

a different Light

(D)on't try to classify David Julian. In a business environment where most pros find success by specializing in a particular photographic niche, Julian won't fit neatly into a clearly labeled box. Part illustrator, part sculptor and part philosopher, he's a self-described mad scientist. His three-dimensional assemblage and photo illustrations transport you via ghost train to a dusty shelf in a pre-modern laboratory lined with artifacts and arcana, where you might expect to find him toiling over the dissection of some long-extinct winged mammal.

Then, just when you think you might have a category for Julian's work, he shows you his travel photography. Bright, graphic and quite literal, it seems totally incongruous with the psyche behind his fantastic abstract oddities. And while you're still struggling to reconcile the two personalities, there's another departure to a black-and-white world of softened solitude, warm and yet lonely, somewhere along the border of awake and asleep.



Though David Julian is best known for his imaginative photo illustrations, some of his most recent work is in a decidedly more literal, photojournalistic direction, while retaining the tactile, textured qualities of his composite images. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Julian traveled to Louisiana to witness the devastation and returned with a series of images that evoke the disarray and emptiness left in the wake of the flood. LEFT: The remains of a photo collage on the wall of a boy's room in Chalmette, La. ABOVE: Interior of an elementary school classroom in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Drawing from multiple disciplines and deep imagination, David Julian's reality is in

the eye of the beholder

By Wesley Pitts >> Photography By David Julian

If it sounds like we're waxing poetic, it's because we are. With all of the digital magic of modern photographic technology, great images still come down to the photographer. No amount of technical skill or Photoshop proficiency can substitute for the insight of the visual poet.

So what makes a mad scientist-photographer-writer-illustrator-philosopher tick?

DPP: Your professional biography begins as a research technician at Harvard's Biological Labs, which sounds very left brain for a creative. Is it fair to say you have a split personality?

David Julian: Oh, yeah, I can't even find the cracks anymore.

DPP: How did you transition from scientist to artist?

Julian: I was never really a scientist, per se. I love science, but the duality of my personality also pushed me toward art. I first developed a passion for photography when I was sent to the tropics to collect insects, and I started doing macro work. My job as a designer in New York pushed me further toward photography, but I was terrible in the traditional darkroom. My photographic heroes, photographers like



Man Ray and Jerry Uelsmann, were/are masters in the darkroom, but it wasn't until Photoshop reached a certain level of maturity in the mid-'90s that I was able to really pursue the photographic work that I wanted to do. Digital imaging allowed me to take the creative leap that I couldn't begin to express in the traditional darkroom. I also wanted to find a medium that produced visible results fast enough to keep my ideas flowing.

DPP: Photography is one of the most technically dependent art forms. Do you approach the medium methodically, or are you open to chance?

Julian: Both. I plan all of my conceptual pieces on paper first. I do a lot of sketching and writing. I'm also very right brain in how I approach my equipment, in that I overcome the technical hurdles by mastering the operation of my gear, so that it becomes second nature and I don't have to think about it. So I handle my equipment like a scientist, but the creative process is entirely intuitive. I approach my personal photography from a meditative state of awareness whenever possible. It's easier than it sounds, and I teach it privately and in some of my workshops.

Photography may seem overly technical today because of the incredible technology behind the images. Cameras tend to get more compli-

The concepts behind Julian's photo illustrations range from simple, romantic ideas about everyday miracles to more sophisticated and mysterious compositions that aren't easily resolved. **ABOVE:** The triptych *Fertility* is "a visual metaphor for stages of fertility and conception," says Julian. **RIGHT:** *Transformation* blends "romance, mystery and symbolic science" and invites the viewer to imagine a narrative about the subject.





ABOVE: Julian's commissioned work ranges from personal to political, but keeps his edge and style. *Manipulations by the KGB in Afghanistan* was commissioned by *The Washington Post*. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** In his *Dreams* series of images, Julian explores strange landscapes through toned black-and-white images, as in *The Temple of Borobudur*. In the foreground, the stone *stupas* atop the world's largest Buddhist Temple draw the attention, but further examination discovers a double-exposed Buddha "to symbolize the peaceful tranquility I felt in this place." *Bible School Hymnal, Arabi, Louisiana, 2005*, from the Katrina series, is an untouched scenario found on the mud-encrusted carpet inside a destroyed church. The letters blew in from the adjoining rooms of a children's classroom.

cated and sophisticated. I'm glad I explored the basics of photography and camera operation before the digital age because I learned simply how to make an accurate image. With that foundation, I'm less overwhelmed with all of the new equipment and possibilities.

DPP: Your range of work includes fine-art, editorial and commissioned commercial images. How do you decide which David Julian to present to a potential corporate client?

Julian: My clients choose the look. They've seen the work from my Website or in print and they know who they're getting. Commercial and editorial art buyers are almost always looking at my illustrations, but if they wander into the fine-art area of my Website, they often change directions. It's both a blessing and curse to be divided this way because it does make me hard to market at times. I try to keep my commercial work away from the fine-art community to present a clearer message of intent. Right now, the diversity works well, but in years to come, I may aim toward a more overall cohesive look.

