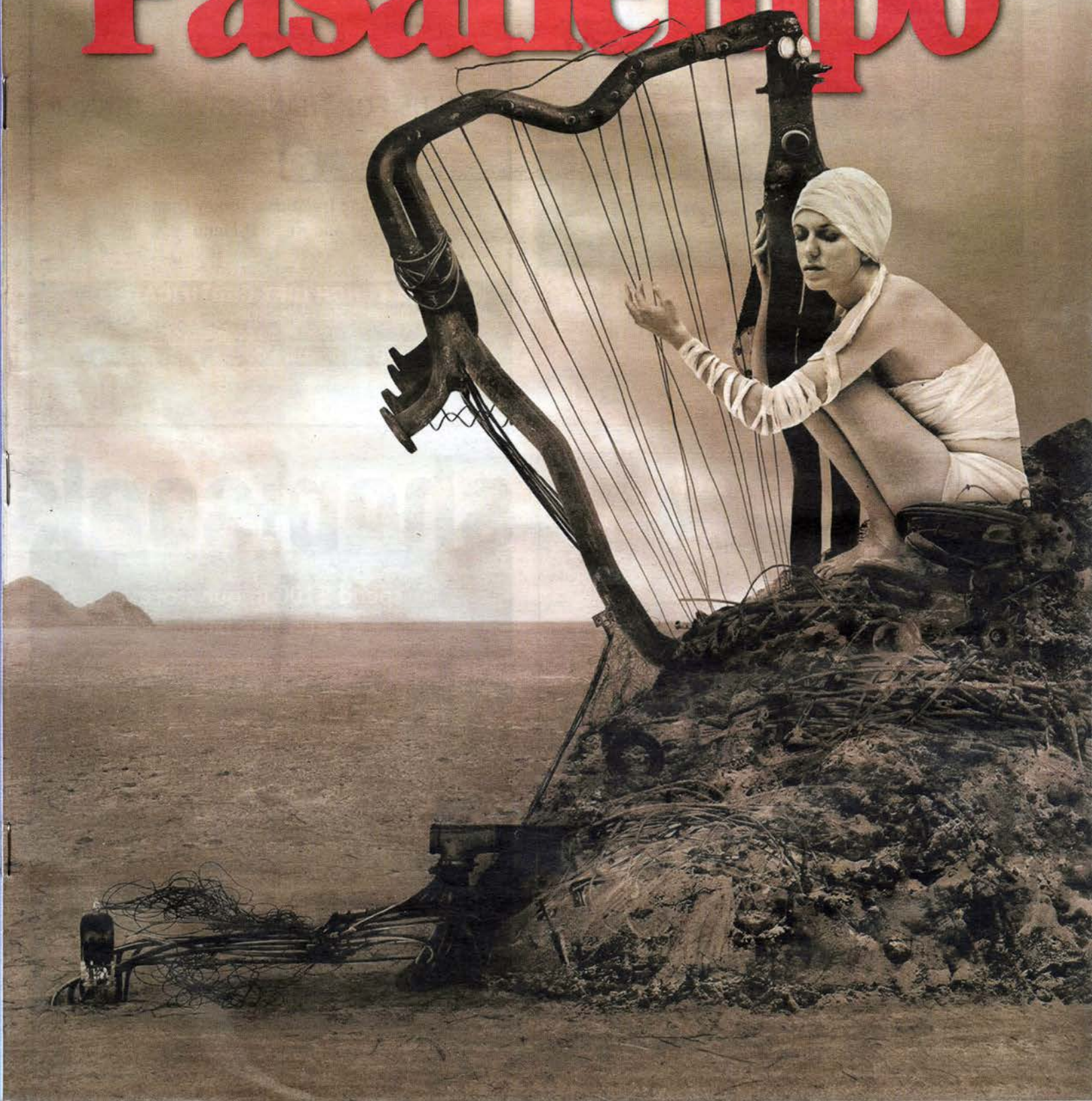


The New Mexican's Weekly Magazine of Arts, Entertainment & Culture



November 4 - 10, 2011

Pasatiempo



Building worlds

On Friday, Nov. 4, Verve Gallery of Photography opens *Alternate Realities*, an exhibit of work that explores variations in narrative and conceptual approach while examining how classic film-based and digital photographic processes are used by three artists to tell their stories. In the pursuit of their fantastical images, these photographers painstakingly assemble their subjects and props, performing a kind of installation-photography hybrid — a still-life/portrait in hyperdrive.

