

Carmel Artists by Dennis Taylor
Carmel Pine Cone, March 11, 2022

Her standing date with a darkroom

What languages do trees speak...and why do they talk to Jane Olin?

The Carmel Valley fine art photographer hears them while taking meditative walks near her home, or through the forests of Big Sur, in search of inspiration.

“I have a long history with trees,” said Olin, who grew up daydreaming in Steilacoom, Wash., a village of 2,350 on Puget Sound, where trees and clouds and other wonders of nature felt like confidants.

All these years later, the friendship continues. In 2021, her mysterious and misty image - very black and very white - of a large branch yawning over a cluster of smaller trees, was judged Best of Show at the International Photography Awards in New York City, regarded as one of the most prestigious competitions in the world.

That image, entitled “Intimate Conversation,” is part of a 30-photo exhibition from the awards touring Europe, while other Olin photos are on display at the New Museum of Los Gatos through June 5 in a show called, “In the Company of Trees.”

“I wait for the subject to call to me. I photograph whatever draws me intuitively,” she said. “I call it contemplative awareness, and it’s grounded in my Zen practice, my meditation practice – staying present, and in the moment.”



Carmel Valley photographer Jane Olin says she has “a long history with trees” and other wonders of nature.

“I need to be in touch with my intuition and work from the deepest place inside of me,” said Olin, who has been practicing yoga for more than 40 years. “I need to take it all in and react to what I see.”

Her influences include two proteges of fabled photographer Ansel Adams - Henry Gilpin, who taught classes she took at Monterey Peninsula College, and John Sexton, from whom she took two workshops. But Olin’s style and process are entirely her own.

Old school, with a twist

While the vast majority of fine art photographers have forayed into the world of digital camera and computerized photo editing, Olin shoots on film and remains romantically involved with the old-fashioned darkroom she maintains at her Laureles Grade home.

That's where she transforms her negatives and images, experimenting with chemicals and bleach, painting, dripping and spraying and playing until something very different emerges. The process often takes four or five hours, until Olin decided the art is done and applies fixative to prevent any further chemically induced metamorphosis.

"I make a judgement based on a visceral feeling. I make work that satisfies me. I want it to call to me," she said. "You can't worry about the other person, the viewer. They're either going to see it, or they're not."

Olin and her husband, John, met in Los Angeles in 1962, when she was an administrative secretary at Hughes Aircraft and he arrived as a scholarship intern from Stanford University, where he was pursuing his Ph.D. in mechanical engineering.

They got engaged a year later, visited Carmel in 1964 to be married at the old chapel at the Highlands Inn, moved to Boston, where John got his first professional job, then to Minnesota, where, in 1971, he and a colleague founded their own high-tech company, Sierra Instruments.

"In 1974, we were tired of the cold weather and decided to move west," said Olin, who worked for several years in the marketing department of Sierra Instruments, which relocated to Monterey at Ryan Ranch.

When the Olins retired in 2004, their adult children, Matt (a Stevenson High graduate) and Erica (Santa Catalina), ran Sierra Instruments until the business was sold in 2019.

"When the children went off to college, I decided to take a look at my life. I had been giving to my children, the family and the business, and felt like I had lost part of myself in the process," Jane Olin recalled. She continued, "I had a gnawing feeling that I was supposed to do something else, and started asking myself, 'What is my passion?'"

That's when she began taking photography classes from Gilpin at MPC, and workshops from fine art photography luminaries like Sexton, Joyce Tenneson, Brian Taylor, Martha Casanave, Holly Roberts and Christopher James.

Validation

Artistic breakthroughs came in 1994, when an Olin photograph won Best of Show at the International Women's Photography Festival in Smolensk, Russian, and in 2000, 2001 and 2003, when her work was accepted into Salon d'Automne, an international juried exhibition in Paris.

In 2002, she won an Award of Excellence in Forum Magazine's annual "Best of Photography" edition, and the following year she got a second-place award in the Camera Club of New York's Juried Photo Competition.

Over the past two decades, Olin's photographs have been celebrated three times as Best of Show, along with two awards for first place, three for second place, 11 honorable mentions, a Gold Award in the Fine Art category at the Tokyo International Photo Awards, and multiple other plaudits.

"But creating art is very solitary. It can be lonely and isolating, and that's how I was feeling, even though I belong to various groups, like Imagemakers and Independent Photographers," she said.

In 2014, Olin reached out to five other women - acquaintances whose groundbreaking photography she admired - and formed Salon Jane, a collaborative group.

"My idea was to bring together these women who were pushing against the traditional rules of photography," she said. "We all kind of have the same way of looking at what we're doing. I wanted to create a group that could support and inspire each other and feed off one another."

Eight years later, Salon Jane is still composed of its original six members - Olin, Casanave, Susan Hyde Greene, Anna Rheim, Robin V. Robinson, and Robin Ward.

The group's first collaborative exhibition, in 2018, was at the Monterey Museum of Art. In 2020, all six were showcased at Middlebury Institute of International Studies in a show called "Celebrating Women Artists with Salon Jane." And in 2021, they celebrated in Carmel at the Center for Photographic Art in an event called "Salon Jane: Present Tense."

In addition to the International Photography Awards traveling exhibition in Europe and her showcase at the New Museum Los Gatos (106 E. Main St., numulosgatos.org), Olin's work is on exhibit through July at a show called "Trees Stir in Their Leaves" at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson.