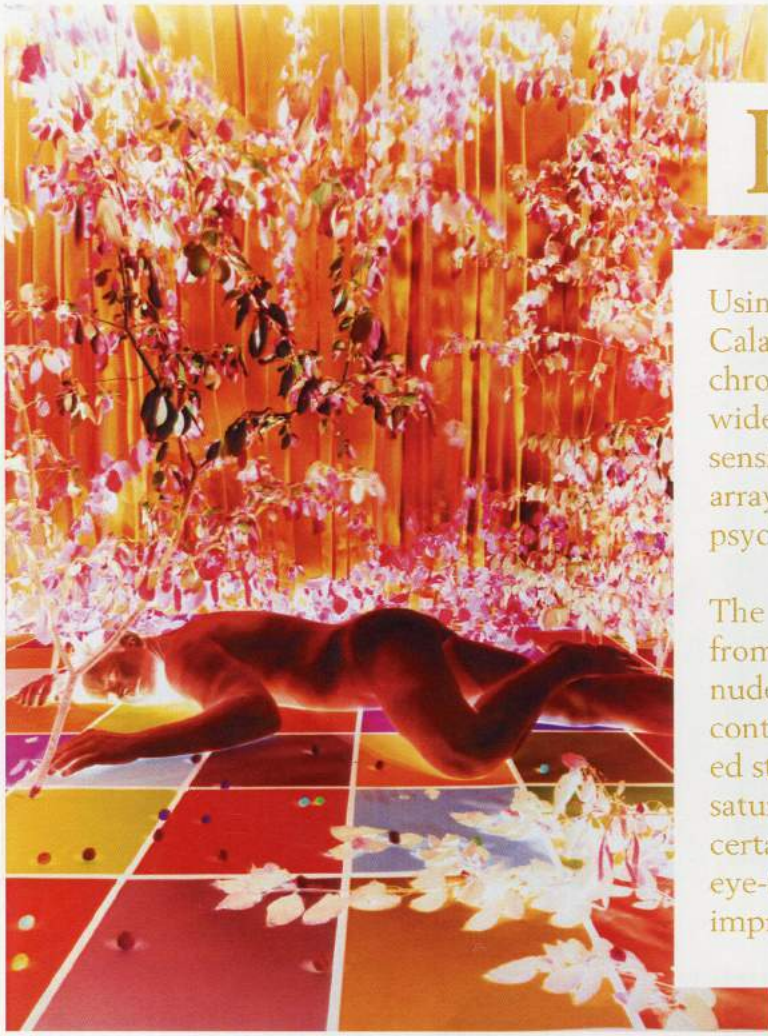


The HAND

THE MAGAZINE FOR REPRODUCTION-BASED ART

interview
with: 25-32

ROBERT
CALAFIORE



Robert Calafiore

Using custom-built pinhole cameras, Robert Calafiore creates large-scale, one-of-a-kind chromogenic prints. Because of the camera's wide angle, the prolonged exposure, and the sensitivity of the paper, the prints are a luscious array of luminous colors that generate almost a psychedelic effect.

The subject matter is currently select pieces from his family's collection of glassware, or the nude male figure. These are placed within a contrived backdrop or an elaborately constructed stage set. By doing this, he can alter the saturation, color, density, and translucency of certain areas of the arrangement to create his eye-feasting images. What is even more impressive is that no digital tools are ever used.

