



Liz Huston
**Ethereal
Light**

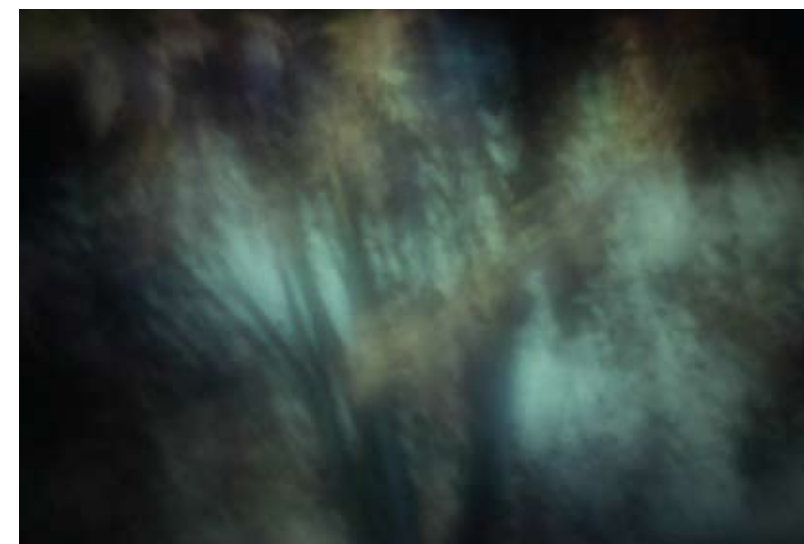
By Amanda Quintenz-Fiedler



Upon first meeting fine-art photographer Liz Huston, it's impossible not to notice her edgy open, artistic vibe. With her jet-black haircut in a shoulder-length fun style and daring tattoos along her arms, she is certainly an independent spirit. But when she smiles and begins to discuss her artwork in a humble and completely open manner, it is evident why her photography is so passionate, tranquil and creative—with vulnerable abandon, she allows her life to dictate the styles and subjects of her art in a patient, contemplative and honest way.

Huston has been teaching herself photography for 17 years, learning the trade in the darkroom while simultaneously working professional jobs. She committed to the medium when it spoke to her at an early age, experimenting and adjusting her processes along the way until, after many dedicated years, she established herself as a professional photographer shooting commercial jobs, weddings and portraits. It was her fine art, though, that kept her motivated, resulting in two self-published fine-art books that began to gain her recognition in the art world of Los Angeles.

While publicly getting attention for her first book, *Sacred: New Orleans Funerary Grounds*, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and putting together award-winning photographs and photomontage work, there was something secret brewing in Huston's art. Having started in the darkroom and working her way through mastery of her various art forms, Huston's curiosity was sparked by pinhole photography. Starting out with a 4×5 sheet film pinhole camera, she tried to capture something new, something different from the way she had been creating art before.





She struggled with the 4×5 and only got a handful of images that she liked at all. The 4×5 pinhole didn't speak to her. She kept learning her trade, applying her skills and growing as a photographer, but her secret desire to explore more pinhole work stubbornly wouldn't go away. "Pinhole, because it's so ethereal, I don't know if that's the right word, it just feels good. Out of all of the stuff that I've experimented with, it just feels the most honest, and I'm very feeling-based—I'm just driven by feelings. I'm not very logical," she says with a laugh. She eventually returned to pinhole photography, but this time with a Zero Image wooden 35mm art camera.

Something clicked. The smaller format, the tangible medium, and the way she had to sacrifice a roll of film to complete the requisite components of the camera, all drew her back into the form. Her first image ever shot with this new camera was a five-minute exposure, and it was the best image on that roll.

"Pinhole stuff is so personal and strange, and it doesn't appeal to a lot of people. People don't know what to make of it," Huston explains. "But just feel it! What does it do for you? Where does it put you in your mind?" Where it put Huston was onto a trail of a new body of work, a decade in the making.

While Huston continued working, exhibiting and selling her other fine-art photography, she kept her pinhole work a secret. "I didn't feel like it was strong enough; I just kept hiding it," she confesses. "Then somebody told me about digital pinhole and I thought, 'Oh well, let me give that a try.' Through that I was able to perfect the exposures, and that carried over into perfecting my little 35. It gave me this confidence."

With her newfound vigor, Huston began to explore not only her 35mm pinhole, but the digital pinhole work that she was creating using her Canon 5D Mark II with a specialized body cap. With the ease of digital and the specific look of film, Huston started to craft a pre-visualized realization of how she wanted her pinhole work to look. The otherworldly quality and cloudy appearance to her images transports viewers into a dream state—looking at the world through tranquil, misty glasses. Statues seem to come alive in all their mythic glory, angels seem wrapped in heavenly light, and soothing waves caress fog-laden beaches in everlasting moments.

