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An Expression of the Inner Child, Made Permanent

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And also who they were.

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How Cheryl Machat Dorskind immortalizes her young subjects
By Ezra Goldstein

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Nigel



Ginny and Dru

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Cheryl Machat Dorskind's photographs have appeared often in this newspaper, accompanying stories about Jewish life on Long Island's East End, where she lives. Her photos do not stand out just because they are technically correct and thoughtfully composed, which they invariably are, but because they add substance to the stories they accompany: text, subtext, context and color (even when her photos are in black and white).

Dorskind does not describe herself as a photojournalist. She says that is an aspect of her craft that she hopes someday to explore further. Still, her photos are already examples of photojournalism at its best: telling stories in their own right as they weave the threads of articles they illustrate into vivid visual accompaniment.

Thus it comes as no surprise, regardless of how Dorskind describes herself, that one of the best things about her new book, *The Art of Photographing Children* (Amphoto)—and there are many good things in this book—is the advice she gives to photographers at all levels on how to invest their work with content.

The children in Dorskind's portraits brim with personality. When you look at them, you don't see just a child's features fixed in time, but a complex of feelings. Years from now, her subjects will show people photos and say, "That's not only what I looked like when I was young; that's who I was."

The book's advice on content is not given primarily in theoretical discourse but rather in practical instruction. It also permeates other advice she gives—on lighting, composition, cropping—even on selecting a camera, film speeds and digital settings. As indicated in its subtitle, "Techniques for Making Better Color, Black and White, Handcolored, and Digital Pictures," *The Art of Photographing Children* is loaded with solid, practical information, but it is always information given in service of the ultimate goal of producing a storytelling photo.

"Photography's origins are theater and magic—a tenuous thread weaving illusion and reality," Dorskind writes in a section called "Seeing Like a Camera" in the chapter on composition. "The camera's lens and the area of focus define the image. The photographer is a conjurer whose tools are the elements of design. Understanding how the camera interprets a scene and how to pull the necessary design tricks out of your hat will allow you to portray the illusive nature of your subject while completing a look-alike resemblance."

Like the best teachers—and it comes as no surprise to learn that she has taught photography in colleges for many years—Dorskind weaves together the how and the why for her "students." A novice fond of disposables cameras—even someone with no interest in ever taking pictures of children—will be a much better photographer after reading Dorskind's book because he or she will understand what makes a good and lasting photo.

Dorskind writes with such obvious love for her medium that even weekend photographers who take only casual snapshots will read her book and begin to care more about that scene they see framed in the viewfinder or the digital screen.

Of special fascination are the two chapters that frame the central body of the book: one on the history of photographing children, the other offering examples of the work of some contemporary photographers. Many of the photos in these chapters are staged studio shots and bear little superficial resemblance to Dorskind's work, which is much more spontaneous. Closer inspection, however, reveals why she picked these photos: the staging may be different but the photos capture children telling us something important about themselves.

Also, if other photographers of children have been and are more inclined to overt theatricality, that does not mean that Dorskind does not see her more subtle work as a form of stagecraft.

In conversation, the Westhampton Beach mother of two compares what she does as a photographer to experiences she once had as an aspiring actress in Manhattan.

“When I studied acting, I was taught to let the character develop within you,” she recalls. “That’s what I do now as a photographer. I’m big on letting things happen when I photograph. I wait for the character to emerge.”

Acting is just one facet of Dorskind’s rather eclectic career path. She took up photography as a teenager, and even had her own darkroom in the Roslyn home where she grew up. She also had a passion for painting, which she indulged in after-school studio classes that she kept secret from many of her friends.



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Lollipop

After high school, however, her father advised her to pursue a career more likely to earn her a living than photography or painting. She graduated from Boston University with a degree in marketing and, in 1978, went to work for CBS Records, managing the promotion of such stars as Patti Labelle.

Dorskind says it was a great job for a young woman, but that “working with so many stars made me realize that I wanted to be an artist like the artists I was managing. Also, by the time I was 26, I began to feel there had to be more to life than working on the next Cheap Trick record.”

Dorskind began to explore, taking acting and art classes at night, and once again taking photographs. Then, in 1982, she got what she now considers her big break: she lost her job. “It was a time of massive layoffs in the record business, myself included. I hadn’t been able to bring myself to leave CBS on my own, because it was too good a job to give up.”

Around the same time, Dorskind took an intensive two-week course in hand coloring photographs and realized she had found a way to combine her love of painting and photography—and, tangentially, even theater. “I took a long route to end up where I began,” she says.