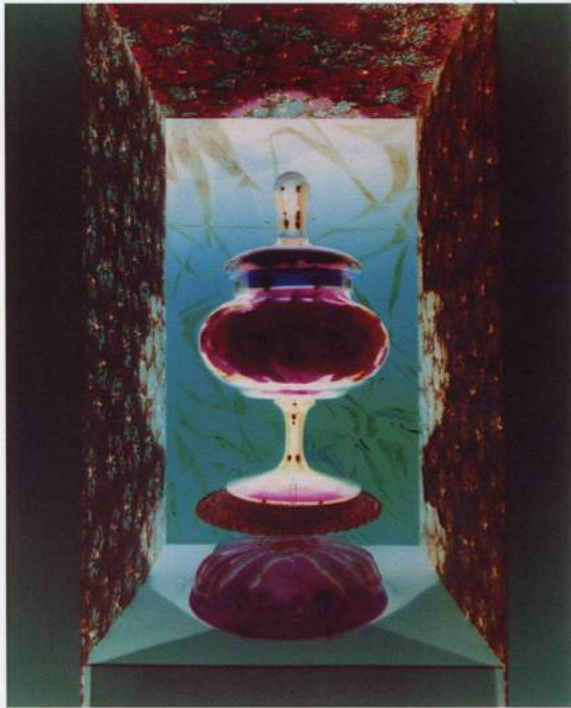
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THM: Hi, Robert! Thanks so much for talking with us. You have been very busy the last couple years! Your work has garnered a lot of attention; you've had shows in some big galleries with some big names. What do you think is the most fulfilling or enjoyable part of your work getting the attention is has gotten lately?

RC: *It has been an amazing couple of years. I am very grateful for all the opportunities I've had to share my work with a larger audience. There are many people to thank. I have found the photo community to be remarkably supportive and generous. It has connected me to countless wonderful photographers, curators, writers, educators and champions of photography. Making these new friends and contacts, has been one of the most rewarding aspects of all the recent attention on my practice. My work is stronger now and my life is richer as a result*

RC: *I am most interested in making work that actively seeks to converse with others. The most exciting moment for me, is when the viewers react and find themselves in the work. So in other words, once the audience engages, the rewarding part, and what motivates me further, is to hear how each of them connects to it in their own way. As with all of us, when experiencing artworks, we come at it with our personal filters, interests, baggage, bias, history and more. It's not so critical for me that the audience walks away with my exact story, but instead finds their own relationship to the work. Those conversations lead to more thinking, making and then yet again, further responses to new work. It's a cycle that keeps us going until the very end. Success for me is when the work can solicit a wide variety of reactions. There is so much to be learned from those diverse responses.*

THM: You know, I think we would say the same thing about making this magazine. The most rewarding part is getting to know people who share our interests and enthusiasm for art. It goes to show that at its heart, making art is really about connecting people and ideas. Do you make your work with that in mind – the idea that your work is actively seeking to converse with others? Or do you think of your work as more of a conversation with yourself that other people may or may not relate to?



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Now that you have achieved some measure of success with your work, what is your next goal professionally?

have been very busy putting the current work out into the world for a few years. It has involved traveling and meeting lots of fantastic people, and having many conversations with insightful minds. I've been fortunate to have the work represented by ClampArt since 2017 and now by Foto Relevance Gallery, as well as supported significantly by Gallery 1/1. It would be meaningful and enlightening for me to see how both the still life and figurative works could be conceptually tied into larger exhibitions about contemporary photography. I have enjoyed some immersive discussions about the work and been honored to give a number of artist talks. I'd love to see how others fit my work into the larger dialogue about image making today.

Beyond that, I am ready to get back into the studio and focus on where this body of work, the pinhole camera technique, and my interests take me next. My time lately has been dedicated to research. The newest tests in the studio involve the figure again and are driven by my feelings on our current political, cultural and social climates. I hope to produce a new series in the next 18 months.

You have spoken about how your work requires manual dexterity and how you noticed a lack of that craftsmanship in some of your classes. Where do you think you get your appreciation for craft? Is it innate or did you learn it?

I'll answer the second part of this question first. I think it's both. By nature, I am a highly detail-oriented being. Through the years, I have worked to leverage the heightened observational skills I seem to have, to serve my studio practice. In part, they determine how I work, and what I make. These natural attributes also influence how I think. And so together, the way I see



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and develop ideas is impacted by these innate qualities. Rather than fight what some might find to be an overwhelming need for controlling the minutia, I want to harness that power and make it work for me in a positive way.

