



INSPIRATION IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Train your mind to make great art a habit

BROOKE SHADEN

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1 THE PHILOSOPHY

PERSONAL HISTORY

Some of my most vivid childhood memories are of being perched high up in a tree in my garden; bees made hives in the tree, which made the trip up all the more terrifying—and all the more exhilarating. I loved climbing trees and taking in the view from above, perhaps because it made me feel like an adventurer. Being in a space that was out of the ordinary allowed my imagination to be set free. From those days to these, I still have a love for all things imaginative.

Growing up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the USA gave me many freedoms and advantages, not least of which was being able to immerse myself in truly beautiful scenery. When I found myself at college in Philadelphia—my first time living in a city—I continually longed for country life and even missed the smell of manure from the farms near my home. It was my first time being away from the landscapes I grew up loving, but luckily my mind never entirely left. I found comfort in my imagination and being able to find new ways of portraying my visions. That experience was the first I had in learning to trust myself to know what I like best. Being able to identify what makes us happy is the first step toward finding inspiration, and it was through learning about myself that I learned how to harness my inspiration to work for me.

In so many ways, I have never left that treetop by my childhood home, and I've never wanted to. I find solace in being able to find inspiration all around me. My family jokes about the "Brooke face," which is the lost-in-space stare I get when I'm thinking; I'm usually daydreaming about all the amazing possibilities that I could create. There is nothing more fulfilling to me than retreating within myself and emerging with an idea so powerful that it shakes me to my core.

I always had an idea that growing older meant growing up, and so I expected to one day feel the pressures of adulthood squeeze my creativity. When that day never came, I realized that I had a decision to make: either to embrace the imagination I was given and run with it, or not. The choice was very simple for me. A world without imagination is a world without inspiration—and isn't inspiration what all those who do creative work strive to achieve?

To be constantly and creatively inspired is a wonderful state to be in, and leads to a happy, bright, and varied life—and one that I want to achieve on a daily basis. I like to consider myself less of a photographer and more of a creator of worlds, a purveyor of magic, or in short, an inventor of inspiration. To be able to find inspiration at the drop of a hat can be the difference between feeling fulfilled and feeling like something vital is missing from our life. Often the difference between the two states is paper thin, and getting from one to the other is as simple as flipping a switch in our mind. The ability to see the world in a different and more inspiring way is something worth aiming for, because if we can achieve this, then our creativity will know no bounds.





◀ **THE WHEAT FACTORY (2009)**

The Wheat Factory was taken about two months after I first started practicing photography. I was on a road trip across America so that I could settle my life in LA—a far cry from Philadelphia. I was driving through Texas and noticed that all I could see for miles were fields. Deciding to capture that feeling of pure rurality, I pulled over at sunset, wrapped myself in a sheet, and took a picture in a field at the side of a ranch.

▲ **UNEARTHED (2008)**

Unearthed was one of the first photographs I ever took and is one of the pictures taken where I began my journey: the suburbs of Philadelphia. I was on a hike, found this tree, and decided that I had to come back to shoot with it. I wrapped myself in my faithful white sheet again and went to work creating this image that, to me, symbolized a new beginning: a tree being dug up at the roots to reveal a girl.

HOW I GOT MY START

When I was little I was convinced I was going to be a writer. By the time I graduated high school I was certain I was going to be a filmmaker. By the time I finished college I was sure I was going to be a cinematographer. It was not until I picked up a DSLR for the first time that I really knew I was going to be a professional photographer.

When I graduated from Temple University I had two degrees: filmmaking and English. With these degrees I felt armed to tell stories, and I thought my ticket into Hollywood was to write and direct screenplays in which I was also the

cinematographer. After realizing the film I'd made wasn't quite up to standard, with my dreams of movie stardom crumbling, I turned to photography. I'd never previously thought of photography as something that would appeal to me because I'd always associated it with the documentary aspect of capturing scenes as they truly are. Certainly this is an art in itself, but I was never motivated by reality—I wanted to go beyond that.