THREE PHOTOGRAPHERS

Charbonneau/French

Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French have been collaborating since 2004, when they met at a community wet-process darkroom in Los Angeles. They liked each other's photography and discussed the possibility of collaboration. At the time, Charbonneau was working with industrial objects, creating physical installations and building costumes out of hardware for use in his photographic images. After the pair hit it off, French became the model for those images.

Charbonneau has been working in the film industry for the past 20 years; his contribution to cinema is sound, rather than sight. "When I first went to school I studied music and then studied photography and filmmaking afterward. Working in film as a music editor just happened as kind of an accident." French, who studied screenwriting before becoming a photographer, went to Tisch School of the Arts and then earned a degree in art history from the University of California at Los Angeles. "Then I worked in television and film development, children's entertainment, and as a gallerist."

When French saw Charbonneau's work for the first time, she noticed a narrative quality, although Charbonneau wasn't using a predetermined story line. "I was shooting a lot of smaller installations in my home with various objects," French said, "so we sort of naturally married our processes together and produced this third approach. At the time when we were just getting to know each other, it was important to us to work exclusively with one another, so that we weren't focused on outside work or artists. A lot of times we would utilize ourselves as subjects."

French and Charbonneau, who work only with film and, at the moment, only black-and-white film, sketch

their photographs out together, either in the studio or on location. Then they look through the viewfinder to assure that the shot is set up to their satisfaction.

