

Northfield Art Town

The hub of visual arts in Northfield, Minnesota

The one... The only.....Leslie Schultz

Interview by Nick Sinclair. Originally published online at Northfield.org on July 1, 2009

Q. Looking at your history you were very involved in literary arts. How did you make a transition to photography and does the literary aspect still have its place in your photography?

It's less a transition and more of a hyphenation. I am currently working on two novel-length fiction works as well as poetry and essays. But there are connections.

My first art form was poetry, and I used to think that I was a poet because I didn't know how to be a painter or photographer. My poetry uses the musical quality of language, but it is also highly imagistic. I have a series of poems that are based on paintings and a number based on photographs, especially old family photographs.

As a visual artist, I spent fifteen years playing with fabric, making two dimensional pieces as diverse as quilts, wall-hangings, and mixed-media collages. These evolved into collages of text and photos by others combined with paint on canvas. Then, when I got a digital camera in 2003, I was able to see myself as a photographer. I spent three months photographing a single amaryllis at the same time each morning, watching it go through its changes. From the winter solstice to the vernal equinox I watched this plant bud, flower, and go to seed as the light shifted with the daily weather and the season. After that, there was no turning back: I was a photographer.

“Photography” literally means “writing with light.” As a poet and photographer, words and images are fluid – not quite interchangeable, but closely related, with arresting visual images giving rise to poems and poems coloring how I view the world through my camera lens. Photography helps me see everything around me with more tenderness, noticing beauty where I might otherwise overlook it. I've learned that each moment is distinct and unrepeatable. In a split second the light changes, the subject changes, I change.

Q. What is your approach to your art? Do you sketch out ideas, do you just shoot and ask questions later?

A little of both. If I see a photograph when I don't have my camera with me or I don't have time to stop, I make a mental note to return. But one can't photograph the past. Something is different. Always the light is different.

Other times, I might have a plan to concentrate on a particular subject: windows or handbags or hood ornaments or leaves. In both cases, my ideas are only spring boards to capture what is before me in the present moment, that split second when the shutter clicks. Most often, though, I just shoot and see patterns of subject matter, color, or geometry later.





Q. What is your camera of choice?

Currently I use a digital single lens reflex camera, a Canon Rebel XT. My sister, Karla Schultz of Atlanta, who is a marvelous wildlife photographer and adept at all things technical, recently gave me a 70 -200 mm L-series lens that allows me to photograph some of the features on the moon – that is quite a thrill. I am not so technically savvy – I work intuitively for the most part – but I like to play with new toys. It is interesting to see what happens when I turn this new lens on a leaf or a flower. I plan to invest soon in a small camera – I’m considering one of the affordable Fuji FinePix models – so that I can pop it into my purse and always have a camera with me. That way, rather than a mental note to return, I can make the photographic equivalent of a sketch.

Q. Do you spend much time in post production?

Not too much. I am a devoted cropper, because framing is so important. I am becoming more ruthless about immediately deleting pictures that are wide of the mark and even those that don’t quite make it. And I like to see how certain color images hold up when they are stripped of color. But I rarely dip into Photoshop. I am too impatient, and (at

least at my skill level with Photoshop) the results are akin to what is said about plastic surgery – not better, just different, artificial, distorted.

Q. What are some of your favorite locations to shoot pictures?

Wherever I am, whatever I am doing, I find myself locating thinking in terms of photographs, much as I hear lines of poems or snatches of dialogue from characters as I go about my daily tasks. These preoccupations even show up in my dreams. It is one kind of excitement to take photographs in familiar settings – my home, my neighborhood, my town. It is a different excitement to have my camera in a brand-new environment. On a recent trip to Europe, I mentally packed for months, and the constants were my passport and my camera.





Q. Any subject matter you prefer to capture?

It varies according to my mood and what is available. I've taken the most photographs of my daughter.

Q. I noticed a recurring theme.... labyrinths. Why, and do you like David Bowie?

I really like a lot of David Bowie, but I don't know anything about the new Labyrinths sound track or the movie.

Most people think of labyrinths as puzzles to solve, but the definition I like is that they are unicursal subsets of mazes. You might feel that you are lost as you walk one, but in fact though you get turned around, you can't get lost. As long as you continue to put one foot in front of another you will get to your goal, and then you turn around and reverse to come back out, to come home. Breathing in and breathing out. It is a wonderful metaphor for process over product, for persistence and steadiness of purpose amid life's ups and downs. I have found that walking my own labyrinth is a wonderful cure for writer's block, indeed, for any block – emotional or mental – that might be keeping me stuck.

