



Angie Seckinger

By Judith Turner-Yamamoto

A BALLETIC CONVERGENCE

Whether shooting a delicate fringe of white shells on a linen drapery or capturing the perfect radiant flush of a wall of blood-orange Venetian plaster, Angie Seckinger photographs rooms that resonate with palpable warmth and presence. These are spaces we want to enter, drawn to the life and emotion

intimated through the balletic convergence of light, shape and color. These same qualities that distinguish her highly successful interior work, published in books and such magazines as *Architectural Digest*, *Southern Accents* and *Veranda*, inform “Macro Journey,” her ongoing series of large-scale

imagery celebrating the spirit of Mediterranean plant life. Splitting her time between her thriving commercial practice in Washington, D.C., and her mountain home in Catalunya, Spain, Seckinger explores the ongoing dialogue and conflux of her commercial and personal work that emerges

for her in leading a creatively engaged and conscious life.

Working with a digital camera, a macro lens and shallow focus, and literally crawling on hands and knees, Seckinger discovers, sometimes just steps away from her door, a plant world overlooked by the naked eye. In monumental prints measuring up to 40x60 inches for individual images or 40x187 inches for triptychs and produced using the Giclée process employing archival inks and 100% rag paper, Seckinger, in what she refers to as revelations, invites viewers into a visual universe of radiance discovered inside landscapes no larger than a clump of humble grass.

JTY: When did your career in photography begin?

AS: I played around with it in high school, I was always photographing. Things really began to fall into place when I was 19 and taking courses at the Corcoran School of Art with Joe Cameron. He became a mentor to me and set me on the course of getting some chops as a photographer.

JTY: How did that unfold?

AS: He suggested I go to the Apeiron Workshops in Millerton, NY. This was in the late 70s when workshops were a viable educational alternative. I spent three months there. I was given my own dark-

room. I was responsible for my work, and was expected to produce works for group critiques. Peter Schlessinger headed up Apeiron, and his feedback was like that of a Jungian psychologist. There were also weeklong workshops with artists-in-residence like Linda Connor and Mark Goodman. The whole thing was very free-form and perfect for me at the time.

JTY: What did you take away from that experience that began to shape your work and your future direction?

AS: I learned that art is a vocabulary, that making images is a form of communication. Anything you had to say, anything you were exploring was valid. At 19, that gives a kid a tremendous confidence boost. There was no such thing as wrong there. Before, all I had learned was shaped by physics—you can’t make a decent image if you don’t know what you’re doing technically. The impetus at Apeiron was, “What is the image about?” not, how it was crafted. It didn’t matter if the print was crap; they were interested in what you were trying to say. It really freed me up to start using imagery as a form of communication.

JTY: What kind of work did you produce there?

AS: The image I took to my first critique was a snapshot of me in a bare room, huddled in a corner in striped pajamas. There

was an image of a fly crawling around on a globe, a woman with a flower in her hand. Describing the images doesn’t capture what the work was about for me as an artist. They were immediate moments of my everyday existence that were emotionally charged. I came away with a portfolio of images that were about emotional perspective.

JTY: What came next?

AS: The Corcoran School had just started the photography program. They had a first year class starting at third year level, all of it determined by your portfolio. Everyone had enough experience and credits—they had the foundation. They were looking for proficiency in craft and as an art form. Apeiron gave me that critical portfolio.

JTY: Who was teaching at the Corcoran then who was important for you?

AS: The core teachers were Joe Cameron, Mark Power, Frank DiPerna, Steve Szabo, Shirley True and Paul Kennedy.

JTY: That’s quite a powerhouse. What started to happen for you, working with these incredibly talented photographers? I remember in the early 80s when you were doing extreme close-ups of things.

AS: That was fourth year. The work was an extension of what I was doing at Apeiron. I started working in color, and the work developed a harder edge, became more voyeuristic in a sense. There





was this juxtaposition of things that were odd, a kind of “look at this world, isn’t it a circus” perspective.

I presented ordinary things taken out of context and editorialized emotionally—a woman’s behind in a tight black and purple dress photographed against a black balloon. Sequencing was very important, what came with what, and what order you viewed them in. Again, it’s that idea of image as language. It’s not just a word, it’s a thought, and how that relates to other thoughts and where that might lead the viewer. There had to

be mystery for the viewer to work with. Sort of like Rorschach prints; here are images abstracted to this degree, now what do you see here? That dialogue was interesting to me.

JTY: In your response, when it comes to seeking a different perspective, I’m seeing a parallel with the “Macro Journey,” except now you’re tuning into a smaller world.

AS: I’ve always had strong emotional reactions to things. At the time I was doing that work I was externalizing feelings. My way of expressing that and formalizing that was to make images with it. I feel like

I’ve now come back to the beginning—it’s about expressing something that is going through me that is very internal. What is it that is passing through me, what is it that is passing through any art? It’s a personal exploration, and at the same time, it’s a universal language. It’s touched by the artist in the sense that you make something with it. But it doesn’t come from you; that’s the spiritual aspect of creativity.

