



## Alternatives

# Rebecca Sexton Larson: Chasing a Man Made Cloud

**Dean Brierly**

Few artists are as adept as Rebecca Sexton Larson at creating narrative bodies of work that explore similar tones, themes and feelings while simultaneously branching off into complementary yet discrete directions. Fewer still are as successful at presenting viewers with images that are at once visually ambiguous yet emotionally resonant. The Tampa, Florida-based photographer works seamlessly with historical and digital processes to explore universal themes of innocence and irony, loneliness and loss.

**At visit to** Sexton Larson's website (an exploration strongly recommended) reveals remarkable consistency of vision across each of her series—*Hereafter*, *To the Garden*, *Forest Bathing*, *Playback Theater* and, featured here, *How to Catch a Man Made Cloud*. Each is replete with images that tell stories; complex and ambivalent, true, yet nonetheless intriguing and accessible. It takes but little time to fall under the spell she deftly conjures.



Rebecca Sexton Larson

For Sexton Larson, the making of this work serves both therapeutic and creative needs. Her stated motivation is to develop "poignant short stories that challenge the relationship between perception and imagination." A challenge that everyone can relate too, even if definitive interpretations remain elusive.

A complex duality informs many of the images. In "Black Hole," a swirl of autumn leaves hovers in a tenuous holding pattern above a dark abyss, but whether the leaves are escaping from the aperture or are about to be sucked into it is left open to question. "Climbing the Ladder" suggests a means of escape or advancement, yet the object's airborne position (again poised above undefined darkness) could also imply a less positive outcome.

Other photographs pose elegantly visualized conundrums, like the surreal tableau of "Ivy League," in which the interior of a stately home has been taken over by an invasive garden tended (or led?) by an enigmatic female statue. In these and other images, visual echoes of 19th century photographic romanticism (notably Atget's images of Parisian parks) are balanced against modernist visual conceits: a line of books strung out along a woodland trail like intrepid hikers in "Judge a Book by its Cover"; the spatial riddle of "Set Up





*Promise the Moon*





*How to Catch a Man Made Cloud*

House," which presents what looks like a full-size house resting atop an impossibly enormous tree stump; or the visual legerdemain of "House of Cards," which evokes "Set Up House" while also deconstructing it.

As clever and intriguing as these conceptions are, they are not mere technical diversions. Each is imbued with deep emotional currents that are all the more affecting for being implicit rather than explicit. The intensely personal (and sometimes painful) nature of this work notwithstanding, Sexton Larson imbues it with affirmative grace notes that enhance its complexity, charm and sense of wonder.

As eloquent verbally as she is visually, the artist recently shared in a candid, open exchange some insights into her creative process and aspirations.

**B&W:** Your photography has evolved along an unusual and interesting path, from making training photographs and videos for law enforcement to medical photography to fine art. Did any of those experiences eventually find their way into your work either visually or thematically?

**RSL:** For a very long time my work has been referred to as "darkly romantic." So I would say, yes, some of my early photographic experience has probably influenced different aspects of it. I have always leaned toward works cast in darker tones. Though I live in Florida, I am not really an artist that works in happy colors. Thematically, my work is not influenced by my early careers, but is instead rooted in select autobiographical moments.

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**B&W:** The images in *How to Catch a Man Made Cloud* were made during your seven-year journey as caregiver for your aging parents. What year did that begin? Is that when you began using digital?

**RSL:** My caregiver experience began around 2008, when my father was diagnosed with dementia and early Alzheimer's and my mother had had a stroke. I am an only child, so responsibility for their care and future care fell to me. Finding a comfortable home and setting up their medical care meant I was not able to dedicate long hours in the darkroom printing large pinhole images or hand-painting photos, which is what I was involved with early on. I found that my parents' needs did not always follow a time schedule; I would get calls at all times of the day and night. Like most artists I maintain a certain degree of sanity through my ability to create. When that freedom was suddenly taken away I needed to develop a new, less time-consuming way to create meaningful works. Understand, at this point in time, I was devoted to the darkroom and the hands-on approach to picture-making, so I became faced with the task of creating photographs digitally while balancing visits to hospital appointments and nursing homes. Working with the computer allows me to take my laptop with me.

I'm now entering my 12th year caring for my mom; my dad passed in 2009 of heart failure. At this point I feel I have a Ph.D. in caregiving, having experienced just about everything that can happen in this unique situation: an only child having to adapt to being a caregiver, while trying to not lose my momentum as a full-time artist.

**B&W:** Was this work created 100 percent digitally, or are there analog elements? The images look quite organic and textured.

**RSL:** I have taken photographs since college and maintain an extensive library of landscapes, objects and events. My filing system is similar to the way Joseph Cornell would store his objects: meticulously categorized into bins [folders]. When I first began this series I would go through photos looking for images that "play well" together and work toward telling the story. As you can imagine, my images, especially going back a decade or two, have been shot with everything from iPhones, pinhole cameras, Diana cameras and even my current Sony 6000. Along the way, I may make 20 different renditions of an image before I am happy. Once the elements are in





*Judge a Book by its Cover*



*Black Hole*

place, I use Photoshop and concentrate on the lighting, blending and finer details of the image until I decide it's complete.

**B&W:** Do you continue to work in the darkroom as well?

**RSL:** I do still work in the darkroom when time allows. Most of my darkroom work centers on historic processes such as salt and/or Van Dyke prints. Usually these images are 8"x10" or smaller.

**B&W:** Do the image titles hold clues or references to your family dynamic and history? Do certain visual motifs do the same?

