

Light Leaks

Low Fidelity Photography

ISSUE 5, WINTER, 2007



FEATURE INTERVIEW: Pinhole Vision—An Interview with Martha Casanave

GALLERY: "Wide Open"

TECHNIQUE: Holga Tintypes

REVIEW: Empire Scout

SHOWCASE: Scott Hammond and A. Saska Mutic

DIY: Seeing the World in 70mm

ISSN 1911-429X



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Pinhole Vision

An Interview with Martha Casanave

By Steph Parke

I had the exciting opportunity to talk with Martha Casanave, a brilliant pinhole photographer and environmental portraitist, teacher and self-described "indoor person." She recently released her third book, *Martha Casanave: Explorations Along an Imaginary Coastline*, a collection of pinhole photographs made along central California's dramatic coastline. She also created such wonderful works as the timeless *Leningrad in Winter* and the touching *Beware of Dog*.

Steph Parke: How did you become involved in photography and how long have you been shooting?

Martha Casanave: I became enamored with photography at a very early age, maybe around eight. I was given a Brownie and I carried it everywhere. I was always shy and the camera gave me courage to interact with people, but also a way to avoid them. In a way, I used it as a crutch for most of my childhood and young adult life. So you could say that getting hooked on photography so early stunted the development of my interpersonal skills, but on the other hand, it gave me a lot of practice with a camera.

SP: Do you remember any of your early cameras?

MC: When I was twelve, my uncle gave me his old Rolleicord and a Weston light meter, so I had to learn about F-stops and shutter speeds. I was totally intimidated. But in retrospect, I've found that any new camera intimidates me, and furthermore, that I don't particularly like cameras at all. I have always wished I could photograph without one. I guess pinhole comes pretty close. Doing photograms, one of my favorite activities, comes even closer. I get to use light sensitive paper and emulsions, but there is no camera involved at all.

SP: So is that what fascinates you about pinhole photography?

MC: I love pinhole because of its simplicity. I like the idea that we uncover the pinhole and the film slowly and silently receives the image. We don't go out and "shoot." I also like the unpredictability.

SP: We lo-fi photographers tend to be camera junkies. Do you have just one favorite pinhole or do you use several?

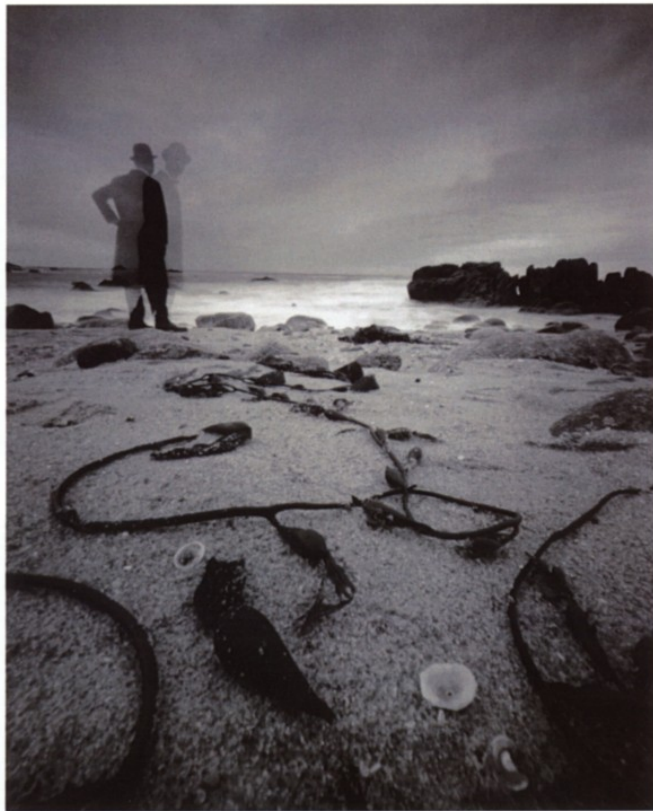
MC: I started out using my Toyo 4x5 field camera, adapted to become a pinhole. Then I got a Santa Barbara 4x5 camera, then a couple of Leonardos. For one project abroad (*Leningrad in Winter*), I adapted my Nikon. Sometimes I use a Zero (2 1/4 format), and for classes we always adapt Holgas and use paint cans of various sizes. By the way, we have a pinhole workshop coming up at the end of April, through U.C. Santa Cruz Extension. It coincides with Worldwide Pinhole Photography Day, always the last Sunday in April. I co-teach it with Chris Patton; he does the science and the handiwork, I do the art. You can check it out on my website, www.marthacasanave.com. I am not the least bit handy, in fact quite the opposite, so I probably couldn't make a light-tight camera if you paid me. I have no interest in making cameras. I just want to make pictures.