The first time I walked one, in the Cities, I knew I needed to be able to walk one regularly. Then we moved to Northfield, and at the time there wasn't one here. But a chance – or not so chance? – meeting with an artist, Marilyn Larson, led to creating one in my garden, and ultimately to co-publishing *A Pocket Guide to Labyrinths* (now in its fourth printing). It was also the gateway to exhibiting my first photograph – of a child in my labyrinth – in a traveling exhibition on the labyrinth that debut in Washington, D.C.

Q. Have you found it easy or difficult to get your work out there to the public?

Some days it seems easy, but on others it seems hard. The hard days are the ones when I temporarily forget that my aim is to make something I find compelling and beautiful.

Sharing the work, through exhibition or sales, is a secondary activity. It is wonderful to feel that my work is enjoyed by other people, but I do it because it is a part of me to explore my experience by shaping words and images into new forms.



Q. What has been the most effective way to get exposure for your work?

No one does anything alone. We inspire each other and learn from each other. I have been extraordinarily lucky to find people with whom I like to work. In photography, I have the ongoing pleasure of working with Patsy Dew. Not only do we appreciate and support each other's solo work, we collaborate on posters and cards of Northfield Images through Kalafield Images. (The name comes from our discovery that we were both born in Kalamazoo, Michigan.)

Also, arts organizations are tremendously supportive of individual artists. For me, the Northfield Arts Guild has helped me sell my work in many ways: in their gallery shop, during the Riverfront Fine Arts and Crafts Festival each September, and by connecting me with arts consultants who have placed my work in corporate collections.

Q. Do you have any exhibits in the near future?

A solo show at the Allina Clinic this spring was a first for me; I would love to do another show in another space, but I currently have no plans for one. If anyone has suggestions, send me an email!

Q. What was your involvement in ArtsPlan 06. What are your hopes for Northfield as an art town?

I was able to help collect information of all kinds of artists, arts organizations, and arts venues in town. I did about 60 interviews. It was stimulating to talk to so many people who are passionate about visual arts, music, theater, literary art, gardening, architecture, fiber arts ... and it left me thinking that Northfield already is an “arts town” without realizing it or fully capitalizing on it.

In my view, it is a step forward to have a standing Arts Commission. Infrastructure is important. But when individuals take chances and follow their passions – to open a gallery, launch a website, produce a play – that really helps spark creativity in the rest of us, and it seems to me that there is even more of this now.

Emerging as a true “arts town” would be a shift in identity, rather like an amateur becoming a professional. It requires more marketing to people outside of Northfield and some considerations that are commercial as well as artist and community-driven. I believe that a lively arts scene makes any town more flexible and resilient, more able to re-imagine itself in response to changing circumstances, more fun to live and work in. I think evolving consciously and collectively as an arts town would make sense for Northfield.

Q. Do you have work available for sale? Where?

I plan to show my work for the fifth year in a row at the Riverfront Fine Arts and Crafts Festival in September during the Defeat of Jesse James Days celebration. My friend, Patsy Dew, and I show our own work, available as prints and cards, and together (as Kalafield Images) we have made a number of posters of Northfield neighborhoods, the downtown, and the colleges. We are planning a new poster of St. Olaf this year.

My cards are available at Northfield Arts Guild shop and will be soon at the Paradise Center for the Arts in Faribault. And, of course, I am happy to show work by appointment .

Q. When you grow up, what would you like to be?



What a great question! Can a person grow up if he or she doesn't stop growing and changing? I am not sure. I believe that I live on many levels at once, so in some ways I am all ages at once.

Or does growing up imply accomplishment? My most burning ambition used to be achieving happiness. And I am vastly happy in my current circumstances, which are demanding and varied and keep me on my toes. I was given a card that says "May your life be filled with unexpected joys." Life really keeps getting more satisfying and sweet, because the more I know and experience, the more creative and appreciative I feel, even on those days when obstacles spring up everywhere. I suppose I assume that happiness is a decision, a habit of mind. And the experience of joy, to my surprise, isn't ephemeral but rather quite durable. The principle feeling doesn't ever erode, and it also pays compound interest.

