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Window Dressing

Photographer Karen Shulman captures the window display's of Bergdorf Goodman with her own bit of panache.

Story by Pam Gersh



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aren Shulman is a self-taught artist with a natural eye. When she has a camera in her hand, she becomes the producer, set designer and lighting expert of every photo she takes. She sees photography as a theatrical performance in which she is granted the opportunity to blend creativity and imagination and form a unique piece of art. A successful photographer, Karen sells her work and travels the world on trips to build her craft. It is her amazing second act.

Karen began in the darkroom in the 1970s, but her dreams of going to art school were sidelined by her father, who told her to do something practical to support herself. "In a way I'm glad I didn't go to art school because I wasn't ready," says Karen. Instead she became an occupational therapist and eventually worked in the pharmaceutical industry, winding up her career in 2012 as an associate director of medical education.

In 2007, however, she found herself living by the ocean in Hull, MA, where she took a class with noted photographer and teacher Lance Keimig. "I knew retirement was right around the corner for me," Karen explains, "and I'd finally have time to dedicate myself to learning more about my passion, photography. This was a way to reinvent myself, because staying in the corporate rat race was not an option. Putting a camera in my hand helped guide me where I needed to go in a time of transition."

Lance was impressed with his stu-



Queen of the Night



Let them eat Cake

dent. “When I first met Karen, she was just getting started,” he says. “Her energy and enthusiasm were intense, but she didn’t know what to do with it. Over the years, I’ve watched her transformation from an eager student to an exhibiting artist. During that relatively short time, her drive has only intensified, and she has developed a distinctive style and personal vision that are the hallmarks of a mature visual artist. Every time I see her work, Karen blows me away with what she’s created.”

As Karen took courses to perfect her technical side and hone her craft, she got jobs in real estate photography to help pay for her trips and education costs. She and her husband, Bill, split their time between homes in Plymouth, MA, and Fort Myers, FL. It was in Florida that another pivotal event changed Karen’s course: She displayed her photos at a street fair in Fort Myers, where she was approached by a gallery owner who encouraged her to create a hard body of work. Over the next few years, Karen put together a collection of images from her travels. “I’ve learned that if I take 500 photographs and get one I love, I consider that a success,” she says.



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During a business trip in New York City in 2009, Karen found herself captivated by Bergdorf Goodman's window displays. She spent hours photographing the changing windows and light, using the glass as a reflection and juxtaposing the Bergdorf windows with New York City streetscapes. Out of a fascination to see beyond what the customer sees, she began one of her most important projects, "Window Dressing." The project features 24 extraordinary color shots that capture the interior display of window mannequins and the reflection of the exterior world as it bounces off the windowpane. Two distinctly different worlds of fantasy and reality are blended into one unique moment. "Window Dressing is ever-evolving, and I return frequently to shoot more images so more pieces are added to the collection every year," she says.

Karen had her first solo show of Window Dressing in Fort Myers in 2014. Judith Liegeois, owner of the eponymous gallery in Naples, FL, loved Karen's work and asked that her photographs be displayed in her galleries. "Karen's eye, through the lens of her camera, is transporting," says Judith. "I feel as though I have entered into her photographs when I look at them." Karen has sold 18 pieces of the collection at the Judith Liegeois Gallery. "Judith encouraged me to make my pieces larger, into 40- by 60-inch images, and she sells them to the public at two storefronts and through her interior design group," says Karen. "She's championed my work and been my most ardent fan and patron. I wouldn't be where I am without her."



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Over The Moon



Karen Shulman
Photo Credit: Bobbi Lane

Karen also credits much of her success to other mentors and supporters, including Bobbi Lane, a commercial photographer in Boston. “Much of Karen’s work is dynamic,” says Bobbi, “like the Window Dressing series, which provides insight into many layers of our commercial and tangible ‘exterior’ world. Each object or scene has its own presence and dignity, like an old soul who has seen much in his lifetime. The quality of light and stillness of Karen’s compositions invite us into the inner world of peace and serenity. It’s impressive that one artist can understand the depth in both existences and bring forth the story that will touch the viewer.”

Karen has won multiple awards, including Best Photograph for Ice Lagoon in Iceland from Still Points Art Quarterly magazine, and Best In Show for Stairway to Heaven from the South Shore Art Association. Her work has also appeared in many art shows in the Boston area, and is frequently featured in art industry magazines.

“What I have learned in my second act is that it’s okay to break the rules,” says Karen. “Having confidence to do what I want is the real game changer in everything I create—completely different from working in the corporate world.” Karen believes the keys to her success are seeking advice from others and remaining open-minded about her work. “The transition from the corporate world to the art world made me slow down and stay in the moment, because when I have a camera in my hands, I fall captive to the world of observation.”

Resources

Karen Shulman
Karen Shulman Photography
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