

# pdn

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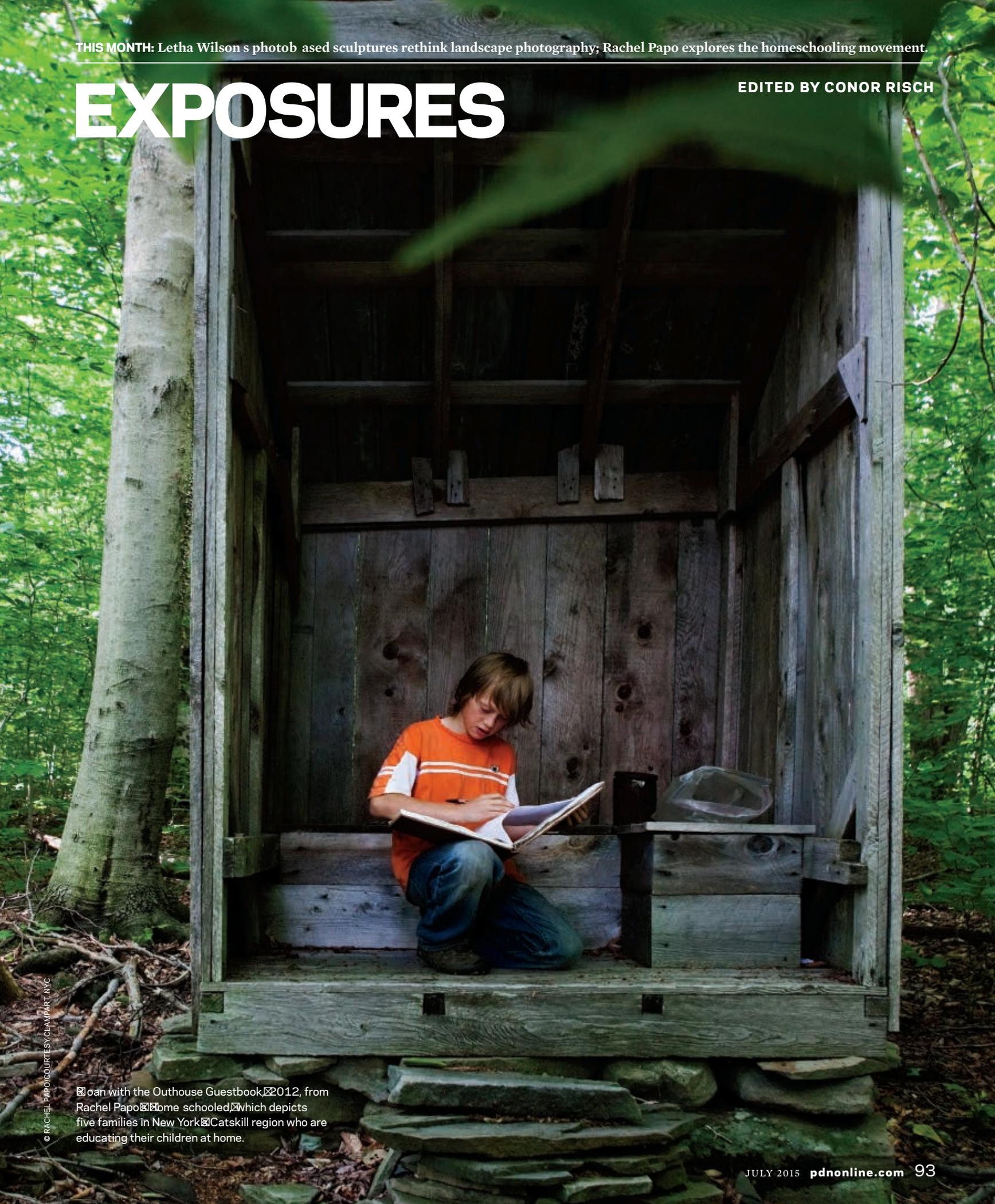
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THIS MONTH: Letha Wilson's photobased sculptures rethink landscape photography; Rachel Papo explores the homeschooling movement.

EDITED BY CONOR RISCH

# EXPOSURES



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Joan with the Outhouse Guestbook, 2012, from Rachel Papo's Home Schooled, which depicts five families in New York's Catskill region who are educating their children at home.



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ABOVE: Home work, 2012, from Rachel Papo's Home schooled, which was on display at the Center for Photography at Woodstock this spring.

