

# A JOURNEY FROM SCHOLARSHIP TO INVENTION: THE MARVELOUS IS THE TRUTH

... a little later, she discovered  
the goal of art was not the truth but the  
marvelous -- indeed, the marvelous was the truth.  
-- Joan Acocella

I always had a yearning to write fiction but felt bereft of stories. I longed to write the imagination and harness creativity. But I was good at left brain rationality: logical, orderly, and grounded in materialism. For decades I took photographs for fun, and participated in writing groups. But research and teaching always came first. It took years after retirement to shift my focus away from scholarship and embrace playful invention. I also discovered that creative writing and photography offered unique vehicles for political voice.

Below I describe some themes in my photography, share my delight in hybrid text-image art, and consider how creative work differs, for me, from scholarly research and writing.

## *i) Found Objects and The Art of Recontextualization and Juxtaposition:*

I'm constantly picking up detritus: debris, remains, fragments, broken china and glass and combining them to create a new narrative. *Objets trouvés* is the practice of turning things that are not normally art into art. It is an art of recontextualization. The series *Intimate Conversations* (2020) started with a found object: a white desert snail shell in a Palm Springs canyon.

The images capture Snail nestled in dialogue with various desert plants and woods. These photographs highlight imagined relationships between parts of the desert community. I am struck by how the spiral in the snail shell is a uniting symbol across nature and human culture. More than ever, we need images of intimate interspecies relations and human-nonhuman coexistence and interdependence.

Working with found objects and inspiration focuses on invention rather than documentation or representation. It is not systematic like academic work, but serendipitous. Not planful but spontaneous and playful.



***ii) The Fluidity between the Natural and the Constructed, the Authentic and the Fabricated, and the Imagined and the Real***

On a recent visit to Venice, I was riveted by the plethora of masks on every corner. Even the cheap knockoffs from China were compelling. Hand-made masks tucked away in small ateliers were lush, captivating and seductive. I took hundreds of photos. For the series *Liminal Animism: The Masks of Venice*, I layered images of Venetian masks which are a sophisticated form of art and artifice within photographs of nature. The series challenges the borders between the natural and the constructed, the authentic and the fabricated, and the imagined and the real.



***iii) Inventing Images rather than Capturing Them***

I like to juxtapose dispersed and unrelated objects like snails and flowers, and birds and shells, bringing together disparate detritus to see them anew. *SkyOceanBirds* began with some seashells—nautilus and coral—picked up on travels. I scanned the shells into Photoshop and then combined them with photographs I'd taken of birds flying in formation at Tom Thompson Park on Lake Ontario in Toronto.

*SkyOceanBirds*, a photo-montage is in the tradition of surrealism which appreciates idiosyncrasy, juxtaposition and contradiction. Surrealism challenges the boundaries between the normal and the fantastical, promotes the unexpected combining of found objects, and embraces dreamscapes and imagery emerging from the subconscious.

The series *Liminal Animism* and *SkyOceanBirds*, then, are not about capturing images but inventing them. Such an approach is fictive rather than representational; imaginative rather than grounded.

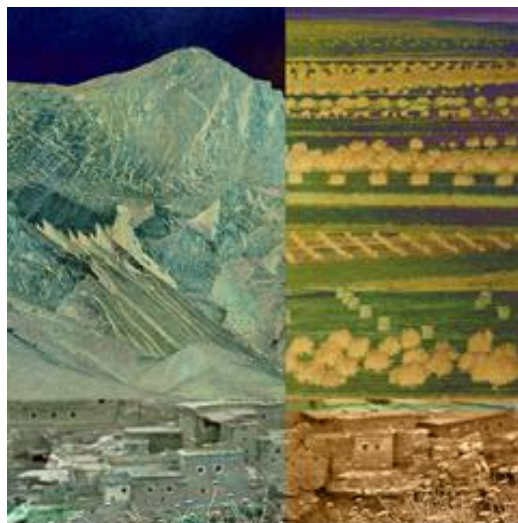


#### *iv) Landscape Imagined*

On an recent trip to Morocco, it was hard to resist photographing everything. How to engage with the images? I'm influenced by Susan Sontag's book *On Photography*. She argues that taking photographs is

“a way of refusing [experience]—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs.”