SP: You worked with Ansel Adams and other photographic greats. What was that like?

MC: I first came to Monterey to study Russian and Japanese. While in school, I was doing a lot of photography and I worked part-time for an environmental portrait photographer who had a gallery and darkroom on Cannery Row. I worked in the lab with him and he gave me the key so I could do my own work at night. I learned a lot from him and also got to know other local photographers through him. I soon realized what a resource there was in this community.



I got to know Ansel Adams when I asked if I could make his portrait. We became friends, and I photographed him numerous times over the years. I never really worked with him. I never had any interest in his type of work, though I had tremendous respect and admiration for him and he had a fabulous sense of humor. I got to know all the other "greats" just by being here and seriously and persistently pursuing my kind of photography (portraiture). There weren't very many women, let alone portraitists, doing photography here and sometimes certain attitudes irked me. On meeting Morley Baer for the very first time, he asked me "Who do you belong to?" When first introduced to Brett Weston, he looked me up and down and asked how old I was. I learned how to dish it right back to those guys and we became friends.



SP: Do you still enjoy working in the environmental portraiture genre?

MC: I still enjoy doing portraits, just as much as ever. Well, I did get tired of doing portraits during all the years when I did it commercially. I specialize in black and white indoor environmental portraiture, though for a long time I had a studio with natural light, too. I got tired of people not liking to look at themselves in pictures. I understand this phenomenon - I am the same way - but having to try to please people was not rewarding for me. I don't do much portraiture for pay anymore, so now I'm back to where I was before: asking people I find interesting to sit for me. This is much more fun! I teach at two colleges now and do some custom printing, so I was able to let the portrait business go.

SP: Which contemporary portrait photographers do you admire?

MC: Arnold Newman was, and still is, my favorite portraitist. I was fortunate to be able to make a portrait of him at his home in New York. For me, there is a difference between "portraits" and "pictures of people." Perhaps my definition of portraiture is rather narrow or old-fashioned, but I wouldn't call the work of someone like Joel Sternfeld portraiture, or even some of Diane Arbus' work, though they are pictures of people looking into the camera.

SP: You've worked extensively in Russia, having made eleven trips there. What is it that draws you there?

MC: My interest in Russia and Russian language and literature began early. I don't know where it came from; perhaps a psychic could tell me... I started studying Russian in high school and majored in it in college, here in Monterey. My first trip to the Soviet Union was when I was in my twenties.

It was a summer-long camping trip, pretty cheap and rough, but memorable! My subsequent trips were much later, and a lot more comfortable. I was able to combine my language and photography skills by taking groups of American photographers on professional tours to photograph and meet their counterparts in the Soviet Union. Several of my trips were the results of grants to participate in symposia and to lead workshops.

SP: Your *Leningrad in Winter* project is timeless. I'm interested in what inspired you to portray the city like this and why you visited in the dead of winter.

MC: The *Leningrad in Winter* work was inspired by an essay written by the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who I had previously photographed in his Greenwich Village home. In his essay, "Guide to a Renamed City," he says:

This is the city where it's somehow easier to endure loneliness than anywhere else: because the city itself is lonely. A strange consolation comes from the notion that these stones have nothing to do with the present and still less with the future...