DPP: Your commercial and editorial photo illustration is perhaps some of your wildest work. Do you struggle with the confines of a commissioned piece, or do you like the challenge of working within a set of predetermined boundaries?

Julian: The only predetermined boundary I like is a deadline. What I really prefer is a collaborative client who's not only willing, but wants a dialogue of





"I wanted to find a way of creating a powerful visual about the fate of forests," says Julian about this diptych, *The Log Soldiers*. He had photographed the log pile image with a Fuji GX617 panoramic camera while traveling in Maine in 1993. Ten years later, on the Olympic peninsula in Washington, Julian saw the fleet of logging trucks and returned with his Noblex camera to finish the image he had long wanted to make. He chose the Noblex for its dramatic distortion.

possibilities at the outset, which we refine until we have a clear direction for the project. I want them to go through a part of the creative process with me whenever possible. One such client is an art director for filmmaker George Lucas, who really understands the collaborative process and loves my diverse abilities.

DPP: Do you have a preference for one body of your work over another?

Julian: Well, that's my problem. I've never been able to decide which part of my work to take away to ease my burden. Some nights I think, Which projects could I live without, so I could focus on just one or two things? I've exposed myself to a variety of pursuits and now I can't give up any of them. They all mean something to me. They all help me know myself and show what I care about to the world. I want to use my life to be present and creative. It's all part of my personal process of evolution.

DPP: How do you approach your personal work compared to commissioned images? Can you take us through the mental process?

Julian: I look at my personal work as a safe haven. I do some creative exercises to help me identify my thoughts and reactions, and prepare my intuition for photography or for my conceptual composite works. It's similar in effect to what athletes do before a game. They stretch, focus and sharpen their reactions.

DPP: Your *Dreams* series of toned black-and-white photography could be viewed as directly opposed to your photo illustration. Where the latter is typically bold, colorful and active, there's a quiet, almost isolated feeling in the *Dreams* series. Was this an intentional departure or a natural evolution?

Julian: It's definitely an intentional departure. The *Dreams* series is an ongoing

body of work—a place wherein I can be totally intuitive with my eye and respond to what’s in front of me rather than preconceive. It’s a very meditative way of working, and creating the work evokes for me what you’re seeing into it. Some of the visual language is from images in my own dreams, which I’ve then subsequently found symbolized in the real world and tried to capture in photographs. I tend toward the dark side of beauty, and as much as my early teachers tried to squelch it, I can’t be who I’m not.

DPP: As a creative who has explored a variety of media, you’re obviously comfortable with a big toolbox. On what digital tools do you rely most heavily?

Julian: A fast Macintosh with Photoshop CS2, a calibrated monitor, my beloved Wacom Intuos3 tablet and two terabytes of fast RAID storage are the basis of my digital darkroom. I’m now shooting with a Canon EOS 5D, a Pentax 67 and an old folding camera. I use Imacon 343 and Nikon 9000 scanners for importing film images and an Epson 7800 Stylus Pro wide-format printer for printmaking.

DPP: In addition to your own work, you’re also an instructor of creative photography workshops. Has teaching influenced your photography?

Julian: Yes, in that I watch students who work and think differently than I do, and I can often learn about how others solve problems from observing them. I tend to attract students who want more than “how-to” workflows and “tips and tricks” learning, though I instruct on those processes as well. I approach my teaching more as a facilitator and coach to identify and empower what’s already within each student’s unique personality. I teach them a lot of photography and digital technique as well, but with a foundation of pure inspired motivation and intuitive experimentation. I have students ranging from creative high-school

grads to seasoned working pros—all of whom report that they benefit greatly from methods that take them further in their craft as artists, thinkers and craftsmen.

DPP: What do you think your portfolio will emphasize five years from now?

Julian: Fine-art photography and a lot more “straight,” lightly manipulated work. I’ll also be marketing differently. I’m at the point where I want to be more selective with the commercial work I take on. I want to select commercial clients based on how well they fit into what I’m already doing, and the creative challenge of the project will be the carrot for me.

My Katrina project was a kick-start in a new direction for me as well. I did it to use my photographic eye to express my sentiments and the victims’ loss of connection. I want to inspire people to use their photography to make personal creative statements, address issues and take risks. I want my future work to have more of a social and spiritual benefit whenever possible. I see our role as photographers and artists not to make attractive pictures with which to decorate our lives, but to make a personal contribution using art as the medium. I’m inspired by many traditional photographers and brilliant photojournalists like James Nachtwey, Sebastião Salgado and Mary Ellen Mark, by environmentally conscious artists like Subhankar Banerjee, Richard Misrach and Chris Jordan and by expressive thinkers such as Keith Carter and Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison.

There’s no reason why digital artists can’t create important, meaningful work using such wondrous new tools. It’s only our hearts and minds that think, feel, create and express. We must select the right tools for our expressions. DPP

To see more of David Julian’s photography, visit www.davidjulian.com.