

Shadow & Light Magazine

The Art of Photography



Image: Joni Sternbach (detail)

Volume 4/Issue 05

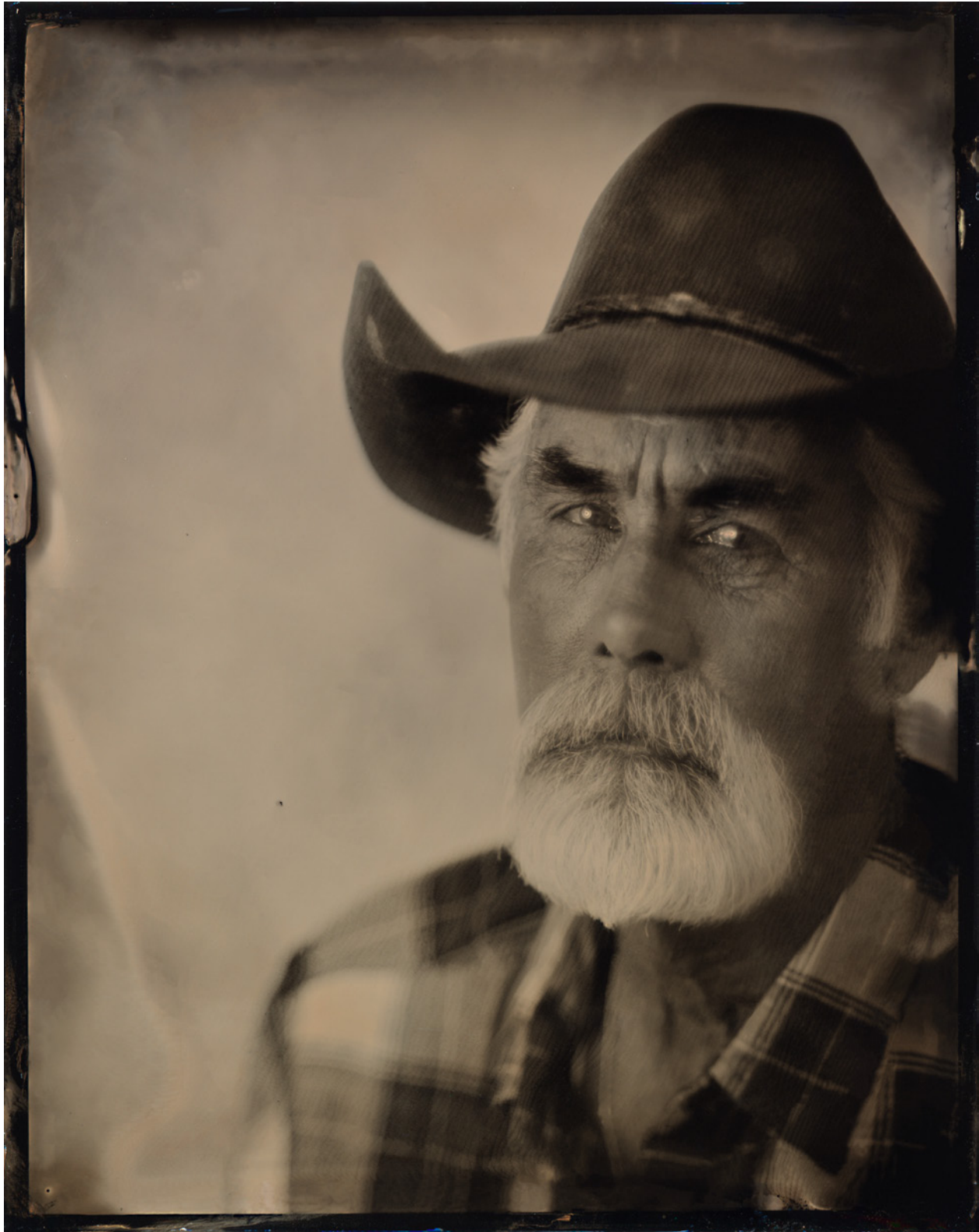
July/August 2018

ISSN: 2471-7681

**Special Issue:
Alternative Processes**

Showcase Portfolio

Kevin Black: *The Road Less Photographed*



New Mexico Cattle Auction #4. • ©Kevin Black

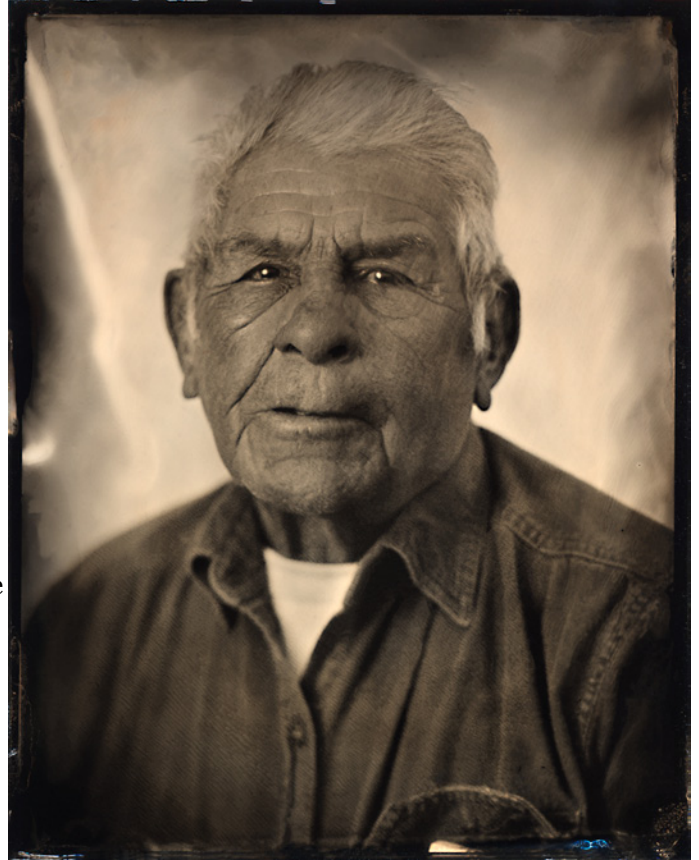
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Shadow & Light Magazine: Tell us about your photographic background, Kevin. Did your dad or your uncle give you that ubiquitous Brownie, or did a career in photography come to you in a dream?

Kevin Black: I was born a photographer. At birth, it was difficult on my mother, but she learned to love me despite the attached camera. Needing formal education, I later attended Rochester Institute of Technology and received a degree in professional photography in 1976. I was on my way to become a studio advertising photographer with a specialty in food work.

