

Joyce Tenneson

Work That Feeds the Soul

by Amanda Quintez-Fielder

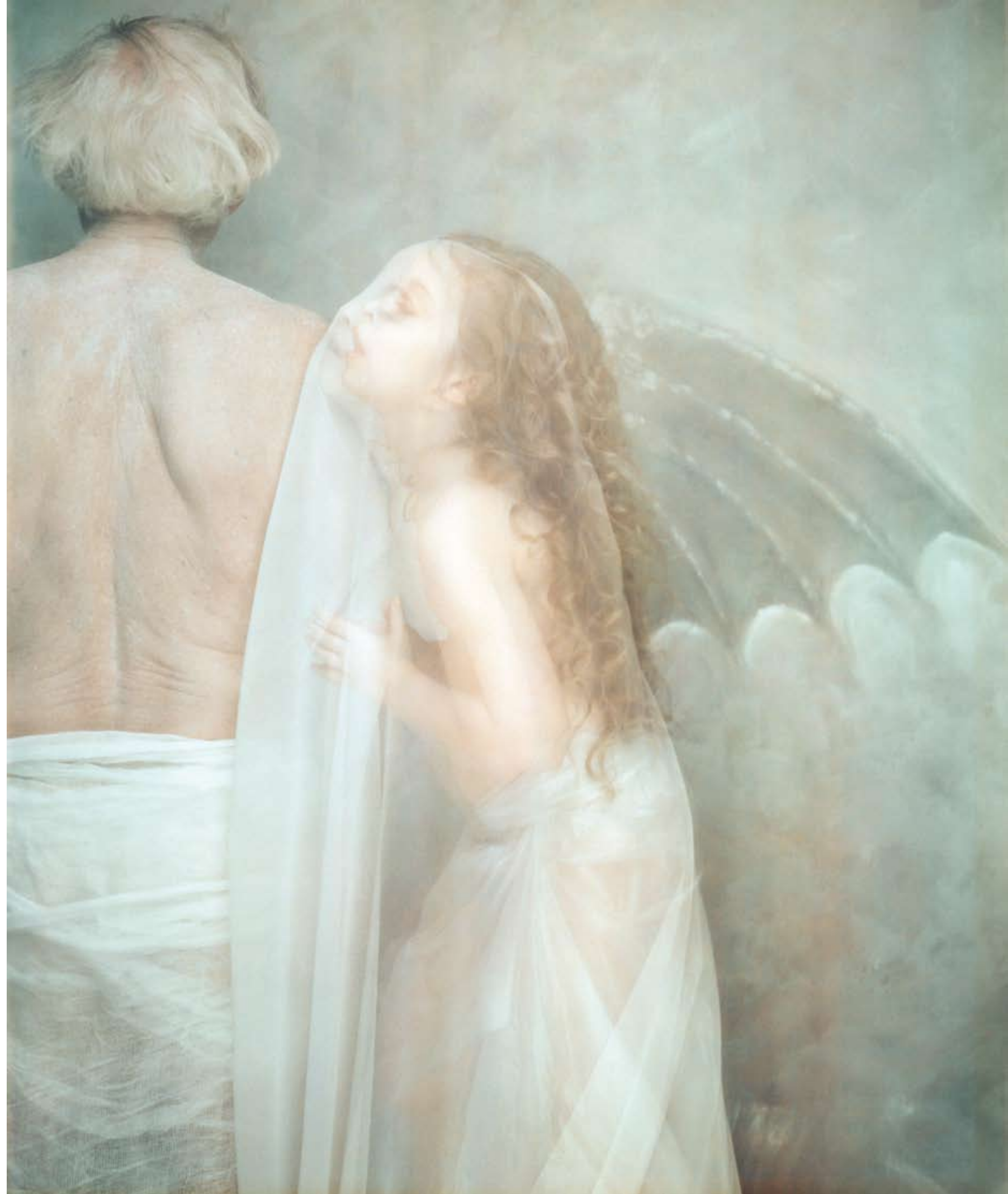
As she climbs the stairs onto the stage of Brooks Institute's Victoria Theater in Santa Barbara, CA to lecture to more than 300 Brooks faculty, staff and students, Joyce Tenneson receives a standing ovation before uttering a word. Dressed in a smart black shirt, jeans and comfortable shoes, she looks out over the lecture hall, squinting slightly into the darkness, and smiles. She carries herself with the kind of poise and grace that you would expect of an artist who consistently makes poignant images. Beneath this calm exterior lies the confident and courageous heart of a woman who has changed the face of photography from the start of her career and brought a previously unwelcome feminine perspective to the commercial world of New York. After a brief introduction, she