Rather than a desire to accumulate, I start from the premise that landscape is invented through our gaze. The series *Landscape Imagined (Morocco)* seeks to re-imagine Morocco, not through what was seen, but rather through what was experienced. When driving through the landscape, multiple images are remembered and forgotten. In this series, I try to represent this fragmentary experience and offer a landscape poetry about an imagined geography and architecture. Such an approach interrogates how we recollect place and construct memories. It highlights the permeability between the remembered and the imagined.



#### **v. *Witnessing***

Jennifer Baichwal from the Anthropocene Project speaks of art's capacity to provoke change: “not to preach, harangue or blame, but to witness, and in that witnessing, try to shift consciousness.” I'm interested in using photography to witness. My foray into political art is neither photo journalism nor street photography. Rather, photo-montage allows the juxtaposition of images to draw attention to political and social issues.

*Reclamation* is a montage constructed from over thirty photographs, most taken at a car dump on Cayman Brac, a small coral island off Grand Cayman. This image reflects on the discarded trash of modern life. The geometry, textures and colours of junked cars and rusted metal have their own strange and grotesque beauty. The green vines (which I added via Photoshop) weaving their way around and through the detritus are a reminder of the earth's resilience and its capacity to regenerate.



#### *vi) The Freedom of Voice*

I am a writer as well as a photographer. In my fiction, I'm drawn to writing about 50-word stories. Recently published (50-Word Stories, June 2023) is "Word Envy."

"She envies the poets. The cadence and repetition, the rhythms, the tapestry of tangled words—unexpected and sometimes incomprehensible. They send her mind wandering and wondering. Word play to slow her mind's chatter: palindromes and alliterations, onomatopoeia and allegory, allusion and bricolage, paradox and parody. Desire blooms in her heart."

These short forms of fiction are newly popular, perhaps to deal with short attention spans. I read recently that humans have shorter attention spans than goldfish! In fact, between 2000 and 215, our attention spans shrank by 25%.

My creative nonfiction bends genres, makes quirky connections and highlights social justice themes—quietly. For example, “[Silence, Please](#)” (Montréal Serai, 2022), a collage essay, considers noise pollution from personal, political and scientific points of view, and in a variety of styles/genres including lyrical prose and poetry, and humour, and via images. I’m passionate about silence and have been involved in various anti-noise crusades. Unlike scholarly writing, creative nonfiction embraces quirky connections, genre-bending, speculation, and an assertive political voice.

I’m also intrigued by work which incorporates both text and image, inspired by the Greek tradition of Ekphrasis (the cross-inspiration of art disciplines). The journal *Masque & Spectacle* (2022) published “[Footprints: Travel Imaginaries Through Photography](#)” which includes fifteen photographs and text. I explore a new way to construct a non-fiction narrative around a photographic series. For [A Still Life](#), I wrote a fictional encounter between the objects on the printer’s tray in one of my photographs, and their imagined owner, Miss Emma (published in *The Ekphrastic Review*, 2022.) Embracing the hybrid and challenging genre boundaries is a pleasure.

This writing is a welcome relief . It’s a pleasure to be released from scholarly rules, rigidities and restrictions, and to speak boldly about issues of concern. However, it’s taken me years to shed academic conventions, the desire to cite, and the careful language of modest and often tentative conclusions. My creative process and the increasingly precarious world has unsettled any remaining certainties I had. Perhaps it is a unique time to appreciate speculation and imagination.

**--Linda Briskin**

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Visit Linda’s photography, writing and Instagram websites:

<http://www.lindabriskinphotography>.

<https://www.lindabriskinphotography.com/pdf/writing.pdf>

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