The lower the temperature falls, the more abstract the city looks. Minus 25 Centigrade is cold enough, but the temperature keeps falling as though, having done away with people, river, and buildings, it aims for ideas, for abstract concepts. With the white smoke floating above the roofs, the buildings along the embankments more and more resemble a stalled train bound for eternity. Trees in parks and public gardens look like school diagrams of human lungs...

...there is a second Petersburg, the one made of verses and of Russian prose...

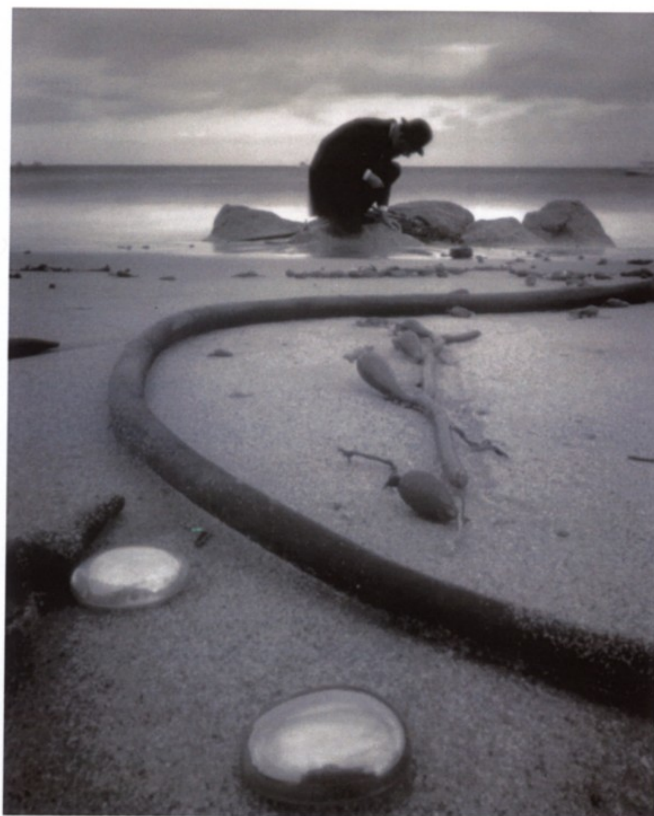


"What better subject for pinhole photography than that?" I asked myself, suddenly struck with inspiration. I had been to Leningrad/St. Petersburg a number of times and found it a haunting, literary place (think Dostoevsky, Akhmatova, etc.), but I'd never been there in the dead of winter. At about the same time, Polaroid Corporation asked me to make some photographs with their then new Polapan film, so I asked them if they'd send me to Leningrad. We worked out a good deal and I went there in the winter of 1988-89 (that was in the good old days when corporations supported artists).

I used a rather large pinhole on my Nikon, to obliterate detail and reduce the city down to its timeless essence. The long exposures caused moving traffic and most moving people to disappear, leaving just the essence of the city blanketed with snow and intersected with frozen canals and rivers. When people do appear in the images, their clothes don't date them. The prints are grainy and feel like they might dissolve, like the ice does in spring. This is Leningrad frozen in time, both literally and figuratively.

SP: Can you tell us a little about your involvement in getting Russia's first women-only photography exhibition off the ground?

MC: I was glad to be a part of getting the annual Women's International Exhibition and Symposium started. I really wish we didn't *have* to do separate women's events, in Russia, or here [in America]. I wish more women could be integrated into all events and that more women were shown in galleries and museums. Men's attitudes toward women are somewhat more primitive in Russia than here, and we had to deal with more than a little patronizing, but women there are strong and there is a substantial feminist movement.



SP: How about your beloved central California Coast? What is it about the area that inspires you?