SLM: You recently left a successful full-time commercial photography career to pursue a career in alternative processes, including taking your “show” on the road. What transpired in your life to enable you to make that life-changing decision, as well as relocating half-way across the country?

KB: The rumors of me leaving commercial work are a vicious rumor being spread by competitors. They are an evil lot. For many years I was drawn to all sorts of imagery outside my career path. I started shooting large format advertising and eventually transitioned to high end digital camera work and digital motion storytelling. As I still am active in the business, I was able to take a one-on-one course in wetplate and started to buy back large format equipment. Moving to New Mexico seemed like fun. After the kids were all raised, my work can happen almost anywhere. I travel back East often to shoot jobs and visit family. Oftentimes I find myself on the West Coast shooting as well. Albuquerque has a functional airport you know.



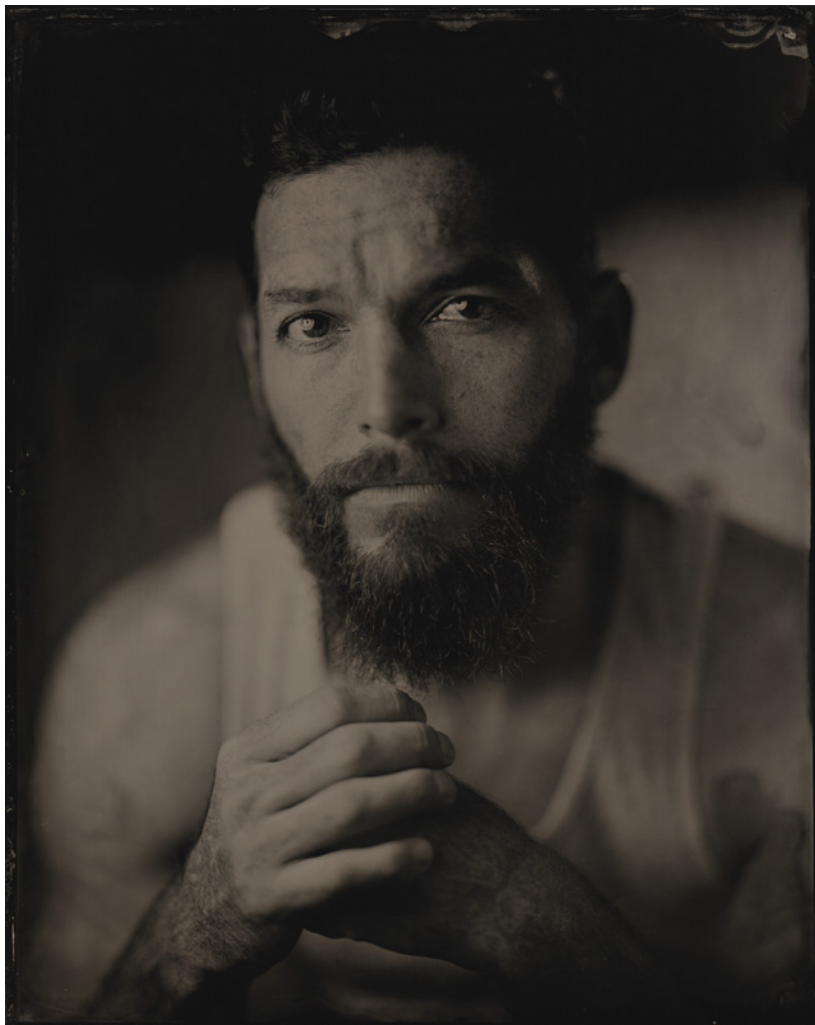
New Mexico Cattle Auction #2. • ©Kevin Black