Huston started to gauge how she would shoot different types of subjects to get that unifying quality to all of her pinhole work. "There's something about film—the way it handles colors. Like reds. Reds on digital just turn purple and gross, but reds on film are just so luscious and they feel like velvet," Huston explains, rubbing her fingers together as if truly recalling a tangible sensation. "But the freedom and the ease of digital I just can't resist."

To achieve the quality of light Huston has managed in her work, she has created a hybrid approach to her pinhole images. She chooses the appropriate tool—digital or film—for her initial capture, and then brings all images into Photoshop to apply the final touches that make her work unique.

After years of experimenting with pinhole capture, she has honed her use of exposures, camera set-up and choice of subject matter to ensure the same type of milky, insubstantial light. All of the images she creates with the pinhole are made with available light, usually outside. Her favorite type of light is daytime shade.

She shrugs and adds, "Daytime shade, a couple of minutes." But that modest comment belies the true amount of work necessary to become comfortable enough



with pinhole capture to be able to easily determine an exposure for a lighting condition as unspecific and unreliable as “shade.”

It took a solid decade for Huston to develop the skill set that she now employs with this work, instinctually able to judge a scene for its exposure time based partly on scientific calculations, and partly on her own experience. She forced herself to learn the analytical principles like distance and exposure estimates, so she could focus on her subject and trust her instincts, experience and knowledge to get the shot.

“I think it’s important to know the rules and to know how it works before you can really trust yourself,” she explains, while simultaneously miming how the analytic information at times makes her head want to explode. “Know the rules, and then break them.”

Working in secret allowed Huston to build her skills, polish her craft and evolve into a confident modern photographer with a consistent, repeatable style. She wasn’t afraid of the amount of work it took to experiment, fumble and even fail before she was able to truly succeed. Her dedication and perseverance led her to important realizations about how she truly had to see her subjects,

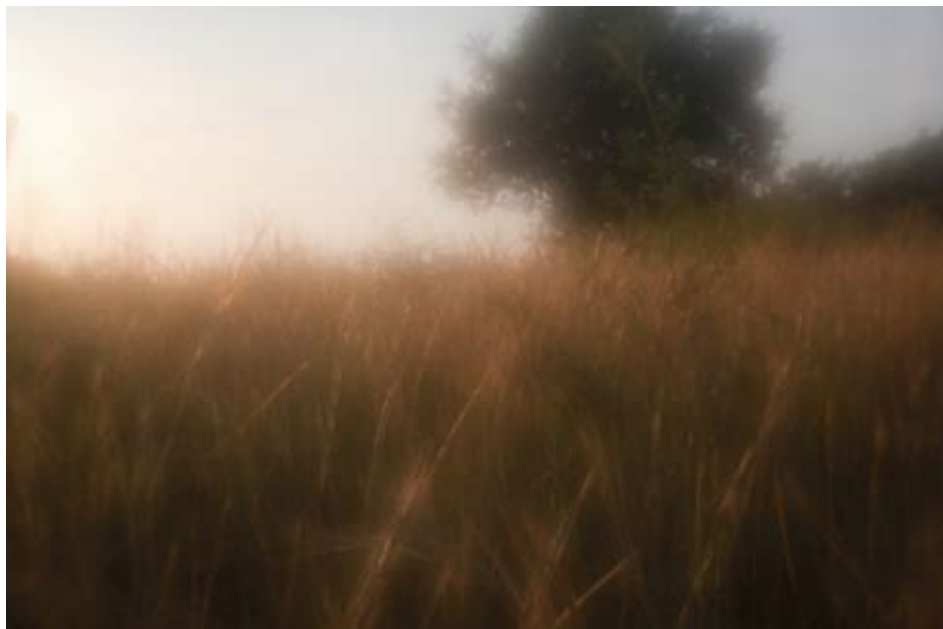
especially when there is no viewfinder to look through.

