

A Conversation with Deb Achak

August 12, 2015 • 11 minute read • by Vanessa Simpson
In Conversation, Guest, Inspiration

Today we have a conversation with Deb Achak, whose love of visual storytelling and environmental portraiture is clearly seen in her photography. She loves to photograph the subjects she is most passionate about: her family, their home, their travels, everyday beauty and lives in Seattle with her husband and two sons.



I first “met” Deb during our year long journey in the NowYou self portrait workshop. Since then, our friendship has grown into a real life friendship. We live fairly close to

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each other (about an hour on a good day) and our kids play like champs when they hang out. When we first moved to the area (almost a year and a half ago now), Deb welcomed me to the Seattle area with such sweetness. She hosted a luncheon at her beautiful home with two other Pacific Northwest NowYou alumni. Truly making Washington feel like home, there is none of the dreaded “Seattle Freeze” with this lady and her boys.

I am thrilled to be sharing a conversation regarding her work that started earlier this spring as we walked around the Henry and had lunch in Seattle’s University District. I have watched her find a strong and lovely voice in photography and videography over the past year or so and her work often brings both a smile and a tear to my eyes. Her work is magic, just like she is.

VS: How did you come to photography? Is it something that a family member was interested in, something you just realized you loved after having children or was it completely organic? Tell me more about your journey.

DA: I began shooting meaningfully about 5 years ago. I shot very casually prior to that, but I was tired of having most of my family photos taken with an iphone. My husband bought me a Canon T3i with a kit lens for a birthday present and I don’t think I have gone a single day without shooting since. It was very much an organic process. I tend to follow my gut towards things and I answered a yearning to execute my vision photographically.



VS: What is your formal background and training? If it wasn’t photography or art, how has that historical you translated in your work today? (This question always

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fascinates me because I truly believe that we are leaving breadcrumbs for our future selves...)

DA: I studied English Literature, Studio Art, and Women's Studies at the University of New Hampshire. Then, like now, I focused my energy on the things I was most passionate about, and it always involved storytelling in one kind or another. When I graduated, I moved to Seattle and found my way into a career in social work, eventually completing my master's at the University of Washington. I left that career when my first son turned one.

When I think about my path to photography I always have the visual image of picking up a creative thread that I put down many years ago. I hear artists talk all the time about how they make art in order to heal themselves in painful times. For me however, the opposite has been true. My life was much more difficult when I was young. I was anxious and depressed a lot. It's clear to me now that when I feel that way, it completely overrides my creative process. So, for me, my healthy, happy adulthood has freed me to pick up my creative thread and express myself fully and openly. I think it shows in my work.

VS: Totally cliché, but what is your gear? But, I ask because so much of your current work is underwater. And some of that gear a little foreign to some of us. And with the video, do you prefer specific gear over another?

DA: I shoot my photos and video with a Canon 6D and either my 35mm (f1.4) or my 24-105mm (f4).

I love to capture underwater photos and video and for that I recently purchased a GoPro Hero 4. In the future I hope to add an underwater housing for my Canon into the mix.



VS: Tell me about your work-space/office. When you are developing your films, where are you? Both mentally and physically. are you a night owl or an early rising creator?

DA: About 2-1/2 years ago my family bought a 100 year old former B&B. It's our home now (and no longer a B&B) but it has been an amazing creative project modernizing and re-imagining the spaces. There was a guest room in the attic and I have claimed as my own. It is very rough at the moment — exposed sub-floor and old paint and lighting — but I have been working up there since the spring. I have a simple desk and chair, my computer, and that's about it.

Like most mothers, I work in the little slips of time that are available to me, mostly late nights or when the boys are in school.

