



# JANET DWYER PHOTOSCANOGRAPHY LARGER THAN LIFE

BY MEHREEN SHAHID

For the artist whose subject is nature and its many intricacies, the process of creation offers infinite possibilities. "Nature itself is my biggest inspiration," says Janet Dwyer. "I am grateful to kind people who visit my studio and bring me flowers, bones, spiders, bird skulls, claws, and other wonderful finds."

Being the model for her mother's photography, along with her four other siblings, was the first step in Dwyer's enchantment with photography. "I recall being fascinated by that little square glass viewer on top of the camera. The whole thing really was a magic box. And eventually lovely square photos with deckled edges would arrive." The magical feeling was enhanced by visiting a neighbouring friend's black and white darkroom, watching images appear from darkness under the glow of a red light.

"When I left home at 18 to attend university in New Brunswick, my dad lent me his 35mm camera. I took a lot of photos, documenting the new landscape and people I met and lived with." In 1973, Dwyer had not even considered a career in photography, let alone in art. Those around her, however, could

clearly see where her passion lay. Near the end of the semester, when Dwyer was unsure about continuing at university, a friend suggested she enroll in a photography program. The courses brought back that magical feeling.

Although Dwyer has extensive experience using cameras owing to her degrees in photography from Conestoga and Ryerson, since 2001 she has been creating images using a flatbed scanner. Using a flatbed scanner for producing works of art is known as scanography. In this process, the scanner replaces the camera. The lid is removed and objects are placed on the scanner glass: backgrounds usually have to be suspended over top, at a slight distance. Depending on the orientation of the scanner, scans may work upside down or sideways or can be modified for the purpose. Dwyer finds unique ways of utilizing the technology.



For example, for scanning ice, she uses the scanner upside down to avoid condensation on the insides of the machine. As an artist, she enjoys the quality and resolution of working with a scanner. "It's like having an ultra high-res camera without spending \$40,000," she says. "The scanner renders objects next to its glass flatbed with absolute clarity," she explains. "Limited depth of focus, zero distortion and a wrap-around quality of lighting are unique to a scanner. Objects are captured by a moving myopic light source, which adds to the 3-D effect and hyper-real image detail."

What makes this process special? Why abandon the ability of a focal lens to zoom in and out in favour of a myopic vision? Dwyer claims, "The resulting massive digital files extend far beyond what large format films yield and can produce

exquisitely magnified large dimension prints. It has a different look than camera-imaged files." Sometimes, movement during scanning creates interesting effects. It also helps to produce an intimacy with the final product that a camera may not be able to furnish as effectively.

To achieve such alluring images, Dwyer plans meticulously and thinks on her feet to overcome the challenges presented by the instrument. A scanner's depth of field is very shallow so compositions are often arranged with this in mind. Composing images upside down also poses its own set of problems. Dealing with dust and the fragility of subjects such as flowers and insects and capturing ice before it melts requires a lot of patience. She advises artists trying their hands at scanography to "Ask yourself what you are trying to communicate with your

imagery. Think of a scanner as a large sensor and take it from there. Look at what other people are doing with scanners and cultivate patience. Usually, I see an image in my mind's eye and work on placement of objects based on that. I do several previews during the course of scanning and rearrange until the preview image is something close to what I imagined. Then a high-resolution scan is done."

Occasionally, in addition to the built-in scanner light, she adds supplementary lighting for more texture or depth. For post-processing, Dwyer uses Photoshop to balance tones and to get the colour effect she wants. She does a fair amount of dodging, burning, and spotting of dust, as the files typically are enlarged greater than 30x40 inches. "I do my own printing on

Hahnemühle papers, usually photo rag and bamboo, and then varnish the prints to allow for display without glass."

Janet Dwyer has taken a technology beyond its intended purpose to closely and meticulously explore the qualities of organic subjects, such as plants, feathers, bones, ice, and live insects. The results of this artistic investigation are unpredictable and the process is thoroughly invigorating in its poetic narrative.

Limited edition prints may be purchased by contacting Dwyer through her web page.

[WWW.JANETDWYER.COM](http://WWW.JANETDWYER.COM)