

Pin is In

Monterey's Martha Casanave Sees Entire Worlds Through The Eye of Her Pinhole Camera

BY MEREDITH MULLINS



You might have seen her teetering on the rocks at Point Lobos, waving her arms wildly like a cartoon character in peril. A tote bag of props in one hand and her backpack filled with cameras tilting her precariously to one side. And if you had gotten close enough, you would have also seen the inventive gleam in her eye.

Martha Casanave has once again set out on her own path, a resolute theme in her 35 years of photography. She is capturing the striking California coast from a "crab's-eye" view. And, true to her always-original perspective, she gives us the dramatic beauty through a dream-like veil of history and mystery.

This haunting series — the subject of a soon-to-be released book called "Explorations Along

An Imaginary Coastline" — was new territory for Casanave. A self-proclaimed "indoor" photographer, she was well-known for her portrait work and studio storytelling.

"I always found people more interesting than rocks and trees," Casanave admits, although she is quick to recognize the Monterey Peninsula's rich legacy of landscape photographers. "I was privileged to count Ansel Adams, Brett Weston, and Morley Baer as friends."

In fact, she photographed them as part of her portrait work in the 1970s and 1980s. But Casanave was never inspired to turn her camera, as they did, to the natural scenes of the central coast. Until now.

The Monterey-based photographer works in projects. The projects get started in different

ways, but always take on a life of their own, and always finish themselves. She had just completed a series about her exuberant whippet (published in her 2001 book "Beware of Dog"). She had learned much about the joy of life and living in the moment, as dogs do, but was saddened when Sweet Pea, the star of the book, died. She was in "hiatus"—waiting for the next inspiration. A friend who is a pinhole expert said, "Let's go out with our pinhole cameras." "Out?" Casanave said with an invisible shudder. "What do you mean 'out'? I'm not an outdoor photographer."

But out they went and, for the next six years, Casanave explored the coast, bringing to the images the dreamlike distortion that comes with a pinhole camera and bringing her own imagination and perspective.



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"I realized that the natural scene wasn't enough for me," she said, "so I began photographing the 'unnatural scene.'"

Casanave takes advantage of the nearly infinite depth of field that a pinhole camera provides. The images seem to stretch through time into the distance. And, because she places her camera on the ground rather than a tripod ("anywhere a crab can go" is the rule), her images offer a unique viewing perspective. You are swept into the scene.

It is no surprise that Casanave loves the primal simplicity of the pinhole camera. An ardent history lover, particularly of photographic history, she teaches workshops and college classes in lensless photography and old photographic processes, such as cyanotype and Van Dyke. She loves the magic of photography. A pinhole camera — which is just a box with a tiny hole — can make an alluring image. She calls such a camera an "optical phenomenon, unadorned by mechanics." The result is art in a very pure form.

Casanave learned the science of photography early on. Her first camera as a child was always around her neck. It quickly became her way of relating to the world. Her next camera (when she was 12) was a Rolleicord, complete with a handheld light meter. She had to learn F-stops, shutter speeds, and how to measure light. But being a professional photographer had no reality base as she moved into high school and college. She majored in Russian at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

She was able, however, to merge her two loves — photography and Russian. She began to

lead photographic workshops to Russia (between 1984 and 1995). Her teaching skills and the starkness and beauty of Russia (and the vodka) made these trips the ultimate travel adventure. And, these journeys yielded some of the most striking images in her first book, "Past Lives" (published in 1991).

As Casanave continues her time travel, grounded in photographic history, she has already identified her next project — daguerreotypes. The process (invented in 1839) involves exposing the image on a copper plate dipped in silver and sensitized with iodine vapors. The final one-of-a-kind image must be enclosed in glass to protect its fragile nature.

"I just don't know where to keep my iodine crystals," Casanave laments. In fact, Martha Stewart and Heloise are oddly silent on the subject.

But you don't meet a photographer like Casanave everyday. A time-traveling explorer, with a passion for history and a penchant for creating truly original, timeless images. Somehow you know she'll rise to the challenge.

Casanave's work can be seen in her new book *Martha Casanave: Explorations Along An Imaginary Coastline* (Hudson Hills Press) and at www.marthacasanave.com. A book signing will be held October 29 at the Pacific Grove Art Center from 7–9 pm, in conjunction with a lensless photography exhibit. ■



Casanave's new book, "Explorations Along An Imaginary Coastline" includes shots taken from a "crab's-eye" view.