David Julian
Strange Beauty
By Ethan G. Salwen

“Crowtime #3” from the 2005
Dreams and Visual Poems. Toned
image from a digital capture.
“What struck me was as I was walking through this wasteland is that all of these things—these personal objects dangling in trees—were lost,” David Julian recalls. “They were all tied to people who could not reconnect to them.” It was December 2005, and Julian, a commercial and editorial photographer, was making his way through the devastation Hurricane Katrina wrought upon New Orleans. Using his camera both to explore, and to try to understand a landscape that overwhelmed his senses, Julian remembers thinking, “whatever had once been outside was forced inside, and what had been inside was now swept outside.”

Julian’s five days in New Orleans resulted in his Taken From the Heart project—straight photographic images of personal possessions Julian encountered. The softly evocative images are particularly powerful because they share an incredibly unique, personal perspective of Katrina’s aftermath. We see things—manmade and natural—that are not primed for the camera’s eye. And when Julian dedicated himself to the visual arts he incorporated his experience from the natural objects he found. “Nature was my church,” Julian explains. “At one point I went to the library and got really turned on by surrealism.” This inspired Julian to paste images from magazines and newspapers to pieces of glass, beginning a process of collaging that has remained the most visible thread that ties his work together. “I was a sensitive kid then and I made art to express and entertain myself,” Julian says. “It’s possible that I was also trying to instigate excitement.”

“My family was pretty pragmatic,” Julian notes. “My mom was a housewife. My dad brought the bread home. There was little support for my creativity other than to make me learn an instrument and go to school.” Julian reports that at 14 his composite drawings of nature and machines concerned his parents they felt as they put their lips to the bottle, celebrating their luck, beating the odds.” When Julian realized the intense personal value of the bottle, he photographed it, and he noted that the image held a unique power for him. This compelled him to begin Cherished Things.

It took Julian two years to pick up steam with it for the simple reason that he cannot resist the allure of the working on many arts. Julian also has to keep up with his commercial assignments, which he considers reducing at times, but which he enjoys for their collaborative nature. Also in recent years greater percentages of Julian’s time has been spent making art. “As young as 7 or 8 I was drawing very basic stage film holder 24 x 36.”

More than anything, Julian’s experience in New Orleans illustrates how each one of his projects evolves into others. “The most important aspect of the experience is that it made me realize how precisely I treat my possessions,” Julian says. “I asked myself, ‘What do my things mean to me?’” This led Julian to embark on a project he calls Cherished Things. “It is a still photography and video project,” explains Julian, who is also a mixed-media artist. “I am photographing a cross section of people in different communities, creating stories of people with the most cherished object they own. It’s not so much about the objects, but the people’s relationship with the objects.” Julian, who plans to make this a long-term, international project is photographing the object, the person with the object and creating a video story of each subject.

When I asked Julian what his most cherished possession is, he told me that, for him, answering that question after returning from New Orleans has been easy. He says, “The object that jumped to my mind is a bottle of Seagram’s scotch that in 1945 had been consumed and signed by the crew members of the B-17 after completing their duties against Nazi Germany.” Julian’s father had been the navigator of that crew, all of whom survived their 35 missions, earning each their “Lucky Bastards” certificates. “I cannot imagine what the heart machine.

“Killing Time” from the portfolio Strange Beauty, Photograph made on location in post-Katrina Louisiana.
Finding a New Expression

In 2001 Julian stumbled into the most recent, most satisfying aspect of his creative expression: teaching. Invited to teach a workshop at Santa Fe Workshops, Julian was amazed at the creative rewards of the experience. Since then he has steadily increased his workshop offerings in the United States, Canada and Mexico. “My focus is on creativity driving technology. My workshops blend inspiration and invention with the confidence of mastering technical skills.” Julian teaches his students how to master the fine points of Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop, but only as the means to an end. “My teaching is really about helping students learn to better understand their creative spirit and potential,” Julian explains. “I love to help people to better know themselves through learning to better express themselves.”

“It’s almost like a meditation,” Julian explains of teaching students to photograph with a greater inner awareness. “It’s has been said before, but creativity is a process of awareness. So in certain workshops I include writing, storytelling and lots of collaboration. If we are going to a lighthouse to photograph, we talk beforehand about possibilities and a story to tell.”

On location Julian guides his students to “take in the location in a sensory way before we begin snapping pictures”—just as he did in New Orleans. He says this is critical for helping students overcome the biggest stumbling block to making meaningful photography—understanding what a photographer wants to say, and why. “The experience that I’m after is deeper than making a beautiful image,” Julian explains. “Why we are here? What do we want to be? What do we want to say with photography?”

“Teaching has given me a chance to disseminate a lot of messages that are churning around in this one brain of mine,” Julian says. For him, teaching is not simply a way to share his knowledge. Teaching offers Julian yet another chance to figure out who he is, and what he most passionately wants to express.

Ethan G. Salwen is an independent photographer and writer based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He specializes in Latin American cultures, and also covers a wide variety of topics for professional photographers including digital technology, marketing techniques and industry trends. Salwen received his training in photography at Rochester Institute of Technology. Visit his blog at www.aftercapture.com.