As for my appreciation of craft and craftsmanship, I think much of it comes from my parents. They came to the United States in the 1940's. Growing up in what you might call a traditional Italian home, as a first generation American, the traditions of those roots dominated childhood.

My father is 95 now, but up until just a few years ago, since as long as I can remember, he had the most incredible gardens. Annually, the summer bounties would supply our family with endless amounts of vegetables and fruits. He was meticulous and loving in every aspect of that work. I watched him stake hundreds of tomato plants each season, hand tying them to elaborate custom supports. I could describe in detail, every effort he took and all the skills it required to do it well. Outside the garden, he did everything else too...painted the house inside and out, repaired the family cars, fixed anything that broke and more. My mother, now 89, applied the same intensity to all she did in the home. Summer was especially busy with the production, canning and freezing of fresh tomato sauce that would last us all year. Every other vegetable and fruit that they grew, would not escape use. Beautifully prepared for meals on the spot or preserved for use later. Her work in the kitchen and throughout the house was impeccable and skilled in so many ways she never realized would influence so strongly, who I am today. The labor-intensive work and discipline, all done with genuine love and their hands, has always stood out to me.

Your work is so colorful, which helps give it a very commanding presence. The viewer is commanded to look, as William Mortensen might say. I am curious; do you have a favorite color that just gets you excited when you see it? If I could guess what it was, I would say magenta. It seems like that color dominates most of the compositions. But I'm not sure if that's intentional or not.

I don't think I could say that one color excites me more than another. However, given the difficulty in achieving certain colors in the process of shooting directly to paper, I do get a little bit more charged when I see prints emerge from the chemistry successfully getting those more elusive colors to work. Some are easier, as the recording capabilities of the materials used, bias a certain set of colors. Others are much harder to get, and it is usually those that give me a bigger smile. On the whole though, every single color, every time I see them, make me pause. It just doesn't get old. It's energizing and motivating.

What is your studio like? Do you work from home or do you have a separate studio? Is it messy, clean, noisy, quiet, chaotic, organized...? Describe your studio on a good day when you're really being productive.



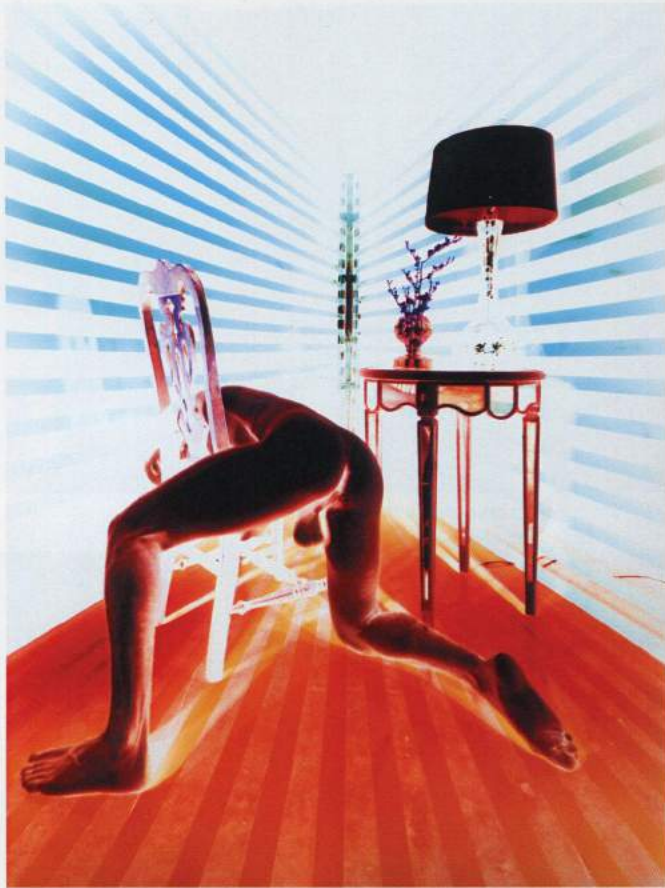
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I work from two separate places. At home, I have a studio set up which is mostly used for pre and post-production work, storage and a place to work out ideas and meet with people. At work, at Hartford Art School, I am so lucky to have access to lighting, studio space, darkrooms and more. Because I have been working large, in color and directly to paper the last ten years, most of the shooting has taken place there. Each set is built, staged and lit, photographed (most exposures nearly an hour long) and processed on the spot. Then the image is critically assessed, adjustments are made to the set, exposure, timing, to the live dodging and burning and eventually reshot. Most times it takes several tries and an all day 15 hour work session to get a single final unique print.