The discovery of digital photography came at the perfect moment for me. I was fresh out of school and for the first time I had no restrictions. I had no teachers telling me the rules for



▲ WALLEEN (2009)

I love creating dark yet conceptual photographs that make the viewer look twice, even if he or she might not want to. This picture was inspired by the feeling of suffocation, both literal and figurative. It was an interesting concept to portray visually.



▲ PROPELLER (2008)

I took this image in my Philadelphia apartment in the first month of my photographic career. I was interested in the idea of using everyday objects and turning them into pieces of art. I took apart my fan and used the propeller from it as a visual element within the scene that created a flight mechanism, hence the title *Propeller*. The idea that something is impossible does not exist here, as the character will use any means necessary to fly.



◀ WATER FOUNTAIN (2009)

Taken in the basement of my Philadelphia apartment, I was determined to use every interesting object or setting I could find to enhance my photography. I am a portrait photographer through and through, so using a subject within interesting surroundings is what I find exciting. I put myself in the sink in *Water Fountain* and decided to have the water running to add tension to the image.

the next assignment, or any fear of getting a C minus. This time, I could be my own teacher; in fact, I could be the photographer, creator, model, cinematographer, and storyteller all in one.

My first photographs were self-portraits taken in my tiny city apartment. I began to use photography in unconventional ways. For example, I began compositing images, at first purely because my apartment was too small to take a picture of my whole body (imagine a Nikon D80 with a mounted 70mm lens in a very tight space). I would take a picture of my upper body and then a picture of my lower body, and stitch those pictures together in Photoshop to give the impression that my apartment was bigger than it was.

From day one I was unconcerned with what the current preoccupation in photography was or even how photography had worked in the past. I was focused on creating whatever imaginative visions I had in my mind. My approach to photography was simple: if someone else had figured this out then I could too. I started experimenting with my camera and cheap 200W lightbulbs wrapped in Ikea paper lanterns, and then worked with the results in Photoshop. My techniques were simple but effective, and I've never looked back.

Photography became something that fulfilled me in every possible way, though I realized very quickly that fulfillment did not come from clicking the shutter, but from the inspiration. Being able to continually access my imagination—and find inspiration for each new image I created—was truly magi-

MY PHILOSOPHY

My ultimate goal is to be inspired from within—whether it's in photography, creativity, or life in general. Everyone relates to the world in a unique way, and that perspective can be used to not only understand what makes us tick, but also to figure out how we personally handle inspiration. It is easy to look at someone else's work and feel inspired by it, but all too often this turns into a crutch for finding inspiration—the ideal is to be able to find it within. If we rely too much on outside sources of inspiration such as the work of other photographers, it is not uncommon for our own work to come to resemble too much the inspiration we are drawing from.

My goal is to avoid this problem completely. When I started photography, I had only myself to answer to; this can be a truly liberating experience or a very nerve-racking one. We are, after all, our own worst critics, and I realized that I had a choice to make. Either I could do what would make me money fast, so that I could afford a better apartment and live comfortably, or I could do what made me happy. I chose to do what made me happy, and also determined that one day it would make me money.

When I first picked up my camera I did not trawl the internet for external inspiration or figure out what might sell best. Instead, I asked myself one very important, yet simple question—what makes me happy? I answered this question very honestly; after all, no one was watching. The answer was simple in theory, but not in execution. I wanted to create dark yet beautiful imagery. How, then, could that be achieved when I had no education in photography or knowledge of the industry? I would have to make it up as I went along.

Each and every time I wanted to create a new image, I only asked myself what I felt like creating, and then set out to create it. In doing so I was constantly inspired and constantly motivated. I began learning what methods worked best for me when inspiration was not striking hot. I started developing little exercises that I could do in order to find inspiration every time. And what is more, I began taking inspiration not only from the things that influenced my photography, but also from the things that influenced my life. Feeling motivated to create what I love is one of my biggest drives.