VS: So much of your work revolves around water. What's the draw to this element? What started the fascination with capturing it in so much of your work? Also, are you a water sign? (yep, I totally just asked you what sign you are. I already know you like long walks on the beach)

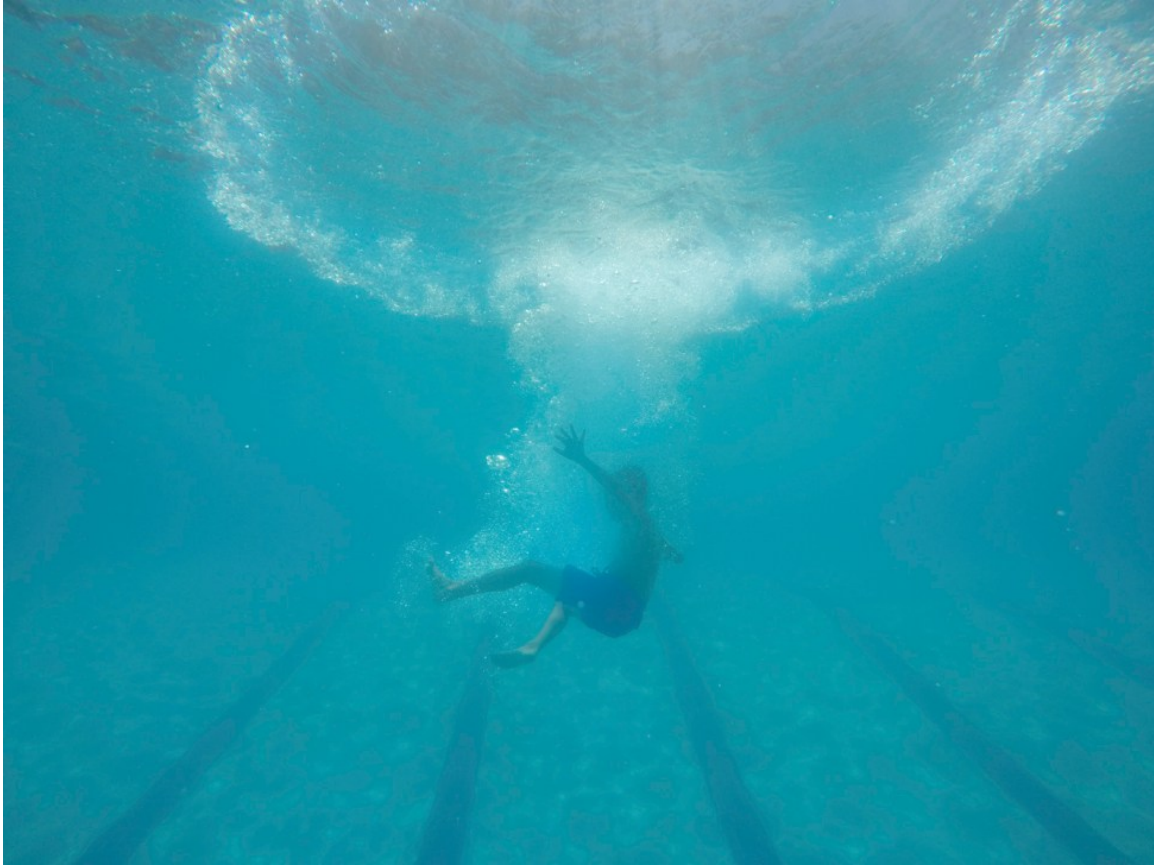
DA: I am completely in love with underwater photography and video, and have been “diving deep” all summer. I am drawn to dreamy, painterly images. There is a poetry that is realized when we are weightless that can't be duplicated elsewhere. I also love that light takes on entirely new qualities underwater. It can create dramatic patterns on

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the skin, or send golden shafts deep underneath. Even bubbles can take on exciting abstractions.



VS: Movies... your videos hit me in such a powerful way. How is your process the same or different when you work in dynamic vs static of photography. Both as you shoot and as you process the final product.

DA: I compose a photograph and a video sequence very similarly, the difference being that I look for movement when I shoot video.

Light is even more important to me in video than it is in photography, and in many ways video has deepened my love affair with light. A photo taken in so-so light has the potential to be edited or converted to black and white to make it better, but video is what it is. I don't alter or enhance my video footage. The right light is pure magic and makes the movement sing.

Creating a finished film, however, is very different than editing photos. It's such a dynamic process. The footage affects the music I select and the music impacts how the footage flows and feels to me. Selecting the right music can take many, many hours. I can't feel "meh" about it. If I don't love the song, the film won't work, period.

