

# artist's statement

## about process

*"Since the invention of photography, when early daguerreotypists literally breathed color onto delicate metal plates in order to heighten the reality of their portraits, artists have turned to a hybrid form of photographic production combining photography, painting, and drawing. The art of hand tinting and hand painting photographic images continues to be employed at the present time, albeit for new and very different reasons. An understanding of the lasting appeal of hand-altered photography is important to the study of photo history and contemporary photographic art itself."*

Alida Fish, September 2003  
Professor of Photography  
The University of the Arts  
Philadelphia

I am not a traditional photographer. I spent many years painting paintings. For me, capturing the photographic image is only the beginning of a long and complex process that allows me to uniquely shape each of my pictures, guided by my imagination, intuition, and emotion. I attempt to drag my photograph as far back into the world of painting that I came from without allowing it to lose its photographic essence. And, since life itself is far from perfect, I attempt to mirror life in my work by allowing imperfections to become part of my subject matter.

I began working seriously as an artist in the 1960's. At that time, I took photographs to aid me with my portrait and landscape drawings and later fashioned collages from photographs found in magazines and used them to explore compositions for my paintings. The drawings and paintings were exhibited, but, because I thought of my photographs and collages as studies, they remained in the background. In 1988 my focus changed and photography became central to my work. Because of my painting past I found that I was less interested in the traditional photographic print. I was accustomed to "hand working" my images as I did when I painted and felt my photographs would be more personal and unique if I combined them with the three other disciplines I was so familiar with: collage, painting and drawing.

I begin by photographing my subjects in front of a neutral background without any notion of how the image will fit into the final composition. I am attracted to the human form and use it almost exclusively in my work. The figure is a universal symbol we all understand as well as being the "yardstick" with which we measure the world around us. I photograph heads, bodies, and hands (and, sometimes, what those hands have written). I feel that the sum of our acts, most often carried out with the help of our hands, written or otherwise, provide a more definitive portrait of an individual than the outer contours of the body.

I am especially drawn to hands perhaps because I have always found working with mine gratifying. Some of the first images that humans made, found on the walls of caves some 40,000 years ago, were of their hands. I feel a distant connection with those ancient artistic

ancestors. Since the mid 1960's, I have produced an ongoing series of hand "portraits." More than thirty exist, so far.

I begin to explore composition possibilities with only a vague idea as a guide and the hope that I will arrive at an image that is both striking and memorable. Inspiration sometimes comes from Greek mythology or Biblical stories, because those engaging ancient tales are filled with exotic personalities and life's lessons still relevant today. The mental image I carry is enough to get me started and it will shift and change as the artwork progresses. Elements and ideas are discarded as better ones present themselves and accidents often provide welcome surprises.

After electrostatically printing my photographed image onto either paper or polyester film (polyester film is a tough, transparent material that does not break down over time), I cut it out.

In an effort to drag my work back into that world of painting that I came from and a desire for the work to be true to the imperfections of life, I "damage" the image by subjecting it to one or more of the following treatments: folding, wrinkling, scratching, sanding, perforating, coating with paint, varnish, shellac and/or metal leaf. This handwork adds character and makes the image unique. Then I select backgrounds for the cutouts from the vast inventory of paper and polyester film that I have prepared in a similar manner for this purpose. The photographs are pinned to backgrounds on one of the large bulletin board walls in my studio.

Thus begins a composition process that relies heavily on trial-and-error, intuition, accident and change. The path to a finished piece is often slow and unpredictable and it is not unusual for my pictures to develop over a number of months or even years.

The pins allow shapes to be freely moved about. The relationships of the components remain in a state of flux until the composition "feels" finished. At that point, the parts are cut and fit together and the entire composition sewn with an electric sewing machine into a single piece.

The stitching serves the practical purpose of making the artwork whole while providing a distinctive textural element to its surface. And, as one critic noted regarding the work relating to the human form, it also acts as a metaphor for psychological damage and repair. Damage that occurs as we deal with the emotional obstacles that life places in our way and the repair that we find necessary to surmount those obstacles and move beyond them.

*Christopher Pekoc, Cleveland, Ohio*