▲ SPIN CYCLE (2009)

For this image I used my size to my advantage. I love working with models of all sizes because of this important lesson: different subjects are suited to different pictures. I happen to be very small, so fitting myself in the dryer proved no problem. As I later discovered, I could also fit myself in the freezer and the oven.

► WALL (2013)

Simple images have always allowed the emotion to come through in a way that is raw and heartfelt, so an image like *Wall* is one that I gravitate toward. Ever since I first picked up a camera, this style has been dear to me, so I still practice the technique to keep in touch with what I love about photography.



EVERYONE IS CREATIVE

One of the biggest myths in any sort of creative endeavor, and in life, is that creativity is reserved for a select few who possess that “it” factor. I believe that this is an excuse made up by people who simply have not yet found how they are creative. Creativity, just like inspiration, needs to be examined and nurtured. Just because someone does not naturally feel inspired to create avant-garde masterpieces every day does not mean that he or she lacks creativity. It means that he or she is creative in a different way.

I learned this lesson growing up with my parents, who I see as being equally creative people. My dad is a musician and I

grew up to the whole house shaking, because he would play his bass so loudly. To me, this is obvious creativity which so many people feel they lack. I, too, felt that I was not creative for a long time because I had no desire to play music or learn how to play an instrument. The biggest mistake I could have made would have been never trying, because I had already dismissed my own abilities, based on a lack of one specific type of creativity.

My mom is a hair stylist. While other people might not see her job as being creative, she sees it as being highly rewarding and fulfilling in her own uniquely creative way. She is constantly trying new things and experimenting. Her



◀ RISE AND FALL (2010)

What better way to challenge creativity than to create an image using new subjects and techniques? This image was the result of photographing a male model for the first time. I also used a technique on him that I had never used before, which involved putting together his limbs separately in Photoshop to complete his posture.



◀ **A ROOM FOR DREAMS (2)**
 The idea of being sick is, for me, padded with the idea of imagination. I love being able to escape from my troubles into an imaginary world, and this image is representative of that feeling.

creativity is rooted in discovery and invention, and it was an inspiring mindset to experience growing up.

At the heart of our creativity should be one underlying question: what makes us happy? For my dad, the answer was music. For my mom, the answer was doing hair. For me, it was creating new worlds with whatever tool I could get my hands on. For some people, organization is creative, and for others running a business is the ultimate in creativity. The first step to figuring out how to unleash creativity is to understand that there is no rule dictating what is and is not creative. What makes you happy? The answer just might unlock how we can best express our inspiration.

If I had a dime for every time someone said to me that they are simply not creative, I would have a lot of dimes! People who are interested in drama or pottery or music are often thought to

be creative, but if our interests don't obviously fit with this definition of what is creative then we may end up believing that we lack creativity. This is a myth that needs to be dispelled. Creativity can come from anywhere, take any form, and most importantly, it comes from within.

One more personal example: I grew up with a very artistic sister. She was always doing silk-screen T-shirts, making charcoal drawings of nude models, creating large pottery pieces, and spending a lot of time in high school art classes. I never excelled in this way. My creativity was internal. It was all about to do with storytelling. A lesson I am so glad that I learned is that creativity is not a competition. Just because I did not naturally gravitate toward being the next Picasso did not mean that my creativity meant nothing. It was quite the opposite: my creativity meant everything.

CREATIVITY CAN BE LEARNED

What is it specifically about creativity that so many people shy away from? Why is it normal to think that creativity is something reserved for the obviously artistic? The reason lies in our perception of creativity and how we interact with that notion. Creativity is often nothing more than problem-solving. To come up against a problem during a project—be it an obstacle or a desire—and then figure out a way to resolve the issue: *that is being creative.*

So often creativity and inspiration are treated as being the same or very similar things, when actually they have separate meanings. Creativity is the application of a thought, while inspiration is the force that originates that thought. Not everyone is always inspired, but everyone can be creative. We all have our own ways of bringing forth our creativity; the key is learning how to embrace our own personal style.

