

David Julian:
**Strange
Beauty**
By Ethan G. Salwen

*"Crowtime #3" from the series
Dreams and Visual Poems. Toned
image from a digital capture.*



"Trombone and Books, Arabi, LA" from the series Taken from the Heart. Unaltered photograph made on location in post-Katrina Louisiana.

"What struck me was as I was walking through this wasteland is that of 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 photo illustrator, fine art photographer and educator, 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, micro perspective of the Katrina aftermath. Julian's images manage to be at once both documentary records and fine art. He did not arrange the objects he encountered, nor did he manipulate his captures in post. Hurricane Katrina created a landscape almost as surreal as the dreamlike visions that Julian creates through complex compositing that is the hallmark of his artwork.

A master of Photoshop compositing, Julian creates editorial and commercial illustrations for magazines, books, CD covers and advertising campaigns. Clients include *SmartMoney*, *MacWorld*, *The Los*

Angeles Times, *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, Microsoft, Taco Bell, CBS, and the George Lucas Educational Foundation. Julian regularly exhibits his fine art and sells prints, and also licenses stock imagery. He has won numerous awards from diverse competitions, including: the Broadcast Design Annual, the Maggie Awards, Communication Arts Magazine Design Annual -and the Society of Publication Design.

Creative Quests

Although it was unusual for Julian to produce straight images for *Taken From the Heart*, the project speaks directly to his overarching process as an artist. Julian constantly reconsiders the visual techniques he can use to address the nagging questions that capture his interest, and which he tries to answer through his art. His process in New Orleans illustrates the importance of Julian's insatiable, life-long passion for collecting and photographing objects—both manmade and natural.

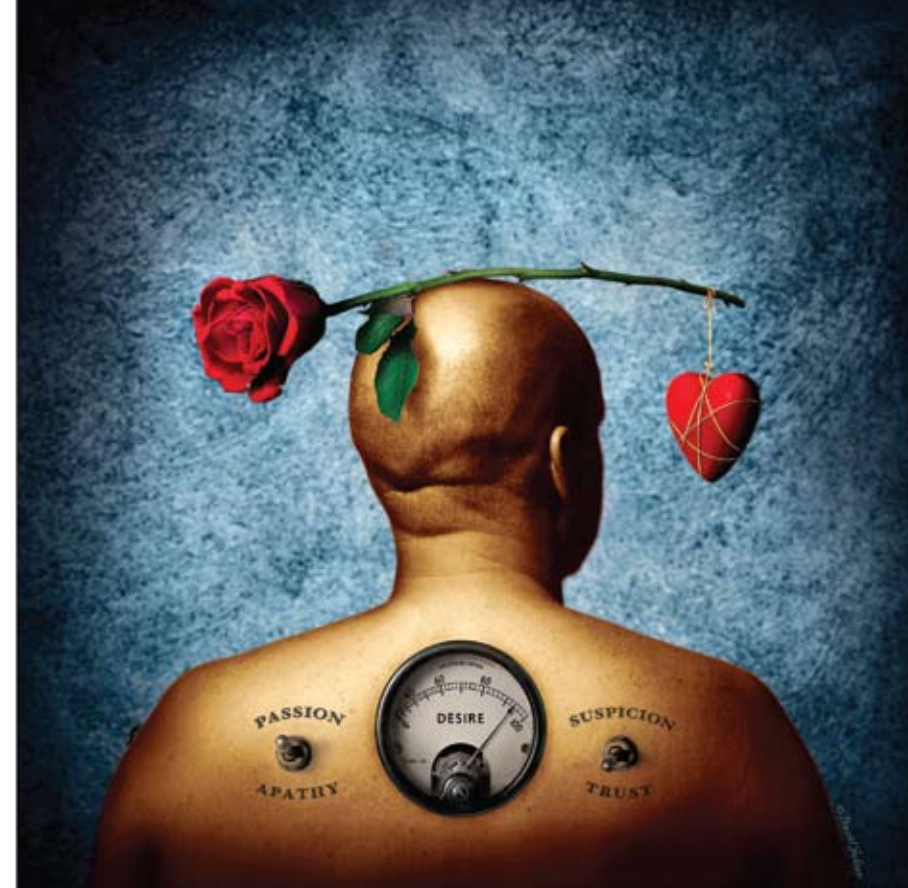
"Right out of high school I went to work as a lab technician at Harvard University's Comparative Zoology Bio Labs," Julian says. "I had a great interest in entomology, and biology was my chosen field of study. My life as an artist was still very much underground." That soon changed, and when Julian dedicated himself to the visual arts he incorporated his experience in the lab. "I learned the vintage museum aesthetic, which has remained a very central part of my own artistic aesthetic."