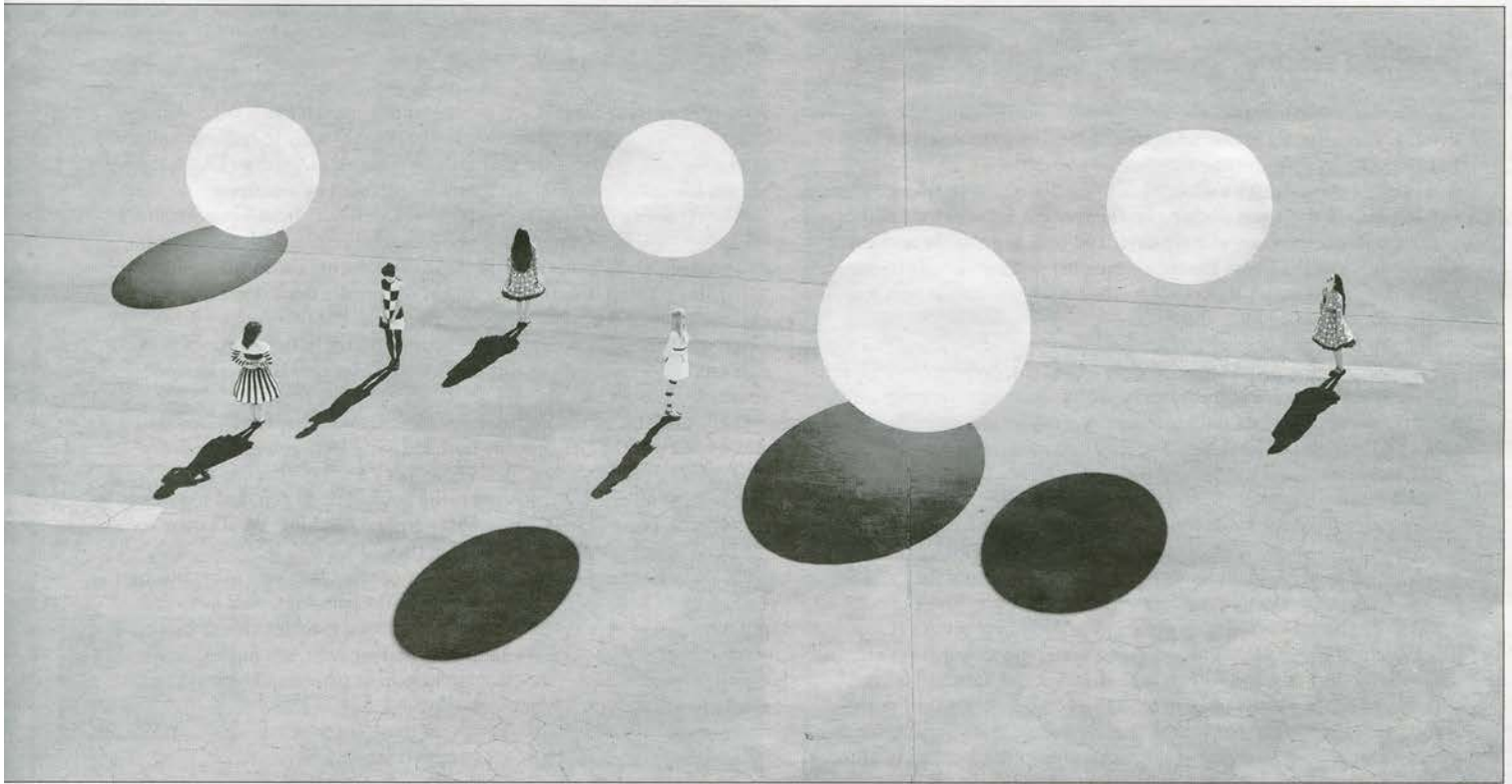
There is very little image manipulation done after the shoot, Charbonneau said, and it is done in a wet-dark-room setting. "Sometimes a printing technique is used to slightly diffuse an image or erase a tether, as in our *Playground* series," Charbonneau said, "and with the *Massillon* series, we used filters that I had made for the camera lens to mimic the soft-focus look of Pictorialist photography from the Victorian period. We didn't manipulate anything but the tonality in Photoshop, in order to enlarge the prints."

Massillon is a city in Ohio where French's great-grandmother resided, and the *Massillon* series is a loose interpretation of her life after the turn of the 20th century, as well as a recognition of her death. "There's a thread of her in there," French said, "but it's very fantastical as well. It's a fairy-tale setting, but it's a very personal narrative based in truth." For this series, French acted as the principal model and one of the photographers.

For the *Playground* series, an examination of how people, constellations, natural environments, and geometric shapes (particularly the sphere) interact, Charbonneau and French faced numerous challenges, especially regarding light and heat. They built small-scale models and three-dimensional figurines to plot the position of the sun for their shoots. "We had to shine artificial light through spheres in the model to see how the shadows would look at a particular time of day," Charbonneau said. "We had to use a crew and set up on-site at the exact time of day to get the shadows exactly the way we wanted them — it was a lot of research, going back and forth, calculating exposures and shadow movement."



Charbonneau/French: *Axis Mundi*, C-print



The spheres used for the shoots (in locations that included White Sands National Monument) are weather balloons, some up to 20 feet in diameter, purchased through military surplus and atmospheric research equipment distributors. “When we first started shooting with the balloons, our initial location was the Sepulveda Dam in L.A.,” French said, “and it was a morning shoot that took many hours to set up. By the time we started shooting, the sun started to heat the concrete, and the concrete started to heat the balloons, at which point the helium and oxygen began to expand. Not only did we have a lot of explosions, but we had a runaway balloon that was pretty miraculous for its gigantic size. They’re very volatile objects.”

Jennifer B. Hudson

“When I grow up I want to be an artist.” This sentence is written next to a picture drawn by Jennifer B. Hudson when she was around 7 years old. Hudson, a self-taught photographer who shoots solely with a digital camera, is an MFA candidate in the University of New Mexico’s studio-art photography program.