As this process requires a darkroom I was initially limited to shooting using a home-made dark box. Recently, I came upon a custom-built trailer that was made for wetplate at a reasonable price, so I bought it. My decisions on equipment and other acquisitions are driven by the direction I want to take in the work. Having a trailer allows me to go to the site of what I want to photograph. Had I wanted to have people come to me, I would have made a studio. I can rent studios, most don't have darkrooms anymore, so I can travel to that place and shoot too.

In the beginning of August, I leave for a 3+ week photo safari to New York and back via North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana and Utah. So, I can go anywhere and shoot. Digital, sheet film, roll film, collodion etc., is all coming along. I have the tools and I'm not afraid of using them.

SLM: Once you chose to pursue alternative processing how did you move forward? Did you already have a background in any part of that genre? Workshops? Classes? What about equipment? I guess what I am asking is did you start with a clean slate?

KB: I have a good mad-scientist background. I was always a nerdy guy and a problem solver. I've always played with photography as well as derived my income from it. For years, I took a high-end Phase One digital back and rubber banded it to a modified Holga camera. I've shot infrared film, made pinhole cameras, stuff like that for decades. As far as tintype, once I got the foundational work done in wet plate I practiced pouring and processing plates. Luck would have it that my girlfriend is beautiful and works at home. Therefore, I had a built-in model for tests. I shot many plates for three months every day in 4x5. In order to push myself more, I decided to try offering portraits at public at



Jesse. • ©Kevin Black

events once the work was consistently good. I started going to events and setting up a pop-up canopy, on location studio and brought the dark box. I was pleasantly surprised that people liked the work and enjoyed my rambling on about the history and process. Rambling is my way of covering nervousness. Oh, well—my secret is out.

As far as a clean slate, I already had decades of large format work. Really, I started my career shooting thousands of images in 8x10 and 4x5 so that was not a problem. We use either aluminum or glass plates. Cleanliness is most important too, so I shower every day. Maybe one day I will try coating a slate plate. I already have shot collodion on stones and semi-precious gems. That's cool.

SLM: Upon making that move how did you shape your vision for the future, and what does that future look like, now?

KB: I always ask myself, "Self, what do you see?" This process lends itself to certain areas. You know the phrase, "The camera just loves you?" Well it loves people, not my specialty. So, I have been shooting people. Please don't tell the cops, the clean-up is enough trouble. It also loves metal, leather, tattoos and certain details. As I shoot different things and try different techniques,

it is that process and the act of working in a certain technique that guides the path. I am also forcing myself to make the work unique. If I shoot a portrait, it has to be 'mine' and not something that I have seen and cannot solely rely on technique to make it unique. So far, I have not accomplished that. I'm getting closer, but not quite there yet. Mark Osterman, at the Eastman House offered a book: "Beyond Technique" that I found helpful.

SLM: Many people who have made personal and career moves like yours often lament that that decision might have been a mistake. That they should have thought longer and harder about what they chose for a new direction. Has that thought ever crossed your mind?

KB: What?? Oh, Sh*! Now you've let the demons in. Bad Tim.