#### EDUCATION THEORY

## Life and Lessons

Rachel Papo's series Home schooled delves into the lives of children who are being raised and educated outside of the American school system. **BY DZANA TSONONDO**

**HOMESCHOOLED**, a new series by Israeli American photographer Rachel Papo, is a quiet meditation on the home education movement, a growing practice in the United States. But while much of the discussion around the subject tends to revolve around parents and their beliefs, Papo's work focuses firmly on the lives and routines of a group of 15 homeschooled children living in New York's Catskill Mountains. They are a disparate bunch: babyfaced True, with her long hair and rosary; Morgan, clutching a microscope in one image and Thor's hammer in the next; tiny Grisha and Anastasia enticing a squirrel from behind a window; the playful farmboy Roan bundled in a cowboy's fringed jacket and coonskin cap, alongside his big sister Iris, whose aloof gaze reminds us that homeschooled or not, teenagers are teenagers.

Papo moved to the Catskills in the fall of 2010, her husband and

five-month-old daughter in tow. The young family had fled New York City in search of a slower pace, and room to find new bearings.

After my daughter, Zohar, was born I went through some hard times adjusting to my new life as a mother. I very soon came to realize that it would take me a lot longer than a few months to find a balance between work and motherhood, Papo explains. Moving to upstate New York was a relief at the time.

They settled in Woodstock, and soon found their place in the small town. It was then that Papo first heard of the home education movement, through a new acquaintance who was homeschooling her five-year-old child. Intrigued, Papo asked the mother for permission to photograph the young girl. Photographs of other homeschooled children soon followed, as Papo found more subjects through word of mouth in the tight-knit community.

## EXPOSURES

### Life and Lessons

At first, she saw the project as a wider series of portraits that could illuminate some commonality between the children. But as the work progressed, two things became clear: The children were all so different than one another in so many ways that a common thread would be impossible to detect, and, after photographing one child, I just wanted to spend more time with them, Papo recalls.

Her approach was simple: To capture the days of these children who were not trapped at desks, surrounded by classmates or furnished with scheduled activities. Her dreamlike pictures speak to afternoons lost in her subjects' worlds; warm wood-paneled rooms, snowy forests and fecund backyards. For some of the kids, their education was as much about exploring the natural world as it was concerned with textbook learning. Papo says the children were uninhibited in front of the camera. As they went about their days, she



would occasionally ask them to pause so she could make a picture when she found something interesting.

Papo followed their journeys of discovery as she was treading her own new ground artistically, having set

ABOVE: Krishna and Anastasia with a squirrel. ©2012.



aside a longtime devotion to the medium of film to shoot her first digital project. It was not a decision she made lightly, but the economics were undeniable. The world moves forward, you have to move with it, she says. In the end, the image is what's important, not my emotional connection to film.

Abandoning her Mamiya 645 for a Canon EOS 5D Mark II, she sought to work on overcast days and in soft light in order to replicate the painterly aspect of her film work. One luxury of this project was that she often had anywhere from several hours to days to spend with her subjects.

Growing up in Israel, Papo was, by her own description, a shy and lonely child. She had three much older brothers and often felt removed from the family dynamic. By the time she was an adolescent, her siblings had already moved out of the house and she spent much of her time alone. Discussing

Homeschooled, she acknowledges that this project and in some ways, all of her work is an interrogation of those sensitive years and their complicated legacies.

In her editing process, Papo works alone on her early edits, always revisiting work to pull out images that went unseen on an earlier pass. Only then does she share a loose edit with friends and colleagues before sitting down with a curator to create a specific exhibit. In the case of Homeschooled, this last and crucial step was done in partnership with Ariel Shanberg, executive director of the Center for Photography at Woodstock, which exhibited the work this spring. While my approach to the editing process was artistic and emotional, his was objective and logical, Papo explains.

Papo estimates that she photographed 15 families (some didn't make the cut for the exhibition) but feels like she could have shot many more. The project's completion was spurred by the family's April, 2013 move to Germany, where Papo now resides.

The move, decided upon in late 2012, provided her with the urgency to finish

Homeschooled, shooting more in the last six months of her time in Woodstock than she had in the previous year and a half.

Papo plans to publish a book of the work.

I need to spend more time with the pictures. I literally shot until the night I left for Berlin, seven months pregnant, and now I have a baby, she says, adding that she hopes next year will be more productive because her 20-month-old will be going to nursery school.

That's why I don't homeschool, she laughs.

I respect the parents who do it, I just don't know how they do it! **pdn**

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