starts a self-compiled retrospective highlighting her favorite bodies of work over the past 40 years—a slide show full of timeless and memorable images that have graced the covers of magazines, sold in international galleries and become firmly wedged in the world of photography.

Whether lecturing or conversing privately, Tenneson is open and uncensored, revealing the pains and the successes she experienced trying to break into photography—back when she was shooting images because she felt a tangible need to do so. Her fine art was, and continues to be, work that she has to do. “[It’s] work that I have done not because someone has paid me to do it,” Tenneson remarks, “but because it is work that feeds my soul.”

Although she seems to have





The process started early, when Tenneson was working as a model for Polaroid early in her career but felt the need to be on the other side of the lens. She was seeing at that time how women were photographed as objects in order to sell beauty. She determined that would not be her fate and she pushed herself out of that role to find a way to make her own photographic statement. She asked Polaroid to give her a camera. They obliged and she began using her free time to shoot self-portraits and portraits of friends that helped build up her skill set and portfolio. Her already distinctive style and creative methods led to some evocative images.

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When Tenneson’s fine art began to attract interest, she was criticized for the very thing that would make her work so unique and timeless: It was feminine. “I had this vision that I could bring a sense of the spiritual into the world of commerce,” Tenneson says of her decision to move from Washington, D.C., where she had been teaching for 15 years, to New York to be a commercial photographer. But Tenneson didn’t let the disparaging critics’ remarks stop her from doing the work. It was as if photography were a conduit to something greater and more profound within her.

Before long Polaroid entered the picture again, providing Tenneson with a grant to do her fine art work. Under that grant Tenneson was able to use the 20x24-inch Polaroid camera in New York City. Soon, one of her images graced the cover of *American Photo*, and her commercial



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come to this understanding about herself over time, her audience recognized this truth from the very beginning. Her photographs are infused with the vulnerability of an artist breaking into new territory and charging down a path of self-discovery and faith. The myths, dogma and feminine appeal present in her work are direct interpretations of her struggle to discover who she really is as a woman and an artist. She has been pursuing this same question for her whole career, starting with her early self-portraits taken when she was still getting her master’s degree in the early 1970s to her more recent work in her book *Wise Women*, which explores what the aging process has in store for her. This weariless pursuit drives and motivates her still, as she seeks the next project, the next body of work to pour herself into.

persona began to emerge. With that Polaroid camera, Tenneson ultimately captured some of her most engaging and iconic images. The bulk and idiosyncrasies of the camera didn't seem to hinder her interpretation of the world around her. In fact, the delicate and exposed nature

Working in New York in the 1980s, Tenneson distinguished herself from the commercial photographers around her, in that fine art drove her career, kept her motivated and enriched her spirit while she struggled to break into the commercial sphere. Since the work she was doing was

tortured for the sake of beauty. In one image she adorns her model with a wreath she found in the flower district, enveloping the woman in leaves and light, a halo reminiscent of the saints that surrounded Tenneson's childhood in a convent. In this case, the model—a woman who appears many times throughout Tenneson's body of work—was also a fortuitous find. "She is really an alter image for me. She was me, a younger me that I met in the subway, and we connected."

What Tenneson couldn't find she would make, often painting backdrops, bending metal or draping materials on her models in the studio and fastening them in place with pins. When working in the studio she would have all the elements available and allow the confluence of events to work together. Tenneson believes that she succeeded because she was honest with herself, listened to her impulses and followed her heart when creating the work. She has maintained a humility that is part of her process, another clue to the puzzle of her soul that finds its way into her photographs.

