave her a camera and all the free film she could use. She has been photographing ever since!

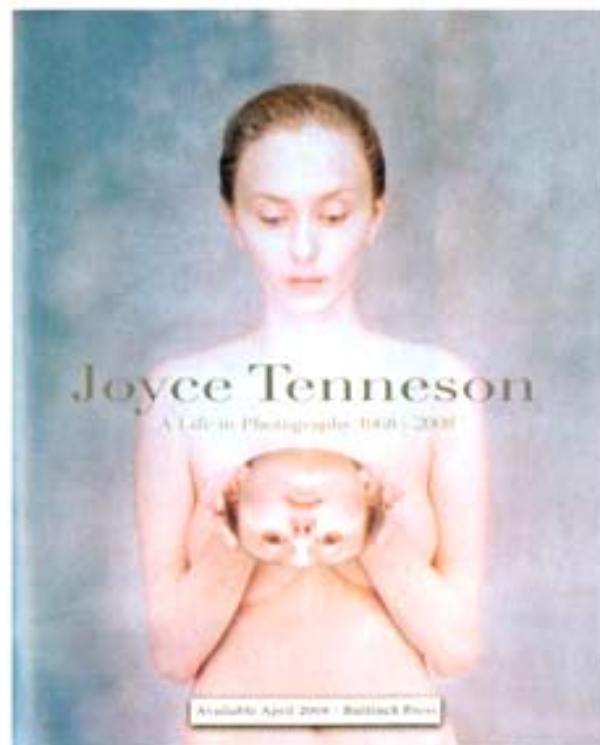
Today Tenneson is still working full steam. Her work has graced the covers of *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* among numerous other magazines. In addition, she has published 13 books on her own



Self-portrait 2006.



Maine studio



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work. Her latest, *Joyce Tenneson: A Life in Photography*, published by Bulfinch Press, will be out in Spring, 2008.

All of Tenneson's images tell a tale and touch a chord that is quickly recognizable. Though life has not always been easy, Tenneson will tell you that one must not let negative events discourage us. She always tries to create beauty, even in times of personal hardship and difficulty.

Being famous or wealthy was never Tenneson's goal. "I have never needed to be a part of a particular movement in photography," she says. "I admire all photographers who attempt to create work from their own heart and spirit. It's not easy, and sometimes the journey is lonely. Perhaps that is why I have become so interested in teaching now. I never had role models myself, I

wish I had! I love being a catalyst for other people's transformation. That is what gives life meaning."

For 20 years Tenneson lived in New York full-time, but she now spends half her time in a studio overlooking the water in Maine. New York was part of her journey and she readily tells you that she had lost contact many times with her heart and her soul while living in the competitive environment of New York.

"Now, living in Maine, I am connected with my spiritual self," she says. "Each morning, when I get up, I meditate and say a prayer of gratitude. I don't take anything for granted."

One of Tenneson's favorite books is *Wise Women*. In these compassionate images, Tenneson shows women aged 65 to 100 from across the country. She also interviewed the women, and was

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able to find short quotes from each that reveals something unique about each of them. The book has been a best-seller for six years, and Tenneson has received an astonishing response from people around the globe, thanking her for producing the book.

Brooke Astor happily holds her precious dachshund and says, "I grow more intense as I age"; Andree Ruelian at 95 reflects on the richness of her life with her artist husband; Helen Gurley Brown smiles as she thinks about the happiest people she sees who stay cheerful as they go through life. Familiar to us are Lauren Bacall, Odette, and many others who confided that though their physical powers in some ways may be diminished, they still feel happier because they are freer and no longer care about a lot of things that troubled them in the past.

"I found that I wanted to be best friends with almost all the women I interviewed because they had been through something," Tenneson says. "They were closing in on the circle of their journey and they had a kind of wisdom that comes from their long life."

These are not ordinary portraits. Each page is alive with people we can feel for, perhaps the kind of people we would hope to be one day. This is Tenneson's gift to us.

Tenneson continues to grow. In an exhibition at the Griffin Museum in Winchester, Massachusetts, last spring she was welcomed by her son and his family who had traveled from Maine as well as a large crowd of admirers who filled the gallery, making the rounds to look at the photographs and often to look again, as did I.

A wall of brilliantly colored flowers, all 50x60" resting against a black background, added a surprising twist to the show at Griffin. "The flowers," Tenneson says, "offered me an opportunity to take a break from working with people and to have fun with a different kind of beauty."

Much of Tenneson's time is now spent teaching. She shares her thoughts at a women's retreat in Santa Fe once a year for those women who want to get back into their creative roots and need time to get away from the cares of their world. Other classes, taught regularly at the Maine Photographic Workshop (www.theworkshops.com), where Tenneson

is on the board, focus on how to do your own photo book and share a deeper feeling for photography with others.

"I feel blessed to be a part of the new Maine Photographic Workshop team because we are about transformation and helping photographers who are at a crossroad," Tenneson says. "I love it!"

She believes that her best pictures happen through grace—when there is a blending of her subject and herself—a communication. "I would never censor something to please someone," she says. "I don't play games."

Her photographs are highly personal, about a moment, a thought, a feeling of intimacy and passion. For example, 67-year-old Christine Lee, whose mesmerizing portrait is on the cover of *Wise Women*, speaks words of wisdom in reflecting on Tenneson's philosophy, saying: "The most important thing is to try and enjoy life because you never know when it will be gone. If you wake up in the morning and have a choice between doing the laundry and taking a walk in the park, go for the walk. You'd hate to die and realize you had spent your last day doing the laundry." Tenneson learned from her *Wise Women*—she spends lots of special time with her granddaughters, Ruby and Lucy.



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For more information, please visit Joyce Tenneson's website at Tenneson.com.

To find her new book, "Joyce Tenneson: A Life in Photography," please go to PhotoEye.com.