



Interview with Deb Achak



Who?

I am a Seattle-based fine art photographer. My work ranges from street photography captured in the water, to conceptual narratives. I love working in a variety of mediums at once. Street photography is exciting to me because it's spontaneous, fluid, intuitive, and relies so much on the unconscious brain. My conceptual work is more constructed. I take intuitive ideas and bring them



to fruition to tell a story. Toggling between the two mediums feels like different hemispheres of my brain are activated, which can be incredibly stimulating. Ironically, I think both bodies of work are autobiographical. My conceptual work is more overtly so, but my street work has threads of my life history woven throughout it.



Where?

My Aquatic Street series is captured in beaches throughout the world — Maui, Italy, Croatia, Mexico, Iceland, Florida, and California, with more destinations



added each year. I've shot in oceans, lakes, rivers, swimming pools, lagoons — anywhere people gather in the water.





When?

I travel to four or five destinations each year, and I occasionally shoot in the waters near my home in Seattle. Some locations I revisit over and over again, such as Maui, but others are new. When I arrive at a new location, I give myself the assignment to find both the universality as well as the uniqueness of the place or people. I load my camera into the underwater housing, and I get busy having fun. I have found that if I am relaxed and focused on enjoying the moment, the work flows beautifully. I may or may not get “the shot” that day, but at the very least I engaged with humanity and nature in the process.



What?

There is a hidden world under the surface of water that is mysterious and beautiful. I am fascinated by the way ordinary bodies suspended in water are poetic and painterly. I am particularly taken with capturing regular people looking extraordinary in the water. Photographing a model in the water is easy. Photographing everyday people — unposed and enjoying a swim, yet looking extraordinary — *that's* what I am after. We are all exceptional in our own way. The water brings that forth like no other environment I have encountered. There is a poetry that is realized when we are weightless that can't be duplicated elsewhere.

Light takes on entirely new qualities underwater. It can create dramatic patterns on the skin or beautiful refractions just under the surface of the water.



There is an art to capturing these additional elements, but only to a certain extent; often it's a gift that is dropped in my lap.

The concept of seeing below the surface is very symbolic to me. I crave a deeper connection with humanity. The surface of things is not enough. I want to know more about people. This work is really about getting in touch with what's hidden or not readily visible, and the fundamental beauty of people, regardless of culture, age, or body size.



Why?

Photographing strangers in the water began organically. I didn't set out to be a street photographer. The simplest answer is that my children got tired of being photographed in the water, so I moved on to other subjects. I am eternally



grateful for their lack of patience because it allowed me to stumble onto something that will hold my interest for years and years. The photo that started it all was “The Queue.” It was a stand-alone image for about a year. I wasn’t sure where it fit with my other work until I traveled to Italy and picked up the practice of shooting strangers in the water again. From there, I was hooked. This work reminds me of my childhood summers spent at crowded public beaches with my mother and siblings. The perspective feels fresh and unique, and of course, it’s such a pleasure photographing people having fun in the water, despite the profound challenges involved with swimming with a camera. At the heart of this work is joy. These days, with so much pain in the world, joy seems like a welcome mandate.