Putting her marketing savvy to work, Dorskind thought there might be a niche for her hand-painted photos in book publishing. She put together a portfolio and made the rounds, landing a contract with Random House where she did book jackets for a series of Ann Beattie books, including *Chilly Scenes of Winter* and *Falling in Place*. She began to get additional work as a freelance photographer and designer from major corporate clients such as Coca-Cola and CBS.

In 1988, now married to Glenn Dorskind and the mother of two-year old Nicole, she agreed to leave Manhattan for Westhampton Beach, still a relatively quiet, rural community. “We picked it because it was the first place closest to the city that didn’t feel like suburbia,” Dorskind recalls.

They made the move, she says, “because Glenn really didn’t want to be in the city, but it was really frightening. I was making money from my photography, and I thought it was going to be career suicide.”



Paul & Luke

Fortunately, both for Dorskind and her many fans, that is not the way things worked out. She says she now has as much work from private commissions as she can handle, especially combined with the photography classes she teaches at Suffolk Community College—after having taught for several years at Southampton College—and the “Picture This” photography column she writes for the *Southampton Press*. In 1998, she published *The Art of Handpainting Photographs* (Watson-Guptill), which has become an industry standard. She has shown her work in galleries all over Long Island, and has two new books in the very early stages. She is frequently commissioned by designers, builders, and homeowners to take photographs showcasing homes in the Hamptons: these photos appear regularly in magazine articles and advertisements.

While raising two daughters—Joelle was born in 1991—Dorskind also managed to jump wholeheartedly into digital photography, which she confesses she now loves. Even though she has accumulated a great deal of technical acumen in computer manipulation, she still does her hand-painted photographs the old fashioned way: with brushes on photos printed in the darkroom on high-fiber paper. “It’s something I love to do,” she says. “I start painting and the next thing I know I’m off in my own world.”

Each year since 1987, Dorskind has donated a photograph to the Suffolk County Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The photograph is given as the grand prize at the coalition's annual dinner. For several years, she has photographed famous authors who have come to speak at the Westhampton Synagogue, in a program co-chaired by her husband, Glenn, a language arts teacher at Westhampton Middle School. "I have some amazing photos of Alan Ginsberg," she says of the late poet.



Dorskind has photographed famous writers who have spoken at The Hampton Synagogue as part of its authors series, which her husband, Glenn, helps to organize. The late poet Allen Ginsberg (above) is one of her favorite subjects.

Though Dorskind teaches her students how to work in a studio and does occasional studio work herself, the Ginsberg photos, like much of what she does, were taken in a natural setting, without fancy studio lighting. She especially likes to shoot outdoors, and the preponderance of sample photos in *The Art of Photographing Children* were taken in natural light. She offers advice on taking photos at various times of day, cloudy and sunny, the wind blowing or not.

"I like the spontaneity of working outside," she says. "It can be chaotic, especially with children, but that makes me focus and work better."

While she admits it's an art to get children to stand still, photographing adults is actually more difficult. "You have to relax an adult. You have to be patient. I might have to spend an hour with adults to get them to forget that I'm there to take a picture."

Dorskind, who turned 50 this year, has numerous projects in the works. She has two new books in mind, possibly including one embracing new technologies. She is considering an extended photo essay on the residents of a nursing home.

Clearly, she has lost none of her zest for what she does. "What I love about photography, she says, is that you think you are seizing reality, framing it in the viewfinder. It's very immediate.

But, you learn that it's not as real as you think. You keep looking at the photo, and you see all these different layers. You see how it exists on so many levels."

"I'm overwhelmed with work," she says, "But there's lots more I want to do. I'll do it. I have lots of goals. I'm excited. There's so much I can do and I think I'll do it."



Rachel and Sara

Rapport

This excerpt is from the chapter "Important Moments" in *The Art of Photographing Children*.

"Advice on how to relate to children can be found throughout this book but rapport is such a major component of a portrait photographer's work that it is important to summarize the essentials. Relate to the child with an open heart and clear your mind from discursive thoughts by constantly refocusing your attention on the child. From infancy through the teen years, children speak their own language. Learn to understand their inflections, nuances and syntax. Play with children and they will let you into their world, which is full of photographic wonders.

"Parents tend to appreciate pictures of their children smiling and often need encouragement to move off the beaten track. The typical "say cheese" pictures, in which a child is asked to "perform" a smile, are not true portraits in that they actually take the sitter out of his inner consciousness. Instead of going up to the child and actually positioning the face, place the subject in position and then let the poses naturally unfold during conversation. Ask questions to invoke a mood or characteristic of the young person. Try questions like, "What is your favorite sport? Who is your best friend? What are you going to do tonight? Ask questions that allow children to reconnect with themselves, and this will project out and into your camera."