



INTERVIEW

All photos from the series
Elemental Forms: Landscapes
 © Nadezda Nikolova-Kratzer

THE LANGUAGE
OF ABSTRACTION

Nadezda Nikolova-Kratzer uses technical skill and pure intuition to create wet plate collodion photograms that explore the boundary between her inner self and the physical landscape she inhabits, as Tracy Calder discovers.

When Nadezda Nikolova-Kratzer uncapped her first bottle of collodion she fell in love. 'I will never forget that first waft,' she recalls, placing her hand on her heart, 'It seemed so familiar, and I thought this is home, this is my life.' It was 2013 and Nadezda was under the tutorage of Wendell Decker – a wet plate photographer who specialised in tintypes of historical re-enactments. 'This gentleman was a purist who vowed to never, ever teach anybody, but somehow my energy was so strong that I convinced him,' she says. But they didn't always see eye to eye. 'He despised the way that some contemporary photographers use wet plate collodion,' she says, 'especially Sally Mann – he had a big dislike of Sally Mann.' Nadezda is a fan of Mann's project *Deep South*, so the pair argued a lot. But despite their differences Decker showed Nadezda the ropes, and helped her to acquire the skills and supplies she needed to carry on exploring wet plate processes on her own. This encouragement came at just the right time as she had grown weary of her work in public policy and economic development. 'My career was kind of rocky, and I wanted out,' she admits. 'It just so happened that I discovered collodion, got interested in pursuing an art career, and my job ended, all at roughly the same time, so I gave myself half a year to jump in and study' >



◀ Nadezda has been passionate about art since childhood. 'As a kid I felt a certain freedom when I was painting or drawing – more so than with anything else in life,' she reveals. But when it came to making decisions that would shape her future career, she found herself paralysed by a fear that connecting this 'sacred thing' to money would destroy it. As a result, her dream of becoming an artist was put on hold. Throughout her twenties and thirties she continued to draw and paint as a hobby, but it wasn't until she stumbled across the work of photographer Lisa Elmaleh that she saw the road ahead more clearly. 'I was looking through an online magazine when I saw a silver gelatin print made from a wet plate negative by Lisa,' she recalls. 'She created a series in the Florida Everglades where she hopped in her car and drove around creating beautiful, haunting images using a large format camera and long exposures.' Nadezda had never seen anything quite like it, and with no training in photographic history she wasn't even sure what she was looking at, but she

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knew it was something special. 'There was this energy, this magnetism to the work,' she enthuses. 'I was so gripped that I had to learn everything I could about it.' A few weeks later she was knocking on Decker's door asking for his help. 'I'm an intuitive person, and when something speaks to me, when it hits me, I trust it, and I'm determined.'

Despite her newfound love for photography, Nadezda never abandoned painting – far from it. 'I see myself more as a painter than a photographer,' she admits, 'most of my inspiration comes from painters, and I use the medium in a very painterly way.' She

lists abstract artist Agnes Martin among her influences, as well as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. 'I love work that uses the language of abstraction and simplicity,' she explains. 'The key is to create impactful work that is stripped to its essentials.' Nadezda certainly accomplished this with her series *Elemental Forms: Landscapes* – a project that she began in 2015 when her family relocated to the San Francisco Bay area of northern California. Her new surroundings suited her, and she found herself embarking on long hikes with her two dogs, observing the landscape as it changed from morning to evening and season to season. As she walked she contemplated Mann's *Deep South* project, and the evocative photograms of Alison Rossiter and, over time, decided to create a series of photograms exploring the boundary between her inner self and the physical landscape she inhabits. 'I felt so well, the energy here just opened me up and the series became a natural outpouring of this feeling,' she explains. ▶







< The method Nadezda uses is deceptively simple. 'The photogram is the most rudimentary of photographic processes,' she assures. 'All you need is light, a photo sensitive surface, and an object that creates a silhouette.' For Nadezda such objects come in the form of cut or torn pieces of paper, which she places either directly on the light sensitive surface or hovers just above it. But, like many photographers using historical processes, she adds her own twist by creating the photograms using wet plate collodion. 'The photograms here are something I developed myself by experimenting, and just doing, doing, doing,' she reveals. 'To use the process in a creative way you need to invest time – and I don't mean a week, I mean years.' Collodion can be tricky, and it takes experience to understand why it reacts in

certain ways. 'The way to become more advanced is to practise, suffer, sweat and bleed,' says Nadezda. When you're working with such volatile chemicals you need to relinquish control and let go of any expectations. 'Obviously I can replicate some of the effects, but there is always an element of uncertainty,' she explains. 'The chemistry has a say in the final composition.'

Nadezda likes to work at night in a garage she has converted into a darkroom. Surprisingly, the tools of her trade are quite basic. 'I have my chemistry, which includes collodion, silver nitrate and developer, my plates (usually black aluminium), a sink, a lamp I flick on and off to create the exposure, tubs for processing, fixing and washing, paper for creating the

shapes, and safety equipment (including a face mask and gloves).' Preferring not to follow a recipe she lets her intuition guide her. 'I know when I'm on the right track because my heart starts to beat faster,' she enthuses. The joy on her face is contagious. It's clear to see that coaxing chemistry into creating something beautiful, otherworldly and unexpected brings her great pleasure. Finding a balance between darkness and light, control and surrender requires skill and intuition, but the results are well worth the effort. Nadezda is a modern-day alchemist, turning base materials into gold.

You can see more of Nadezda Nikolova-Kratzer's work by visiting: nadezdanikolova.com.