Once I have selected a song, and loaded my footage, the process gets more organic. I look for themes that can repeat and I see how very disparate sequences might harmonize

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together. It's done mostly by feel. I tinker and then walk away, tinker and then walk away, repeat, repeat, repeat. For my long format films, this process can last many weeks.

VS: *We have talked about this, but how often are you creating films, how long are they usually?*

DA: I am taking Xanthe Berkeley's year long Creating Time Capsules course and I have challenged myself to complete 10-12 full length films. They are 3-5 minutes long.

In addition, I have joined Xanthe's Instagram project #minimondaymovies. These are quick 15 second films designed to fit Instagram's video format. To date, I have made 19 of them. I love the challenge of telling a story in just 15 seconds.

VS: *How does your family respond to your movies? Both in the making and then to the result. I can imagine the boys when they are older having a much more intense reaction to them then they might now, but do you think they get why you are photographing them and your world the way you do now?*

DS: My husband and sons are my biggest fans and they love watching the finished films. When filming, I try to honor how the boys are feeling in the moment. It's like any of us who take photos of our children: sometimes they are into it and sometimes not. Since this is such a big passion for me, it's really important that I not overstep their boundaries. I want them to grow up experiencing it positively.

I do think they understand why I do what I do. And I believe that demonstrating a creative passion is really healthy for them to see. Both my husband and I love what we do and we hope the boys grow up with a desire to seek out a profession or a creative practice that fills them up.

VS: *What else can you share with all of us about making these movies?*

DA: I have been so delighted to discover what a meditative process making films is for me. When I am in the studio editing, I lose track of time and every possible distraction falls away. I can stay in that space for many hours at a time and I love it. It is also become a gratitude practice for me. There is something about making these films that clears away all the tough parts of motherhood (the bickering, the grocery shopping, the long hours!) and extracts just the beautiful bits. I fall head over heels in love with my family and my life every time I make a film. For that reason alone, I would like to make them for as long as possible.

VS: *Other than your family and perhaps water, what are some token "Deb" angles, subjects, or other iconic type subjects that you are always drawn to with your camera in hand?*



DA: I love silhouette shots, both in photos and in video. I use them in my work as often as possible.



I love low light photography. I also love a good laugh. Combining the two is pretty exciting for me, like this moment when my was son dribbling a soccer ball down the hallway at a fancy Palm Springs hotel.



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And more and more I am drawn to subjects that are universal, for a wider audience. I gravitate to dreamy and painterly images such as cloudscapes and water wakes.



VS: Who and what inspires you? photographer/videographer/artist or otherwise?

DA: There is no question that I have Xanthe Berkeley to thank for my evolution into filmmaking. I took my first class with her 3 years ago and it was such a game changer for me as an artist. I learn so much every time I watch her films, especially her love affair with color. She has been incredibly encouraging of my path and I am forever grateful her mentorship.

I am also completely inspired by re-invention stories. I get goosebumps when I hear someone tell a story about combining life experience and a deep seated passion into an entirely new creation. It doesn't matter what field it is in — finance, woodworking, yoga, writing, painting, business. I am drawn to the passion that the person brings to an entirely new path and the bravery it takes to reinvent oneself later in life. And of course there is so much inspiration on Instagram, with blogs, art magazines, etc. If I have a really strong gut reaction to something I see, like a deep excruciating envy, I usually know it is something I want to know more about and I try to move fearlessly in that direction. Curiosity and a strong gut reaction always seem to lead me where I need to be.

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VS: Anything else you want to share about your adventures in photography? How about anything about yourself for our readers to learn about you a bit more?

DA: This fall I hope to realize a dream I have had for some time to master the art of digital printing and create a line of fine art prints of my work. It combines my love of decor and design with my love of photography (more threads coming together!). I'll begin with my own walls and if it suits me here I will begin offering prints on my site. For more from Deb Achak, you can see her work [here](#), follow her on Instagram [here](#) or vimeo [here](#). I promise you will be an instant fan of this talented artist. keep chasing that light, [Vanessa](#)



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