How then does one learn creativity? If everyone is creative, there must be little learning involved to actually be so. The real work is in figuring out how we personally are creative and how we can apply that energy to our work. Think about your life as it currently stands. I am willing to bet that you do something

creative every day, whether you see it as such or not. Take your job, for example, or school. Every single day, in order to be productive, you need to make decisions that keep progress moving. So you are being creative, because you are problem-solving to move your desires to completion.

What about more obvious creative endeavors? Here I'm talking about what we do with our spare time. It doesn't matter if the answer is watching television or mountain biking. Anything can be fuel for inspiration. For example: I watch television and movies as a way of relaxing after working hard. Specifically, I watch *Game of Thrones*, not only because I find it wonderfully exciting, but because it shows me a different world. I take inspiration from it visually, as well as narratively. That inspiration then feeds into building my photographs, because it informs the way I see the world and the way I define beauty and intrigue.

Now take my other favorite hobby: hiking. I love going hiking because it clears my mind, but I also try to see it as a creative endeavor. Hiking shows me settings that I can use for my photographs, and frees my mind from the daily grind. It allows me to find inspiration in every step, because I am not only doing what I enjoy, but also applying it to my photography on a daily basis.

So it is worth thinking about what we love and how we can turn that into something creative.



◀ RUNNING FROM WIND (2010)

This picture was taken in the very early morning in a foggy field. I was out shooting with my friend, the amazing photographer Miss Aniela, and we ran through cold, wet grass so that I could get this picture. The inspiration behind this image is the recurring theme in my dreams that something or someone is chasing me. This picture creates an atmosphere of pursuit, giving the feeling that something or someone is chasing the subjects through the field.

▶ TALLY (2009)

Skin photographs beautifully with window light on it, so I decided to challenge myself for this series and use natural window light and a plain white wall as a background as often and interestingly as possible. By using chocolate sauce to add an unsettling element, I was able to distract from the dull surroundings and focus the eye on the subject, who is posed displaying unease and tension. Never underestimate the power of giving yourself projects to work to.



INSPIRATION IS EVERYWHERE

Thus far I have been presenting inspiration as an abstract feeling that appears on a whim. This certainly does happen—no matter what we do for a living or for fun, we all know the power of a great idea hitting us from nowhere or a beautiful daydream sucking us in whole. This is the type of inspiration that is wonderful to experience, but is often fleeting, and impossible to control. What happens when a client needs a photograph in a hurry and no ideas come to mind? What happens when life takes over and things do not work out as planned? What happens when our usual method of brainstorming fails and there is no time left to sit and wonder?

The answer to these questions is the answer to how we define inspiration. I believe that there is no clear definition for what inspiration is, and even less of a concrete method of how to find it. I believe that inspiration is everywhere. We just have to look for it. In life, if we look for something hard enough, chances are we will find it. I might never have another amazing idea completely off the cuff again, but if I can train myself to find inspiration in everything, then I will be constantly inspired.

The commonly held view is that inspiration is reserved for an elite few artists who are so in touch with their inner workings that they find themselves inspired constantly, as if by some kind of magic. While this might be how some people function, I have never met an artist who has not been frustrated at some point by a lack of inspiration. We all need help sometimes finding it, and luckily there are some techniques that help a lot.

I'll talk about these techniques in greater depth in the next section, but in general, they involve changing our personal perspective. From finding meaning in every little part of our routine, to looking back on memories to find stories we can use, there is potential inspiration in our whole life if we choose to open our eyes to it. I believe that most people turn a blind eye to inspiration, not because they do not seek it, but because they have been conditioned not to see it. How often do you take the same route to work each morning? How often do you eat the same breakfast, visit the same restaurants, or travel to the same vacation spots? Human beings are creatures of habit, and breaking some of those habits might well be the key to opening up our minds to find inspiration.