"Sea Horse" from the portfolio Strange Beauty. Photo composite still life on velvet set into vintage 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 preciously 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 "Luckye Bastardes" certificates. "I cannot imagine what



Top: "Desire." Photo composite for Cranial Crowbar. *Desire is about the how relationships change as we strive for a growing, intimate bond. The bound heart presents the goal that is truly desired.*
Top Left: "Red Hat with Fish, Buras, LA" from the series Taken from the Heart. Unaltered photograph made on location in post-Katrina Louisiana.
Top Right: "Love in Vain." Still life with props as a self-assignment about the psychology of love. A Rhinoceros beetle efforts to pull a string to ignite the heart machine.

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 consumed by his passion for teaching others how to leverage their creativity.

Born to Collage

"As young as 7 or 8 I was drawing very heavily, and I was very into collaging," says

Julian, who is now in his mid-50s. As a child growing up in Boston, he spent most of his free time alone playing in woods and streams near his home, creating art objects 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

and teachers to the point of sending him to a psychiatrist for evaluation. Julian's fever for drawing and collaging only increased. "I found myself grasping ideas out of air, in an ADD kind of way," he says. "I have always been the experimenter—the mad scientist."

"I didn't want to become famous," Julian explains. "I wanted to support myself making art." This was his realization when after a year-and-a-half he left his lab-assistant job and began studying art full-time at

Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 1975. Having distanced himself from his family financially, he was dedicated to making it on his own. Feeling frustrated with the limitations of the curriculum at Mass Art, Julian moved to Brooklyn in 1977 to attend Pratt Institute, graduating in 1979. In New York, Julian quickly began to break out of his insular world, connecting with like-minded people already deeply engaged in the creative process.

Although interested in art direction, Julian studied communications design because it was the one major that allowed him to experiment in drawing, illustration, design and photography, all of which he put to use to create surrealism that was increasingly photorealistic; although not photographic in nature. Julian was blown away by the composite photography of Jerry Uelsmann, but says that he never went through a “darkroom phase.” He found the process of compositing images in the darkroom tedious, rather than exhilarating.

After working as freelance illustrator, in 1983 Julian went to work for Time Inc. as an art director, where he worked until 1991. Since then he has worked independently, moving to Seattle in 1994. While at Time Warner’s HBO, Julian became increasingly interested in photography. The camera offered him a way to explore the world. “I loved working with chrome and being able to see my images with no darkroom time,” he says. “In the late ‘80s, digital imaging began to emerge in earnest. This resulted in my not getting any sleep for three years, as I went mental. Rather than create computer art, I wanted to create composite photography. As layers became introduced into Photoshop I went back to a world that I had left behind when I abandoned the darkroom.” Obsessed, Julian taught himself the skills he needed to create the images he could imagine in his mind’s eye. The ultimate payoff of digital compositing for Julian: “I can now work almost as fast as I can think.”

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 has steadily increased his workshop offerings in the United States, Canada and Mexico. “My focus is on creativity driving technology. My workshops blend



“Sea Poems.” Assignment for a movie poster about a blind writer’s discovery of her birth at sea.

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 mediation,” 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. CC

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