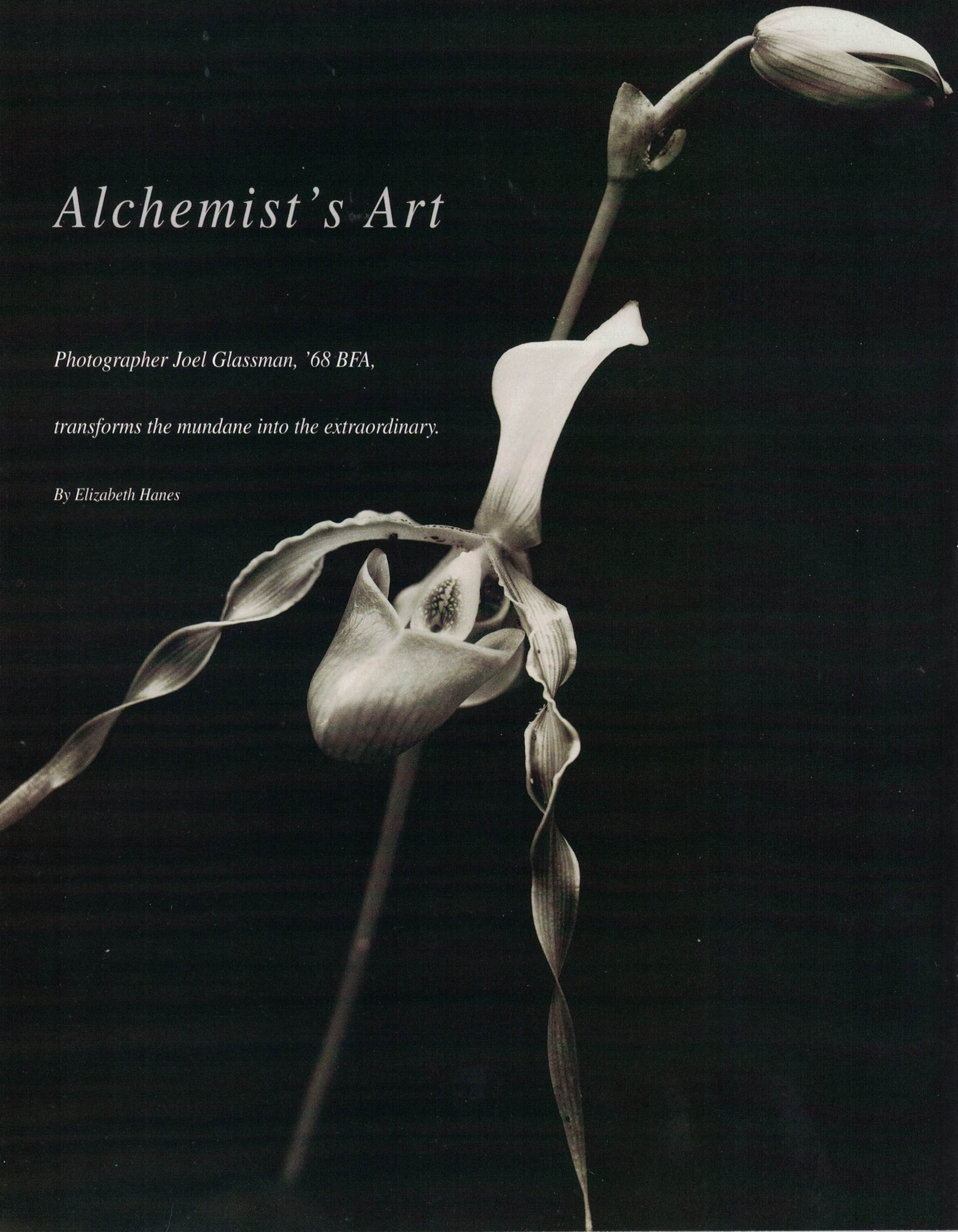


Alchemist's Art

*Photographer Joel Glassman, '68 BFA,
transforms the mundane into the extraordinary.*

By Elizabeth Hanes



The alchemist has worked his magic again, this time transforming a flower into a human being.

In this portrait, the orchid poses as a 1940s starlet: a pretty thing elevated to the sublime. Feathery tendrils float around her throat like a boa; her pouty mouth is tinted gold for emphasis. Dramatic lighting and a sultry pose contribute to the glamorous portrayal of this fragile bloom. Tomorrow, she will decline and fade away, like so many Hollywood ingénues before her. But today, she's larger than life, her evanescent beauty preserved in this silver gelatin print. Yes, the alchemist has done his job well: as you gaze at the image, it's easy to forget the subject of this portrait is only a flower.

If medieval alchemists concerned themselves with turning base metals into gold, modern alchemist Joel Aaron Glassman, '68 BFA, has made it his life's work to transform mundane objects into something extraordinary, to infuse old processes with new vision, and generally to turn our perceptions inside-out. In his career, he's elevated exotic insects to the level of gigantic monsters, and he's reduced a video camera to a mere notebook.

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Easterner Becomes Westerner

Joel isn't really an alchemist, of course. He's an artist. Born in New York City, he was well into his art education at the Parsons School of Design when he transferred to UNM almost on a whim: "[O]ne of my teachers...told a couple of us that he could get us into UNM as transfer students. So, what the hell, I applied and was accepted."

After majoring in sculpture, Joel returned to New York for a brief stint in graduate school. But the lure of the West proved too strong, and he moved to San Francisco in 1970, where his artistic career really began to take off.