▲ FETUS (2009)

The subject of rebirth is prevalent throughout my images, particularly in *Fetus*. I found myself in Walmart trying various containers on my head to find one big enough to use in this shoot. Shooting, I had a remote in my hand and I did a back bend over a couch to dip my head into the container. I had two people on standby should something go wrong, but luckily I got the shot in three tries. It was intensely claustrophobic, and remains the most terrifying photoshoot I've ever done. If you're stuck for inspiration, think about what scares you—is it something you could incorporate into a shot or series?

► AN UNHEARD CRY (2009)

Underwater photography was something that I had never tried before creating this image. I learned a lot about what works underwater and what doesn't when creating this picture, and that in itself can be motivating and inspirational. I took a lot of bad pictures that day, and realized that sometimes complete failure is the best form of inspiration because it pushes us to try harder and learn more. Oddly enough, this final picture from that day remains a favorite of mine across my whole portfolio. Maybe I like it so much because I know how hard-won it was.



FINDING MEANING IN EVERYTHING

It might be my literature-student background, but I am a firm believer that if we want to see it, we can find meaning in anything. I was always the student in English class who raised her hand first to answer questions about symbolism in novels. I do the same thing now, except that I'm not doing it to pass a test. Everything in life has meaning if we look deeply enough, and recognizing this is the foremost technique in finding inspiration when it won't come to us. That meaning can so easily translate into inspiration for creative endeavors so it is an invaluable tool for anyone who is feeling "blocked."

▼ THE UNTAMED PASSAGE (2010)

To find inspiration in a blank space is arguably one of the most difficult ways to work, since the space itself gives no clues as to how to fill it. We simply have to be creative and come up with ways to make a dull space interesting. Alternatively, one could argue that it is easy to work with a blank space because you can do whatever you want within it. It depends on the way you look at it. For this image I was inspired by a feeling that is for me almost instinctual when I think of a blank, empty space—the sensation of falling.



The first step to finding meaning in everything is to, very simply, change our routine. Take a different route to work—who knows what you will find? Try a different type of cuisine instead of the usual fare, and think about where it comes from and how it's made. Try a new hobby with a friend just for the sake of trying something new. Go to a cooking class, or join a bike-riding group. Try pottery, or pick up a paintbrush. And remember, there is no right or wrong, and there is no one judging. Feeling blocked is often a symptom of being stagnant in another area of life.

PRACTICAL POINTERS: FIND INSPIRATION IN AN EVERYDAY OBJECT

The point of the "Everyday Object" challenge is to remind you that inspiration is everywhere; you just have to look for it. For the "Everyday Object" challenge I've chosen a chair. It's an object that almost everyone across the world will encounter every day in some form or another, and with which everyone has different associations. The key is to be able to look at an everyday object in a new light and use it as a springboard for inspiration. Take a moment to consider the following questions:

- Examine the shapes of the chairs in your environment. Reduce them to their component parts and consider each individually. What do they remind you of?
- Is there some symbolism to each part of the chair? To the seat, legs, back, or arm rests?
- What uses can a chair be put to? How could you incorporate each use into your photography?
- Personalize it: What memories do you have of chairs? Are they positive or negative?
- Is there a specific chair that has more meaning to you than others?

The answers to these questions will be varied and the results will show you how your mind works. From answering each of these questions, you will not only have analyzed in depth an object that you pass by every day, but you will also have the foundation built to start creating images from this inspiration.



▲ IMMORTAL BIRD (2010)

I have long been inspired by levitation photography. I mixed several techniques for this effect. Not only was levitation photography implemented, but I also shot this at night using special lights: paper lanterns from Ikea housing 200-watt bulbs from the hardware store. I am constantly preaching the idea that photography does not have to be expensive, nor does it have to be a skill that is learned through years at school; it can be what we make it into.