No, this whole thing, from RIT to now has been a journey. It has not been easy all the time, for sure. I have had and continue to have a good career in the profession that I was drawn to at an early stage. I see that I am having several interrelated careers and it is fun—and challenging. I've raised my children with that idea and it seems they are having a healthy lifestyle and growth. I realize that I have been privileged to work in the profession continuously for more than 40 years.

SLM: Now that you are, basically, in full production mode tell us about your obstacles and challenges. Just the fact that you entered a completely new area of photography is daunting enough, let alone uprooting and moving to unfamiliar surroundings.

KB: It's all challenges. I want to supplement my traditional digital commercial work with film and tintypes.

I also want to continue to interface with the public making portraits, alternative process jewelry and soft goods. I'm getting a lot of personal satisfaction from their enthusiasm and support. I want to continue to shoot digital motion. One day last year I shot some fine art figures in the morning in wetplate and then was shooting the same woman in digital motion and trying new camera angles with a drone in the desert. Kind of going from 1847 to 2017 in a few hours. Somehow it all fits.

I guess the biggest challenge will be finding foundations and patrons to support my craziness and not losing commercial clients because I don't fit into the box too well. That damn New Mexico food has me gaining weight. I need a larger box!

As far as uprooting, I have always enjoyed travel. I now have the opportunity to garden in the high desert and hear more Spanish and Native American being spoken. My kids travel too so we do see each other. It's all good.



New Mexico Cattle Auction #1. • ©Kevin Black

SLM: OK. We are now five years into the future. What does your photographic life look like at this time?

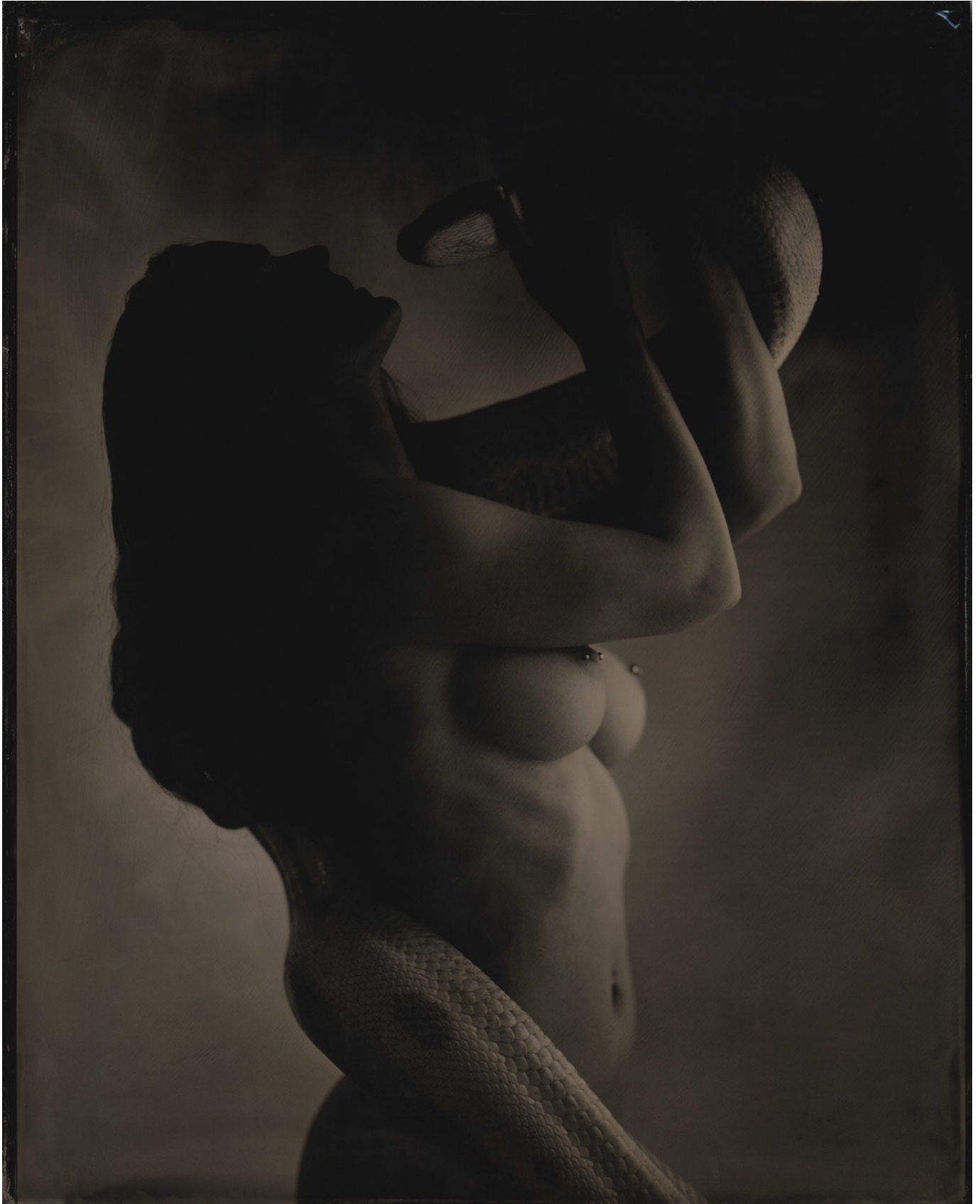
KB: I'm not sure. I have a few projects I am working on. You know, you gotta work through the current vision you see in your heart and mind and let the work take you to that future place. I have no lack of what I find beautiful and interesting. I also know that I cannot be fractured and jump from one thing to another without working in depth on a project. It's a full life and I have a supporting partner and community. One fellow tintype photographer recommends that you find a project and work in depth on it for no less than a year. I agree.