MC: Why did it take me 35 years to begin photographing the Central Coast, my home territory? I've always been an indoor portrait photographer. I came to the Monterey Peninsula in the first place not because of photography, but to study languages at the Institute of International Studies. Even after I got to know Ansel, Morley, Brett and other landscape photographers who lived here, I used to make good-natured fun of the "Rock and Tree" school of photography. I never thought *I'd* be doing seascapes! Look at me now! It just goes to show, you never know what turns your life will take. I must admit, however, that I got bored pretty quickly by the natural scene, and started adding things occasionally; most significantly, a person in the distance. Having an unidentifiable person dressed in 19th century clothing in some of the images gave them a narrative quality and made the work much more interesting for me to pursue.

SP: And why do you concentrate on the ocean?

MC: Why just the shoreline? I don't know. I am following my inclination, doing what feels right. Perhaps all will be revealed as I work, perhaps not. A psychic gave me an (unsolicited) explanation recently, as he perused my new book. I won't tell the story here, but suffice it to say that I don't reject anything; all ideas and stories are part of the creative process. Imagination is the central element for me. Truth is irrelevant. Or, you could say, truth is hidden.

The only other outdoor work I've done is the pinhole series *Leningrad in Winter*, though I wouldn't call it landscape. They could be called urban-scape, with some people in them. That whole series was intended to portray

Leningrad as a literary myth, not as a contemporary, bustling metropolis.

So far, I haven't been attracted to any other place to photograph. So far...

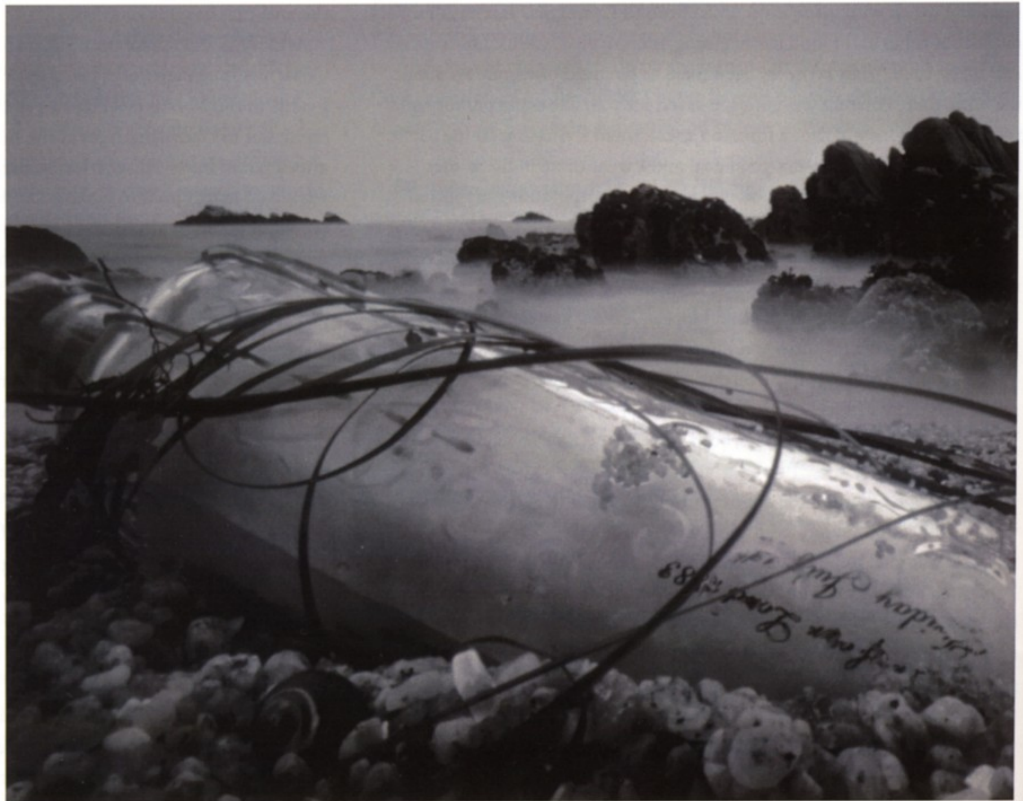
SP: You've recently released your third book, *Explorations along an Imaginary Coastline*. Can you tell us about it?