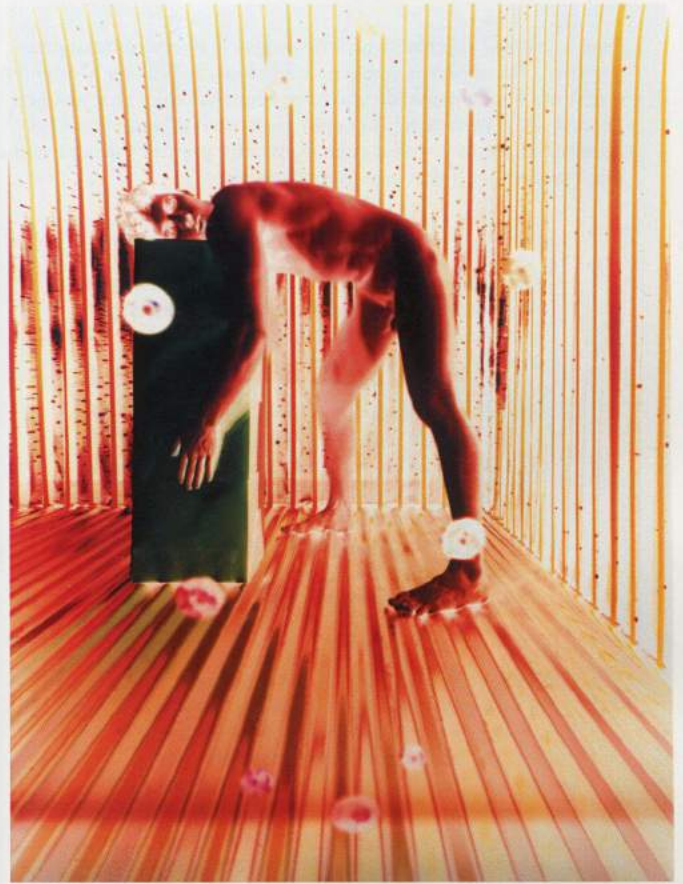
Both my spaces are neat, clean, quiet, organized and always ready. A long time ago, one of those great teachers told me that it is more productive to control your space rather than have it control you. It came natural to me anyway, and serves the kind of work I make. But don't be fooled, I love visitors while I am on a break, and lots of stimulation outside the moments where I am concentrating and directly making.



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*2 Triptych

Working with pinhole cameras, you are in touch with the beginnings of photography. The scale and color of your work is reminiscent of the Impressionists' intent to show what something feels like as opposed to what it looks like. How do you feel connected to art history? I mean, do you feel that you channel certain artists when you are creating?

Indeed, it is all about feeling something and not necessarily about recognizing a specific place, person or thing. I have always admired the work of Henri Matisse. The recent exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, helped to further my understanding of his still life work. His love for and obsession over certain objects, is something I feel connected to. He had a relationship with those objects that elevated their importance to far beyond what they were individually. Likewise, I think much of my work is about the final works being greater than the sum of all their parts. Something is transformed, transcended. The ordinary is made extraordinary. Even magical.

And of course, the references to Henry Fox Talbot's, Pencil of Nature, particularly to Articles of China and Articles of Glass, is probably unmistakable. I have a huge affinity for that work and the beginnings of photography.