New Becomes Old

The early 1970s saw the advent of videotape as an artistic medium. As portable cameras came into the hands of artists, museums began appointing "video curators" to oversee exhibitions of these new works.

Many of the early video artists used the medium to create conceptual art: tapes of highly structured performance pieces or documentaries of "ordinary people." Joel, however, saw different potential in video. Instead of exploiting the medium's ability to preserve moving images, the alchemist in him sought to transform the technology, in a surrealistic way, into a common notebook or sketchbook.

"[My] tapes were still lifes," Joel said. "I did a series of tapes called the 'video tape notebooks.' I used tape [as if it were] pencil and paper."

The critics took note. Joel won the first San Francisco Video Festival in 1976 with his tape of dreamlike sequences of walls, clouds, and written notes repeated over and over. This success landed Joel a coveted spot in the Whitney Museum's first video exhibition, and



his groundbreaking work resides today in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution.

Old Becomes New

In what has become a typical metamorphosis in his artistic life, Joel reversed course in the late 1970s, moving away from video and into the older technology of photography. Not just any photography, but 19th century platinum printing. He fell in love with the extended tonal range and detail that can only be accomplished with the old techniques. Going into hock for a 4x5 inch field camera and two lenses, he took to the streets of New York City, photographing the city "as if it were some 19th century landscape." And then, the alchemist truly began to emerge.

"I'm a virtual encyclopedia of photo chemistry and formulas," Joel says. "The funny thing is, I probably would have failed chemistry had I taken it in college. Only in my quest for the perfect image did I come to understand and enjoy it."

Using formulas like Amidol (for the chemists, that's the dihydrochloride salt of 2,4-diaminophenol), introduced as a developing agent in 1892, Joel began to create triple-toned prints using sepia, selenium, and gold chloride. But the beauty of his old-style prints doesn't hint at the modern artistic sensibilities that lie below the surface.

Small Becomes Large

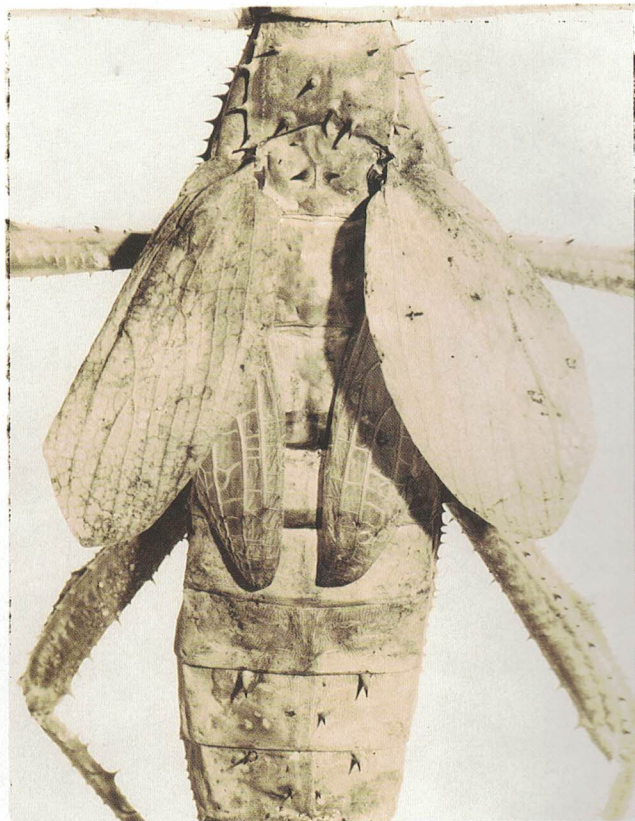
How big is a safety pin? In Joel's photographs, it might be a foot long. An orchid three inches in diameter grows to eighteen inches. A steel nut takes on the proportions of a truck's wheel.

T
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To Joel, "living large" has a different connotation. Influenced by the 1959 movie *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Joel creates images in which objects tower over the humans viewing them. In these photos, he not only transforms the subject matter, he transforms us, as well. When you encounter the giant arthropods in his "Little Monsters" series, you metaphorically shrink to the size of a ladybug. Knowing that the bugs are, in reality, only a few inches long does not diminish your own feeling of smallness when standing next to the mural-sized prints. Even a hauntingly beautiful orchid becomes something to be feared, a source of vague anxiety, when it's the size of your head.

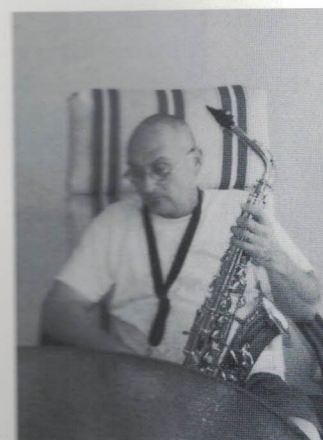
Yet, arousing viewer discomfort is not the artist's objective. "I wanted to make something that was deliberately beautiful," Joel says.

Digital Noise

With the explosion of digital photography, will Joel once again change his artistic medium? Already, he works with digital imagery and even teaches it—at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena.

Well, he's moving into digital, all right, but not in the way you'd think. In this case, the "digital" refers to music. Not only does Joel play the saxophone, but also the digital horns. His group, "Beautiful Noise," expects to debut soon in Pasadena.

No matter what form his future artistic expression takes, he is sure to continue standing the process (or your perception) on its ear. As he says, in his artistic world, "nothing is as it seems." Alchemy, apparently, is a calling, and Joel Glassman has become one of its finest practitioners.



Portrait of Joel Glassman
by Melanie Pleasure.