If we break up our routines we will start to break out of our comfort zones. Once out there, make a conscious effort to notice things that are new and unusual; this is grist to the inspiration-mill. In fact, whenever I try something new, I make a point of finding ways to incorporate bits of the experience into a photograph.

A good example is when I decided to drive into the middle of nowhere with a friend. I didn't tell her much, only that we were going to explore middle California, and we ended up finding some interesting train tracks. I decided to photograph them, and in doing so was able to use that experience as direct inspiration for a shot. Just by surrounding myself with places that I was unfamiliar with, I was inspired by everything I saw.

Taking this one step further, try to find inspiration in the mundane. Most of us have a home that we are used to seeing on a daily basis, and so we often do not even see the objects in it any more. I have spent hours staring at things that hold no



▲ SLEEPWALKER (2010)

This is a self-portrait that was taken in a creek. My inspiration came from the simplest of sources—the use of a new camera angle. I put my camera on a tripod, using the kit 18–55mm lens at 18mm, and photographed looking at myself. I had to edit the tripod legs out of the picture later, but the process itself was fairly simple. By experimenting technically with photography there are endless possibilities of what can be created.

meaning for me, just because they are in my immediate environment and they happen to be easy for me to stare at. I am trying to find inspiration. But then I realized that I was wasting a lot of time looking at the things around me, because I wasn't seeing them. Sure, I was looking, but I wasn't seeing.

I decided to challenge myself and find inspiration in everyday objects. The first time was with a tissue box. I stared at a tissue box for nearly an hour before finding inspiration. My problem was that I had been looking at the tissue box literally. I was asking myself, how I could use a tissue box in one of my photos? The deciding moment came when I finally looked beyond the object itself. I looked into my past and thought about memories that I have around tissue boxes, I looked at the actual box and likened it to a home with the tissues as little blankets inside. Suddenly a theme began to emerge of what home (and care and comfort) meant to me. All this came from contemplating the most ordinary of objects.

TIPS & TOOLS FOR FINDING INSPIRATION

In Chapter 3: Student Case Studies & Inspiration Exercises, you will find many different exercises to harness inspiration for various creative projects, but here I want to give some context for those exercises. In order for someone to find inspiration, he or she has to be open to seeing things in a new way. This is because seeing things in new ways allows our mind to open up and free itself from any ruts.

As I see it, there are two types of inspiration. There is internal inspiration, which comes to us from our own experiences and perceptions of the world, and then there is external inspiration, which comes from other people. All of our experiences and opinions are in part formed by our

interactions with the world around us, so in defining "external inspiration" I'm referring specifically to being inspired by someone else.

I am constantly seeking internal inspiration and most often reject external inspiration for the simple reason that I want my art to be truly me, inside and out. I fully support occasionally looking to other artists for inspiration, as the community is wonderful and ever-evolving. But there is a fine line between putting our own art into the world and producing regurgitations of other people's work. The line is easier crossed the more inspiration an artist gets from external sources.



▲ A BLENDING OF STRUCTURE (2010)

This image was created as part of a series titled "Ballet: Vacate" depicting ballerinas in unusual positions and spaces. In *A Blending of Structure*, it was my intent to have the subject's limbs mimicking the branches in the picture.



▲ MY LITTLE BLUEJAY (2010)

I revel in relating humans to other animals in my work, so in *My Little Bluejay* I twisted my body into something vaguely bird-like, with my hand extending as a small wing from a bare body. The blue cloth enhanced this theme, as did the nest-like branches surrounding the subject.



▲ **A STORY IN OLDER TERMS (2009)**

While this was a self-portrait, I edited my face in post-production and changed it to fit the character that I had envisioned. Don't allow a lack of available models to limit the characters you can create. Experiment with props, styling, and practice with an editing suite to get your post-production skills up to scratch.

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