JTY: When did you get back to that?

AS: The emotional perspective has always been with me. After I left art school and realized the practical nature of life—you’ve got to feed yourself—and I had this photographic skill as a tool, the art started to be less important than the commerce. It didn’t feel like I was selling out, it felt like a natural progression.

JTY: But one of the most affecting aspects of your commercial interiors work is the sense of presence that’s evoked and the range of feeling. That’s what sets your work apart.

AS: I am still who I am—what I make and do are a reflection of that. In art school, the whole thing is about process and the artist, until you don’t know who you are in the process. It wasn’t until I was away from that for a while that I realized that’s just fundamental, the carrying of yourself to the work, whether you’re making an omelet, or a commercial photograph or what we would want to call art. It’s the same. You’re still the same person.

That’s one of the places Joe Cameron was instrumental in influencing me—the creative process never stops—whether you’re actually producing work or not. Being an artist, that’s internal. He didn’t make or show work for many years, but the process never stopped for him. It was a creative act for him if he was just moving a chair in his living room—that was him making art. The realization of the validity of that is hugely important. You realize you can be an artist whether you’re producing something, whether it’s recognized or not.

JTY: Are you also talking about your commercial work?

AS: The commercial work, the creative work—the two go hand in hand. I’ve gotten to the point where I can’t separate them. I started doing commercial work to solve problems for people. I thought coming out of art school that commercial work would taint me.



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At some point, it became a true service—I'm trying to give people what they need. As artists, we have this concept of selling out. In my own life, I don't know what that means anymore.

Now when I'm taking pictures, if it doesn't have emotional content, I consider the work a failure. If it's technically perfect but empty, it doesn't interest me.

JTY: Do you find there's a dialogue between the commercial work and the personal work?

AS: Absolutely. If you don't allow yourself to have that experience, you cut yourself out of the process. You rob yourself of an opportunity to learn something. You learn when you're the most humble. Humility is not necessarily part of the process for people who are at the top of the art world. I find that very unattractive. It's supposed to be about the work.

JTY: When did the whole "Macro Journey" begin?

AS: I'd reached a point in my life 10 years ago where everything I was doing needed more validity. I was reasonably successful, but I didn't feel like I was growing. I began seeing things from a different perspective and that meant unblocking some things. I was missing the magic, the sauce, the thing that makes you want to get up and work in the

morning. It meant looking in a whole lot of different places.

JTY: Where did you look?

AS: I started to climb. I'd never been very physical, and I didn't think of myself as strong. I was always small and felt I didn't do those things well. I found that I could do rock climbing well because of how I'm built. Being small is not a disadvantage. For the first time I could do something based completely on my own power. There was no one there to tell me right from wrong. I just enjoyed it. I got physically and emotionally stronger. Climbing led me in 2000 to Siurana in Catalonia, Spain, which opened up my life on many levels and immersed me in nature. I found myself balancing a new life in Spain with a life in the States where I was shooting commercially and caring for my aging parents. I kept thinking I had to choose something, one or the other. It was only when I realized it was all working as it should be, that nothing was broken or needed to be fixed, that I became really successful and found myself doing my personal work again. Being here and realizing that running water and electricity aren't givens, they're events, you start to become a natural conservationist. I was defining a new way of living. It grounds you, roots you to the earth, and makes you realize you are part of something that is a lot bigger than you are.

JTY: What was the beginning, the "aha" moment of taking these photographs?

AS: In January 2006 I had just bought a new camera for my commercial work, the Canon EOS 5D. Digital was coming on and providing images of the quality I wanted in order to create images with beautiful continuous tone. On a whim I bought a macro lens and took both with me to Spain. It was early dawn and the mist had pulled back through the valley. The light coming through the diffused clouds was like a natural softbox. The mist had left a sheen on this rose hip and I took a close picture. The image moved me.

JTY: To what were you responding?

AS: The image went beyond the rose hip itself. That image was about something essential to that rose hip. It wasn't about how it looked; it was about essence. It felt like a gift given to me by the mountain and the things I love about this place. It felt like something was being revealed, getting close to seeing the thing itself, and going inside.

JTY: How did the macro lens play into this?

AS: It became crucial. It did what I had always done in photography—remove the subject from the context in which it is normally seen, and let it surprise and reveal its mystery. I'm taking people into a world



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that is not visible to the naked eye.

JTY: What exactly is a macro lens doing to the view?

AS: I had always understood it was about revealing detail; sharp, up-close images. Conversely, what was exciting for me was the lack of detail. So much becomes about shape, space, depth, the purity of light and color, mystery. The essence of those living plants is what comes through. A curtain is being pulled aside for me to view something, and it isn't about detail, it's about emotional connectivity and life essence.

JTY: You're really providing a point of access to that experience.