Absolutely. I can see that connection to Fox Talbot's work. It is clear that history and your connection to history is important to you. You are a first generation American and your still life work directly references your family, is that right? Did you use these dishes when you were younger? Also, how much do you know about 20th century glassware? Are you an expert?

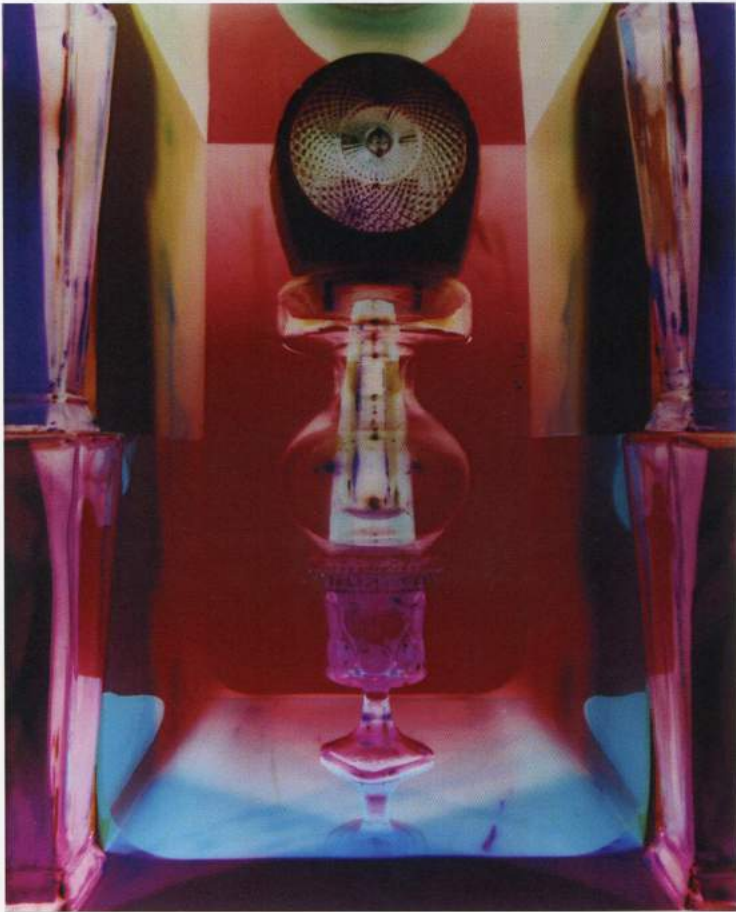
Yes, that is exactly right. The glass objects in this series are from a collection of ordinary serving and tableware that we used growing up. They are some of the first nicer things my parents could afford, after years of hard work and time building a new life in the U.S.

They always meant a lot to me and now stand for everything that the opportunities of their immigration gave them and in turn me. I see through the lens of that narrative a lot, as I think about how to and what to make work about.

I am definitely not an expert on glass. I have educated myself on certain things about it, but more important to me is the care and design that went in to making it. Mid century glass, in particular, was made at a moment when a broader audience appreciated and valued craftsmanship and design. It is the narrative behind the glass that intersects with my own story and interests.

Do you think of your figurative work as portraiture or still life, or something in between? How do you define those genres?

I have often talked about the figure, in this series of works, as being just another object in a complex set. But what that really means, and what it sounds like on the surface, are probably two different things.



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Right. That is a very loaded idea if you mean it in the sense that you are very literally objectifying the figure as a prop. Is that what you are considering, when you say the meaning versus what it sounds like? I don't see it necessarily in a negative way, though. The figure is a beautiful thing as an object. There's no judgment being made. Is that way off? Do we want to go there!?