In the image "Deanna and the Old Man" (pg. 21), which Tenneson has called one of the best images of her career, she created all the elements, introduced the players, and let the magic happen, while she stayed poised and ready behind the camera. It depicts a young girl arching her back in seeming agony, shrouded in translucent material beside a statuesque figure muted in white. Behind the girl, the imprint of leathery wings spreads out and fills the frame. "I painted that bat wing but I didn't know how I was going to use it," Tenneson admits, but the availability of the constructed elements, the luck of finding the right models, and her expertise in the studio led her to a revelation. "That was me. That little girl was me. I had a father that was never there for me, and when I did that shot, it blew my mind. And I think it's really a powerful image."

The trouble with shooting work for herself was that Tenneson found she was responsible for financing the images—renting the studio, locating the talent, providing props and backdrops—forcing her dedication and organization to work in concert to ensure that she would get the most out of every shoot. Despite the financial challenge, she never allowed those expenses to affect her ultimate vision.



of her work seemed somehow enhanced by the medium, which was telling of Tenneson's interaction and connection with her subjects and subject matter. All of the elements come together to create a certain spirit, a feeling of unabashed honesty and vulnerable confidence. Spending time with Tenneson outside of the public eye, one can see her willingness to bare her soul, which is as evident in her personality as it is in her images.

a part of her, her eyes were always open in search of props and accessories that she could use in her shoots. She would scour the flea markets and flower districts of New York, looking for anything that intrigued her. She would be attracted to materials she could form to hold a certain shape, or metals that reminded her of warriors, even a shark's jaw that she knew she would drape over a nude woman to make a statement about how women were being

During preparation for one of her most well known images, “Dasha, Russia”—an earthy, sepia image of a woman with two doves on her shoulders (below)—Tenneson and the model had a heartfelt conversation

vital, as if the doves were sentinels guarding her essence. Something about that sentiment and her connection with Dasha led her to hire a dove handler to try and recreate that feeling of doves emerging from

Somewhat frustrated, Tenneson recalls, she said, “ ‘Let’s take a break.’ And when I said that, the doves landed on the model’s shoulders and I had that one frame.”

Although her calm attitude may belie the fact, Tenneson’s experience had prepared her for just such opportunities. The camera was set, the film loaded, the lighting and focus precise so that the resulting moment when those birds alighted on the slim shoulders of her model, she had the artistic presence of mind to take the shot. It is this instinct just as much as her experience and technical aptitude that makes Tenneson such a refined photographer.

She recently had the opportunity to review all her Polaroid images, including images from series such as “Transformations” and “Light Warriors.” Hoping to put together a book of some of the images, Tenneson and her assistants pulled the images out of storage in New York, transferred them to her studio in Maine and began to scan all 7800 of them for permanent archiving and organization. The result is a compilation of some never-before-published work from that period of her career. For a Tenneson fan, the images are like experiencing one of your favorite stories again, but from a new perspective. The pictures present more clues of the Tenneson locked away in her photography. Though the images themselves are delicate in appearance, they have the feel of filigreed stone. She is as delicate as latticework but simultaneously as solid and impenetrable as the path of her career.

At the end of her whirlwind tour of Santa Barbara, Tenneson pokes at a salad in a crowded Mexican restaurant and discusses her future. She has said that she is certain that her best work is ahead of her. After 40 years as a successful photographer, the process has become easy for her, almost so easy that it doesn’t hold the same value as it did when she struggled to break in and produce work she could not repress. And yet she remains driven to find that next project and continues to seek new bodies of work. This nameless drive is what defines her. The photographer is irrevocably tied to her photographs. For, in the end, her images are her soul.

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prior to the shoot. “She had a recurring dream of a dove coming out of her heart chakra and she wanted me to tell her what that meant,” Tenneson says, unconsciously moving her hands in front of her as if the doves are emerging from her at this very moment. Tenneson told the model of her own similar dreams and how she felt a sense of needing to protect something

the heart, a feeling that artist and model shared on a deeper level. On the day of the shoot, the doves, model, and styling were in place, but the image seemed elusive. The image was shot in an era before Photoshop and Tenneson was trying to shoot it as she saw it, with the two doves appearing to be fluttering out of the woman’s chest. But the image was contrived and unsuccessful.