AS: This work is really blending the commercial and the art. The interior designers I work with are interested in this work for their projects. It brings what I get here in Spain—the peace, the serenity, the grounding—to an urban environment where it is sorely needed. One of my first clients for the work apologized because the space where she needed the work was in a dentist's office. I couldn't think of a better place for these images to be, giving people an opportunity to step outside themselves

and away from stress for a moment.

JTY: How is the "Macro Journey" project evolving?

AS: My work is becoming more abstract. I am becoming more interested in the non-specific, usually with a central point of focus. In the background, layering is becoming important. I'm working more with depth, with things being out of focus and vague fields of color. The small point of focus is helping convey this as a complete thought.

JTY: It's the rabbit hole, right, that point of focus?

AS: Yes, it's what you're going down to get to somewhere else. It's not just a blade of grass anymore. It's still recognizable, you know it's a plant, but this is an event.

JTY: So, it's about the subject's being and capturing that?

AS: Capture doesn't resonate for me. It's a revelation. This is a gift the plant has given for it to be viewed. It's not about me capturing it, it's about me witnessing it and passing it on. I've always felt a connection to plants, to the natural world. It felt only natural that plants should reveal

themselves to me. I have a lot of love and respect for plants. It's kind of like they are loving me back.

JTY: There's a single image of three small rust-colored plants (above) that I think of as a coiling dance of leaves. Where does that fall in the evolution of the series?

AS: And I'm reminded of the dancing brooms in [Disney's] *Fantasia*. That image bridges the early, more representational work and the more abstract approach that's evolving. Those plants are probably a quarter inch tall. Most of the time, I'm as close as I can get with the lens wide open. What ends up in focus is determined by the plane of focus, the depth of field.

JTY: And no manipulation of the image, right? You're not arranging things?

AS: Oh no. It's like diving to me. You go in and wander around inside this other world. In-camera is where I actually start to explore. I don't leave the viewfinder. I'm not looking up, looking down. Things appear, I'm not actually sure what I'm seeing. I see this thing by the side of the path. I get into the camera and go down and look at it. I'm traveling around that plant, moving

through space, but I'm not leaving the viewfinder. It's a voyage, and the camera is the vehicle. I can spend 20 minutes in a plant. I end up breathless. I have to take the camera away from my eye and do something else. I get totally lost in this small world.

JTY: Are you taking lots of different shots? Does it vary if there's movement or the light shifts?

AS: It's about what happens in that space, emotionally or physically. Maybe I've gone out to shoot grasses and it's a windy day. I can be just fighting it, wishing it would hold still. And then I realize the movement is interesting and maybe I just need to wait for the picture to happen. It's really about the moment and what's happening in that environment. It almost feels to me like I'm one of the plants.

JTY: What about color?

AS: I don't manipulate any of it. I would never be able to fabricate this palette. I've discovered how infinitely varied a blade of grass can be. I've seen red, purple blue grass—these are natural colors. There is a real pleasure that comes from seeing color in its true state. And all this variation exists at the same time in one small clump of grass.

JTY: What kind of geography and move-

ment are we talking about here?

AS: 10 inches of space, or less.

JTY: What about the triptychs?

AS: Those link back to my love of sequencing. I often saw things as being related to each other. The grasses triptych is one of my earliest where I felt it was complete as a piece. Something else was happening there for me—rhythm, movement. Some of these want to be in relationship to other things.

JTY: They start to have a conversation...

AS: Right, that idea I've mentioned of images forming a sentence.

JTY: What's been one of the greater revelations of doing this work?

AS: Color and form. Working through the seasons and photographing the same subject matter, I've discovered the unexpected nature of color and how that contradicts our mindset about colors and the seasons. We assume winter is dry, drab and colorless. Here in the winter the grasses are vibrant—the reds and purples. The summer colors are soft. By the end of June the seed heads have dried and summer is layers of muted neutrals. Even our lawns are this type of creature from this environment that I'm in. They're meant to go to seed by the end of June. And we artificially prolong

it with fertilizer and water. By November, I see green growth starting again.

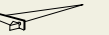
There's an aspect of calligraphy to these images, an economy of form seen in Asian art and architecture that resonates for me and comes through here.

JTY: That Asian sensibility too, like your work, it's all coming out of nature?

AS: This work is simple and abstract without losing its soul. It's pure color and form. The thing that vibrates on a single note is beautiful, and a lot of this work strikes that simplicity.

There's a point of access provided to this experience that's a byproduct of a purposeful effort to live a conscious life lived in conjunction with the natural world. I couldn't be making this work without this perspective and putting myself on this path. I would not be open to this experience and available to it.

For more information and a portfolio of Angie Seckinger's imagery, visit www.angiaseckinger.com.



Judith Turner-Yamamoto's articles have appeared in Elle, The Boston Globe, Finfair, the Los Angeles Times, Travel & Leisure and Southern Accents, among others.