Indeed, a loaded subject. I find it remarkable and disconcerting, that in 2019, we are still afraid of the naked male. Naked or nude? Each implies something slightly different, but the bottom line is, that a majority of people, find it difficult to interact with the unclothed male body. Yet, the nude female, as we know, is commonplace and hasn't received the same reaction. Of course today, with so much shifting culturally and politically, a long overdue focus on all kinds of gender inequality issues has been lit. We have not talked about it enough. There is so much wrong with the way we have been socialized to believe and feel certain ways about the sexes. I guess I should return to a direct reply to your question. Yes, you can say I am objectifying the naked men in these artworks. And absolutely yes, it is about the beauty of that object that is one of the motivating factors for making this series. The male on male gaze. Male to male friendships. It's all been made so complex and in my view, it's time to change it. The new work will continue to address this interest.

Early on, I talked a lot about beauty in my work, and how dirty a word it has become in contemporary art. I want to get back to this idea and more deeply question the ideas about beauty. What is it? Who defines it? What value does it hold today? It's another layer of my work and I want to push it alongside the rest of what I am thinking.



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We both teach high school, so we loved to hear you talk in other interviews about the influence your high school teacher had on you. Now, you are a teacher too. What do you think is the most valuable asset you bring to the classroom?

I love the classroom. There are a number of teachers, who I still think about often. Each of them gave me a part of something, which at the time, I most likely didn't fully understand. Those that were most influential, went beyond teaching me and became mentors. It was those deeper connections, the genuine support and the belief, that who I was, would take me somewhere, that put those teachers at the top. I think that my understanding of their impact on me, is my most valuable asset. I hope to bring to my students, the same confidence in themselves, while honestly and critically evaluating their progress, each step of the way.

Also, besides the obvious analog skills and techniques, references to the history and contemporary practice of photography, and research and concept development tools I can teach them, I think that how much I expect of them, is generally becoming less typical in their early lives, and therefore more valuable.



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What are your other interests besides art?

I always enjoy answering a question like this one. It asks that I shift my attention for a bit, removing me from the studio and practice in which I am almost always engaged.

My interests outside of art, tend to be related to it. Creating experiences has always given me pleasure. Those can be family gatherings, dinner parties for friends, or arranging living/working spaces for myself or others. Something about cooking a meal, preparing all the details, and providing a fun time, is energizing. It's all about the care and attention I can concentrate in my relationships to people.

Of course, there are lots more, things like great cinema, architecture...both historic, and contemporary, but especially mid century modern, and gardening. And another at the top of the list...travel. When I can, I like to get away, visiting new places as close to me as parts of my own neighborhood that I have not yet explored, to cities and countries I have not been to. These days, with access to just about anything on the internet, the advances in augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and the availability of almost everything everywhere, I want to remain feverishly curious for physical and emotional experiences, and dive in first hand, real time and face to face with everything and everyone.



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OK, three more questions:

1) Do you use your props when you entertain or arrange spaces?

Absolutely. It's so much fun to see them on the wall and on the table at the same time. They are significant holders of my past experiences and continue to absorb the passing of time in my life. I wouldn't have it any other way.

2) What place that you've visited are you most anxious to return to?

I need to return to my parents homeland. It's been too long since I was last in Sicily. I feel connected to it in a way that will sound corny. But when I am there, I feel at home.

I have never had an opportunity to travel to anywhere in Asia. It's high on the list. But I think next up is Peru. My partner grew up in

And 3) What place is next on your itinerary?

the jungles of Peru and then Lima, and I have always wanted to visit Machu Picchu. I can only imagine just how magical a place it must be. Now I have a personal guide. What better way to travel?

I can't imagine a better way! Well, safe travels and good luck in all of your endeavors. Thank you so much for your thoughtful answers. Take care, Robert!

For more information and updates on Robert's work, check out his website: robertcalafiore.com

Calafiore is represented by:
ClampArt, New York City, NY
Foto Relevance Gallery, Houston, TX

*1 All images are:
Untitled, Pinhole Camera C-Prints, Unique 40" H x 30" W

*2 All images are:
Unique Pinhole Camera Chromogenic Prints
24" H x 20" W