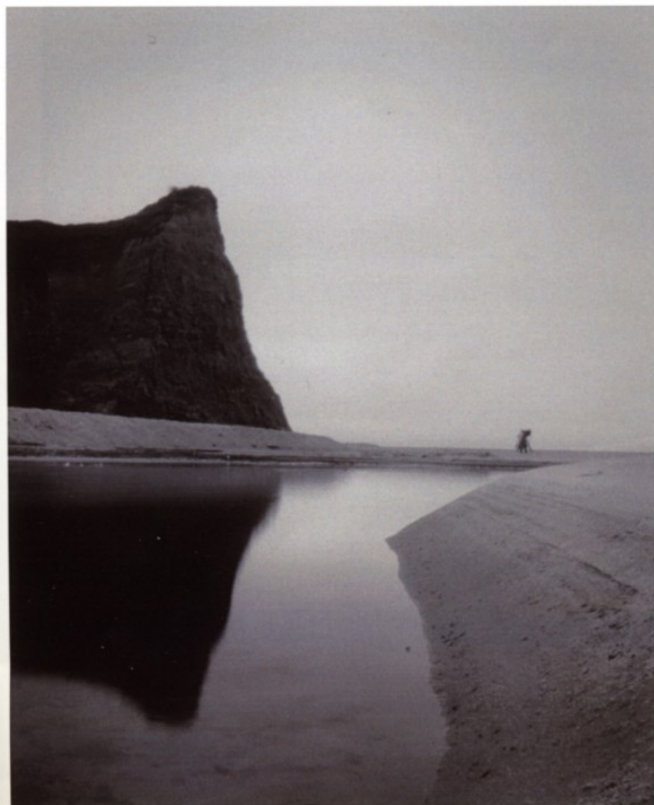
MC: *Explorations* represents six years (and still going) of pinhole work along the central California coastline. The work got started thanks to a friend who twisted my arm to photograph outside with our pinhole cameras. "Outside?" I whined. "I'm an indoor photographer!" I was between projects and whenever I am in that place I think I'll never work again, that my creativity has run itself out. I had been working with the 4x5 pinhole camera indoors, trying some still lifes, but to no avail. I was feeling depressed and frustrated, so I allowed myself to be coerced, thinking it could do no harm.

This friend happens to work at Hopkins Marine Station, which has a stunningly beautiful slice of coastline not open to the public, so I started there. I seemed to be having fun. This got my attention! Fun: a crucial element for me!

SP: What was the inspiration behind including the mysterious, 19th century figure in many of your photographs?

MC: As I mentioned earlier, I soon got bored with just the natural scene, so as soon as a person began to appear in the images, my interest was revived. That the person was from the 19th century made pursuing this work even more fun and interesting for me. I don't really want to divulge the details of how I found





this person, because I like to pretend I don't know who he is. I like to ask myself, "Who is this mysterious visitor? What is he looking for? What did he leave behind?"

SP: What would you say to people who have only dabbled in pinhole photography, to get them to dive right in?

MC: The advice I'd give to a newcomer to pinhole photography is: Ask yourself "What can pinhole do for me that lens photography can't?" In other words, think about what pinhole is good for —expressing dream, memory, fantasy, timelessness, etc. What are the characteristics of pinhole that give it its special look? Infinite depth of field, time dilations, soft focus, wide-angle distortion... More specifically, ask yourself when you are photographing, "Why am I using a pinhole camera right now, for this particular subject matter, instead of a lens camera? Am I putting the camera on a tripod at eye level, just like I do with a lens camera? Why?"

If you can come up with convincing answers to these questions, you're on your way! One has to develop what I call "pinhole vision," which is different from regular camera vision. In other words, the medium *does* need to be appropriate to the message. ■



Steph Parke lives in northern Utah and toys with her Dianas and a Holgamods Holga.