“I started out as a portrait photographer and ran a successful wedding-photography studio in Texas. I loved photographing people. I think I found a real spiritual connection in that. But I knew that I wanted to do something more with making photographs. I never felt like I really landed in portraiture. Things weren’t making me happy there.”

About five years after opening the studio, Hudson sold the business and moved to Boston to focus on fine-art photography. It was there that she began creating her first



Jennifer B. Hudson: *Flora 1*, 2011, archival pigment ink print; above, Charbonneau/French: *Dividing Suns*, 2010, C-print

continued on Page 42

Building worlds, continued from Page 41

noncommercial series of photographs, titled *Traveler*, while earning a living as a lecturer, an instructor at Boston University's Center for Digital Imaging Arts, and a part-time commercial portraitist.

"I came to New Mexico a while back to participate in an emerging-artists exhibition at Verve. I was working on the concept for my *Medic* photographic series at the time, and my boyfriend Josh and I — we're married now — drove out to Ghost Ranch. I remember just standing at the ranch and looking at Georgia's [O'Keeffe] mountain and looking at Josh and saying, 'We have to do *Medic* here.'"

Upon returning to Boston, Hudson and Josh packed a crate with 750 pounds of equipment and other necessities and shipped it to New Mexico. She secured a residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute in November 2010, and over the course of six weeks, she created the set and assembled the props and models (all from New Mexico) that were needed to shoot the *Medic* series.

The conceptual aspects of Hudson's photographic approach are the most challenging part of her work. She spent more than five months sketching the concepts for *Medic* — an exploration of illness. "I sketch the work for much longer than I actually shoot it, especially because of the way I do things. I'm constantly compositing things, and I have to know the exact scale of the objects I'm using on the set, especially in relation to people." The sketching goes so far as to determine what objects will cast shadows and light on the body, and where those shadows and light will fall.

Fifty percent of what you see in *Medic* was on the set for the live shoot, and the other half was added in the digital studio. "I photograph as much as I can in real time, but some of the objects I use are much larger or much smaller than the scale I need. Anything that isn't to scale gets added later through digital compositing."

Although Hudson explored structures that were already built for the shooting of *Medic*, including cells at New Mexico State Penitentiary, she found nothing that she could have access to for the amount of time she needed, so she and Josh built one at the Santa Fe Art Institute. Hudson

wanted a square room that was lit from above and felt like a jail cell or a bare hospital room. Their set contained a skylight with 16 halogen bulbs on the top side of it, and the skylight was moveable. After her shoot, the set was left at the institute, where it was then used by a sculptor.