One thing I'd like to mention. For the last six years I worked with my partner on a woman's health project almost full time. That work has been inspirational and transformative. When I was a full time commercial photographer in Philly, it was all business. My team and I performed at a very high level. Now fast forward and the experiences and learnings in between have informed where I am now as a person and a photographer. I think that you always have to be open to new learnings of the heart and mind. They will help you make the work.

Many times, these portraits I make in collodion are special. Not only are they unique for the process, unique that they are one offs without replication, but special for the clients. I've photographed a woman who was pregnant for the first time, full term after many, many attempts. I've photographed couples who never had formal portraits before. They were going through significant life challenges that might alter their lives together and wanted a special set of portraits. That work is good, too. ○



Sacred Stone. • ©Kevin Black



Snake. • ©Kevin Black



Fabian, Traditional. • ©Kevin Black



New Mexico Cattle Auction #3. • ©Kevin Black

Shadow & Light Magazine, in print!

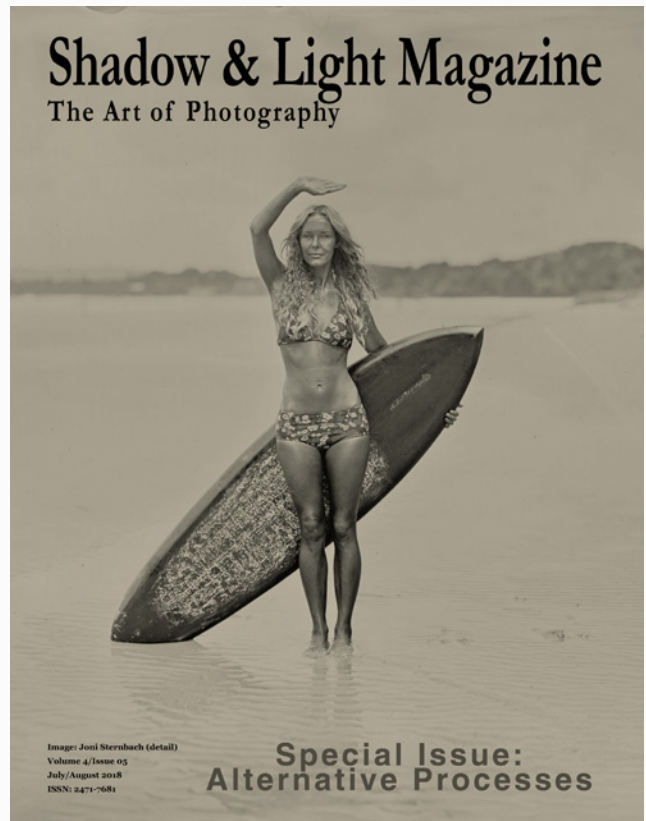
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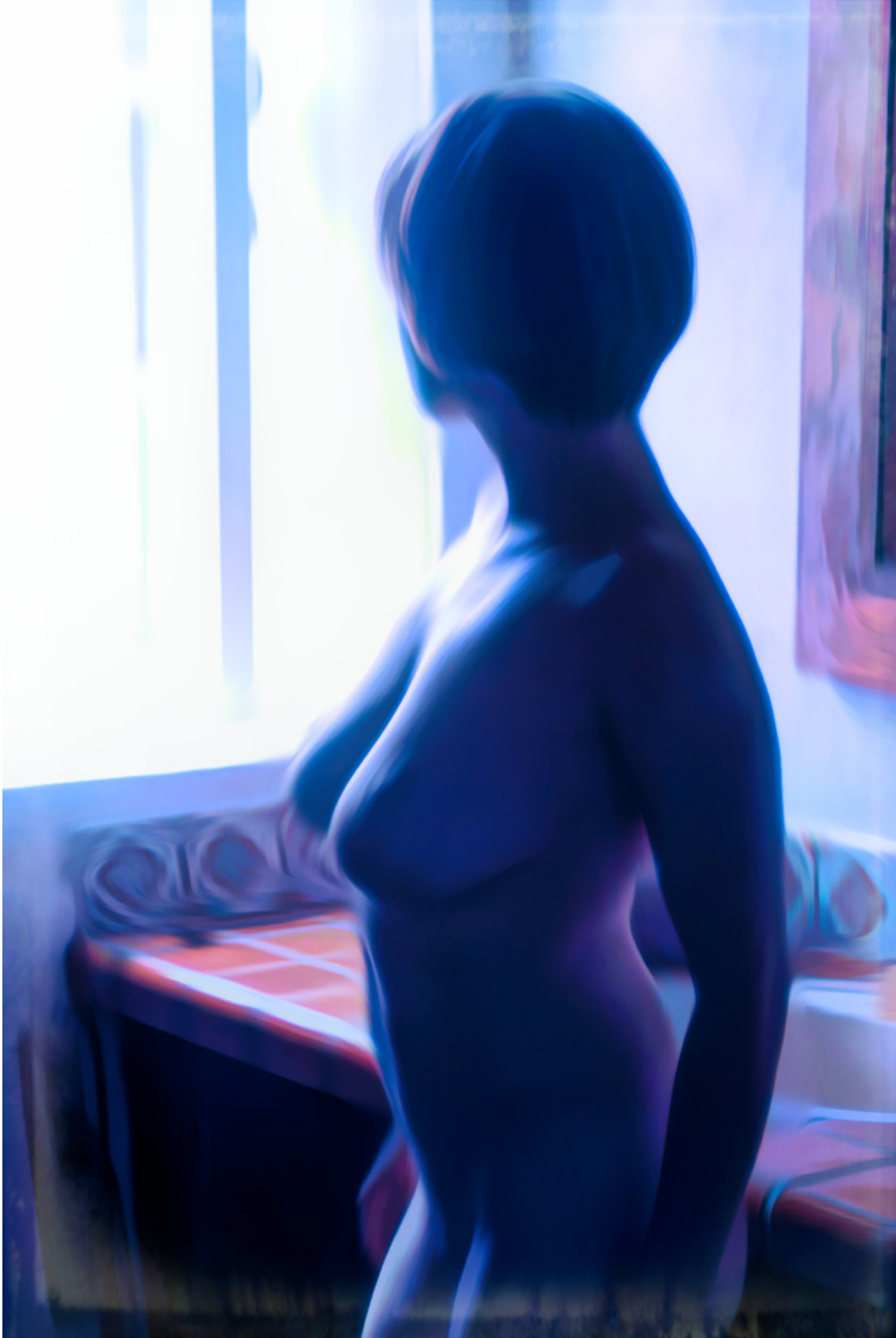
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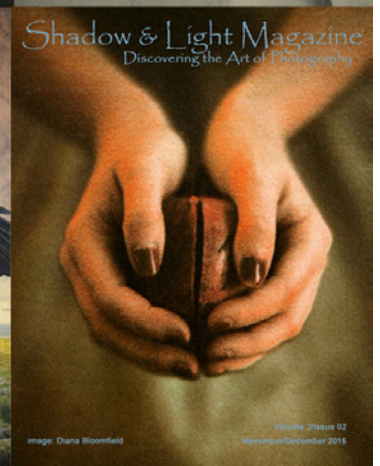
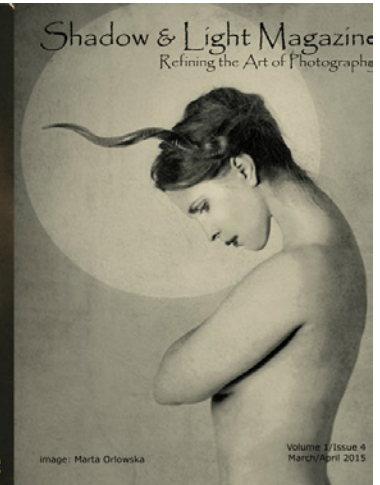
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Thank you!