**RSL:** Definitely. Though each of my images illustrates a nonexistent landscape or situation, I feel they are universally reflective of the isolation and loneliness I was experiencing at the time I made them. The titles are intentionally based on idioms, words or phrases that aren't meant to be taken literally, but instead hint at my vulnerability—very similar to some of my unpredictable caregiving experiences.

**B&W:** Is all of your work autobiographical to some degree? Does it all comprise discrete chapters in an ongoing visual diary?

**RSL:** I have kept a visual diary since my high school art days and develop most of my ideas from autobiographical situations. My earliest work that I created after graduating college dealt directly with writing diary entries onto the photographs. When I graduated I could not afford a large-format camera to create the size photos I wanted to make, so I began building pinhole cameras. Because of the slow expo-

sures with the cameras, often up to 45 minutes, I would shoot objects and still life setups around my house. The images were created using Polaroid PN55 film projected onto large photographic paper (40"x 50") that I would hand-paint with oils. Many of the objects in these earlier works related to diary entries in which I would write or sew onto the photos.

**B&W:** For images produced during what must have been a difficult and emotional time, they don't feel oppressive or gloomy, but land somewhere between darkness and light.

**RSL:** I don't strive to create images that are negative or depressing. I actually feel as though I am dealing with escapism and trying to create my ultimate calm, happy place. When everything is uncontrollable around me, I am able to sort it out and make a more definitive reality by layering my photographs of experiences, objects and environments. To me, it's a peaceful process and very meditative for my soul.

**B&W:** They have a kind of dark fable ambience, though, don't they?

**RSL:** I would agree somewhat in that I feel that some of the images deliver a moral or lesson not unlike a fable.

**B&W:** For myself, I take away from this work a sense of innocence, an evocation of a kind of primeval emotional state. They also strike a nice balance between engaging the mind and the emotions. About 50-50, I'd say. Have you found that many people respond to them in this way?

**RSL:** I have been working on this series of images for almost a year and have shared it with others at several portfolio reviews. Initially, I was apprehensive because it was a very new and different direction for me as a photographer. But the work was received with great enthusiasm and support. Viewers are drawn to the emotional state of the images, and surprisingly, a great number can relate to my story of creating work while caring for aging parents. We are in an era when the baby boomer generation, my generation, are facing more and more difficult decisions of caring for aging parents or spouses. I feel those viewers understand best the need for a calming respite, which I hope comes through in my work.

**B&W:** Do you feel that the further you get from a literal interpretation of a particular sub-

"I actually feel as though I am dealing with escapism and trying to create my ultimate calm, happy place."



*State of Undress*



*Every Picture Tells a Story*



*Climb the Ladder*



*Three Sheets*



"My images speak to me in certain situations, but I am interested in how others may perceive them differently."



*Set Up House*

ject, the closer you get to revealing or capturing some kind of truth about it, whether literal or symbolic?

**RSL:** A great deal of what I look for is rooted in the symbolic. My images speak to me in certain situations, but I am interested in how others may perceive them differently. My story may not be someone else's interpretation.

**B&W:** Did you share any of this work with your parents while you were caring for them?

**RSL:** Neither of my parents have seen my current project. My father passed away in 2009 and my mom is currently battling dementia. And honestly, I don't believe they understood my need to create and make art. My husband took pictures of my parents walking through a solo exhibition many years ago at the Polk Museum of Art. It was a very big show for me at that time in my career, so I thought we'd drive my parents from Tampa to Lakeland to see the exhibition. You could tell they were just trying to understand that the images on the museum's wall came from their child.

**B&W:** Had they been interested in and supportive of your photography, or discussed it with you? (Outside of when your mother asked about your "fascination with dark drawings of landscapes and houses" when you were in kindergarten.) Interesting that as an adult you make dark photographs of landscapes and houses.

**RSL:** My parents were always supportive in their way. I grew up a military brat, moving around every two to three years. Early on my parents got me involved with art classes,

mainly painting. Art would remain the one constant as I grew up and changed schools multiple times. I went to high school in the Washington, D.C. area, so I was exposed to great art and encouraged by my art teachers to major in art in college. My dad in his quiet, stoic manner was silently horrified that I would graduate college with a degree in fine art and painting, so with his urging, I went for a second degree. I know he was hoping I would major in business or engineering, but I got my other degree in mass communications with an emphasis in photojournalism.

**B&W:** In another interview you cite photographers like Sally Mann, Joel Peter-Witkin and Laurent Millet as influences. Do you also derive energy or inspiration from your husband's work, and do you bounce ideas off one another?

**RSL:** I am drawn to photographers that have a story to tell with their work, and my husband's photographs are no different. We have been married for 35 years. He is my best friend, trusted critic and the first person that always sees my work. Matt is extremely technically oriented, and I am more spiritually oriented, so it makes for a nice balance. More importantly, we trust each other's opinion.

We went to college together, and our first encounter was in a Photojournalism II class critique where he proceeded to try to justify my abstract photographs that were being projected in front of the whole class. He said, "She's a fine art major, give her a break."

The class laughed. However, he was clueless that he had just unintentionally insulted my work. I was a fine art major in a journalism class, and my abstract photos of plants really didn't fit the assignment. And his comment probably did save me that day. Matt and I shoot very differently, and have found it is best to work separately and not share the darkroom [smile].

#### Addendum

*All works copyright Rebecca Sexton Larson. To see more, visit sextonlarson.com and instagram.com/sextonlarson/. Her work is held in major collections across the United States, including Polaroid, Progressive Corporate Art, Graham Nash, Polk Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts St. Pete, the Tampa Museum of Art, and the New Mexico Historical Museum, among others.*



Ivy League



*Once Bitten, Twice Shy*



*High as a Kite*





*House of Cards*