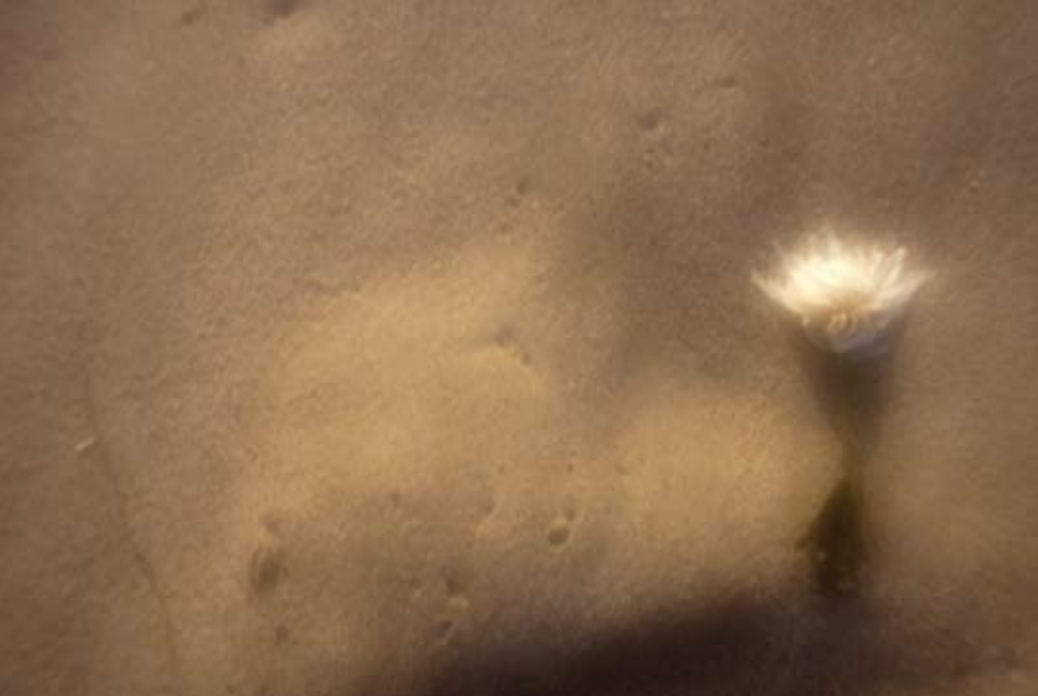
“With pinhole I’ve discovered that it’s really important to know exactly what your subject is,” Huston explains, with a sheepish grin. “I know this sounds really lame. But if I were to shoot this,” she gestures to her empty porcelain coffee cup and saucer on the café table in front of her, “Is this the subject? Or is the table the subject? When you’re framing it, it is so important. I have to know: What am I trying to say with this picture?”

Being grounded not only in film and digital, but also in the fine art and commercial worlds, Huston has a very open


understanding of how her fine-art photography differs from her commercial work. “I think that, because we shoot so much, especially with digital—with weddings or headshots—we just shoot so much that you don’t even really think about what you’re trying to say with each capture. But with pinhole, even digital pinhole, I really have to slow down and really know—is this interesting? Does this have a story?”

The stories that she creates allow the viewer to flow from one photograph to the next, content to linger in the misty images that all share the same delicate light. The resulting narrative might be different for each viewer, but the nature with which





both her fine art and commercial sites. She is also starting to entertain the idea printing the images in incredibly large sizes for exhibition purposes.

Her work is personal and passionate, and has grown and evolved over the years to finally be realized as a collection of haunting images. There is an openness to the work that is mirrored by the artist herself, and it is clear that she has mastered her own brand of seeing the world through a great expanse of time, a willingness to see beyond the ordinary, and an acknowledgement of the ethereal light that surrounds us all. 

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Huston has been able to present a coherent body of work that allows the mind to give over to the dream-like state and follow a personal journey.

But even though the images are open to interpretation, this does not imply a lack of precision in her craft, or the clarity of her vision. To effectively use the pinhole camera, Huston employs an assured awareness of her surroundings, beyond merely separating the cup from the table. To create a truly mesmerizing image, the crop, capture, and framing of the initial subject matter have to be visualized to be realized.

Huston understands, after a decade of feeling her way through the process that she must know what the relationship is between her subject and its surroundings, as well as the subject and her.

“It’s more than just the person in the frame. For me, with pinhole, it’s a relationship with the image and what it’s trying to say, and what you’re trying to say with it,” she says. “The more muddled my understanding is of what I’m shooting, the more muddled the image turns out. Because it’s pinhole, and because it’s so ethereal and blurry and wondrous, if I don’t know what I’m shooting and why I’m shooting it, that translates in the image. It’s very Zen in a way. You have to be very mindful!”

After all these years of keeping her pinhole work to herself, Huston is starting to try out images on her friends, posting a few pictures on Facebook to a limited audience, and putting out her feelers to try and gauge their validity. The response was incredibly positive, and Huston made the move to expand exposure by uploading images to