On the other hand, I want to continue to surprise myself. If I could live a thousand years, and develop all my interests, I imagine myself acquiring the multifaceted musical talent and potential of Norah Jones, the clarity and compassion of Paramahansa Yogananda, the storytelling abilities of Isak Dineson and Alice Munro, the lyrical filmmaking ability of Ang Lee, the political savvy and idealism of Barack Obama, the poetic ear of Richard Wilbur and Amy Clampitt, and the photographic skill of Henri Cartier Bresson. Oh, and I would have a garden filled with flowers and no weeds. I could be a whole arts town in my own self! That would be interesting.

To read some literary arts by Leslie keep on reading

Walking the Labyrinth

After I first walked a painted canvas labyrinth at Pathways, a healing center in Minneapolis, I dreamed of being able to walk one every day. I wasn't sure exactly what effect it had had on me, but I knew it was powerful. What I yearned for was to walk a labyrinth barefoot, on grass, when my feet could touch the ground.

After returning to Northfield in 1996, I was delighted to discover the temporary labyrinth near the Hill of Three Oaks. I walked it often, and dreamed of having a nearby labyrinth as a permanent resource. The next summer, in 1997, my husband and I asked Marilyn Larson to help us create a labyrinth in our garden at 114 Winona Street, just down the street from Carleton's Chapel. Marilyn dowsed the labyrinth's outline on August 6, 1997 — our 9th wedding anniversary and the 48th anniversary of Hiroshima Day, an international symbol of the importance of working for peace, both in one's daily life and in the world.

As a yoga teacher, I have told students how the first yogic principle, *Ahimsa*, means “non-violence. Yoga is a way of practicing non-violence with one's self, of quieting for a time the overlay of voices we each carry that insist we push too hard, too far, too fast. As a writer, I have found that when I am struggling with a project, stuck in a mental cage of my own making, it helps to walk the labyrinth. Because I feel safe there, fear of failing dissolves and along with it my writer's block. The built-in turns that all labyrinths contain encourage me to look at problems of all kinds from new perspectives. The circular path reminds me that the process, not the product — the race, not the finish line — is what is truly important to me. I am reminded that “peace is every step” and that if I simply put one foot in front of the other I will arrive. By walking, I become grounded, but not stuck.

One large fear, now dissolved, is how other people would interpret the labyrinth. Our labyrinth began as a relatively discreet outline of twine pegged into the lawn. The next year, my husband and I moved stones from a farmer's field to mark the paths. This meditation walk is visible from the street, and has drawn many comments. I have been

surprised by how intrigued people are, and how many decide to accept the invitation to walk it themselves. Most report a sense of calm and well being. One woman who has trouble with an occasionally irregular heartbeat described how walking this pattern restored her normal rhythm in a few minutes, a process that usually took several hours for her. I have heard a variety of such stories from strangers and friends alike. I've noticed, too, that birds, squirrels, and rabbits are drawn to the perches and hollows created by the stones.

Today, I consider our labyrinth a form of living sculpture. The stones, which seemed so permanent when we laid them in place, shift as the grass grows and the frost heaves the ground beneath them. Each time I walk this circle of stones is unique, because I am different and so is the world about me — the air, the light, the seasons, and the possibilities for my day. It is said that “Truth waits for eyes unclouded by desire.” Like its shadow, fear, I find desire suspended when I walk the healing pattern of the labyrinth. This is the ongoing gift the labyrinth makes to me, encouraging me to slow down, look carefully around me, and to emerge from this place refreshed by listening to that still, small voice within.

Leslie Schultz

HOPPER: STREET SCENE, GLOUCESTER

How does this prettiness hurt?
Is it simply the lines,
the curve of a quiet street
with its start and end obscured?
Or the Model T that sleeps
by the curb, its windows dissolving? Perhaps it is the light.
Here yellow clapboard
and distant church domes
twin, golden
an unlit lamp
all hold their own
for a time
against shadows blue
and implacable as evening.

Leslie Schultz
1985

Manet: Boating

Neither is quite at ease.
The sail is full. The oarsman
leans on the tiller,
tilts his straw boater to smile
at the lady. Her hat
is black and white. She
wears a veil and stares
at the rippling lights beyond
the sail. She will not watch
a sailor watching her, charting
the swell and fall of her blue dress.

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