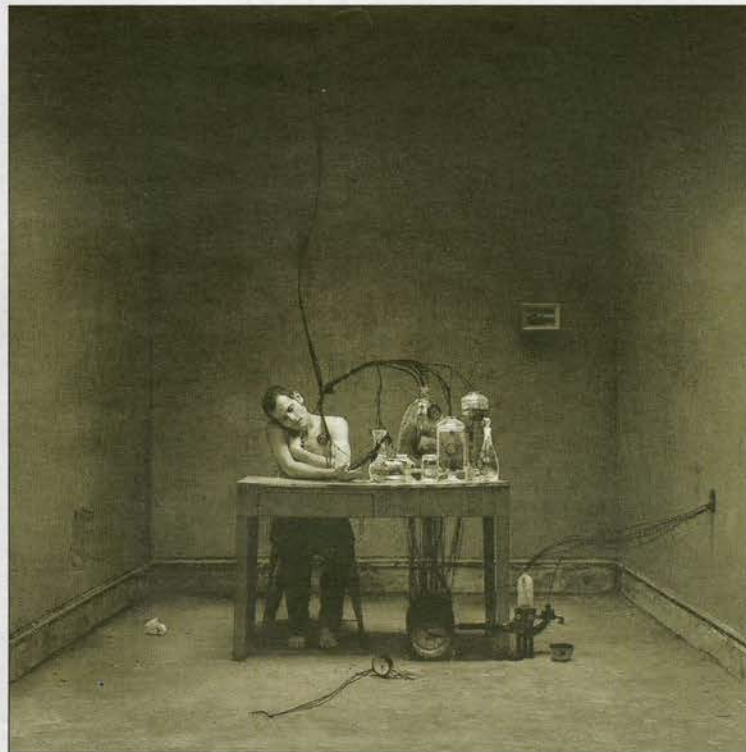
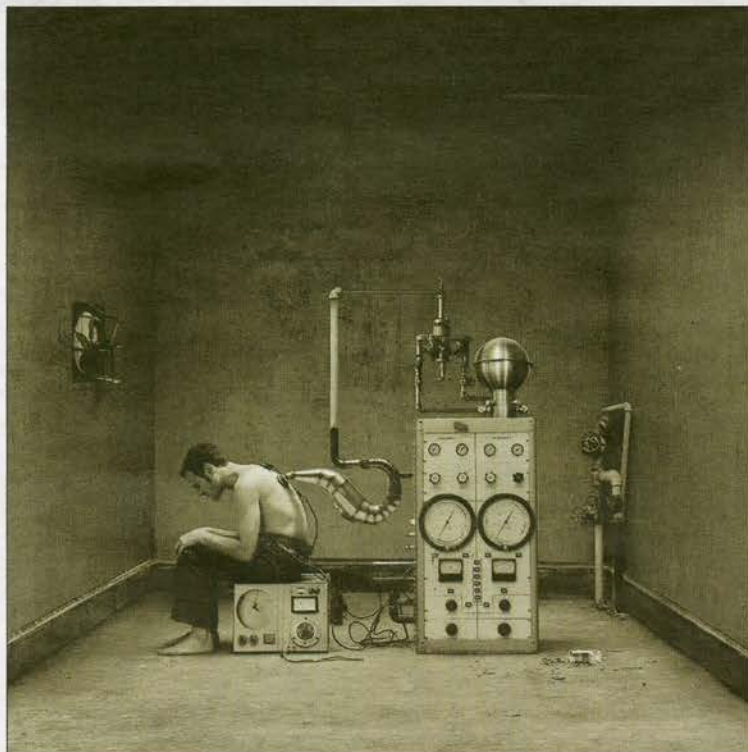
Hudson uses a Nikon D3 35mm camera (left over from her portraiture business) with a 24-70mm lens. She gets good results with that set-up, and the familiarity helps minimize mistakes during the location shoots. "Anything photographed on set in real time really doesn't get retouched except for shadows, which I brush in by hand, but that's what's great about this process. There are some strange things in these images that aren't to scale, and that's one of the things that makes the work feel so fantasylike."

Hudson described the impetus for *Medic*: "It was about two years ago, and while I was the sick one, my husband and I were going through a difficult time with it — together. There was a lot of testing and prodding and doctors' offices and machines being hooked up to you, and it was just a scary time being in your 30s, looking around thinking, 'Wow, you're too young to be going through this kind of thing.'"

"*Medic* is essentially based on one sentence that Josh said to me during that time. He said, 'I wish that I could take the pain from your body and put it into mine.' For the series, I started making machines in my head — machines that could do things for us that we can't, not just medically, but emotionally ... machines that could help us perform miracles in our relationships with each other." ◀

details

- ▼ *Alternate Realities*, photographs by Charbonneau/French and Jennifer B. Hudson
- ▼ Reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, Nov. 4 (gallery talk with the artists 2 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 5); exhibit through December
- ▼ Verve Gallery of Photography, 219 E. Marcy St., 982-5009



Jennifer B. Hudson, images from the *Medic* series: left, *Extraction*, 2011, archival pigment ink print; right, *Mercy*, 2011, archival pigment ink print