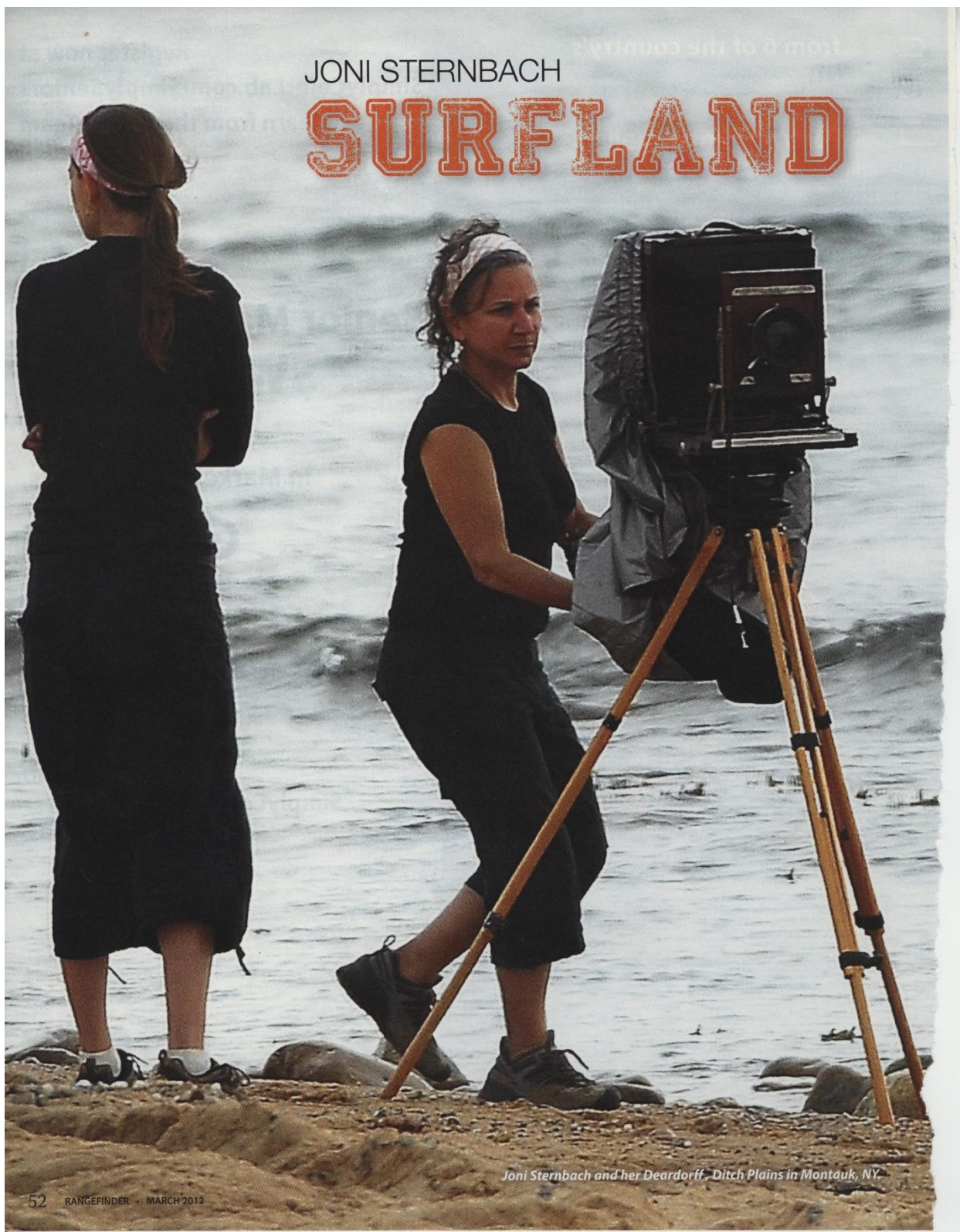


JONI STERNBACH

SURFLAND

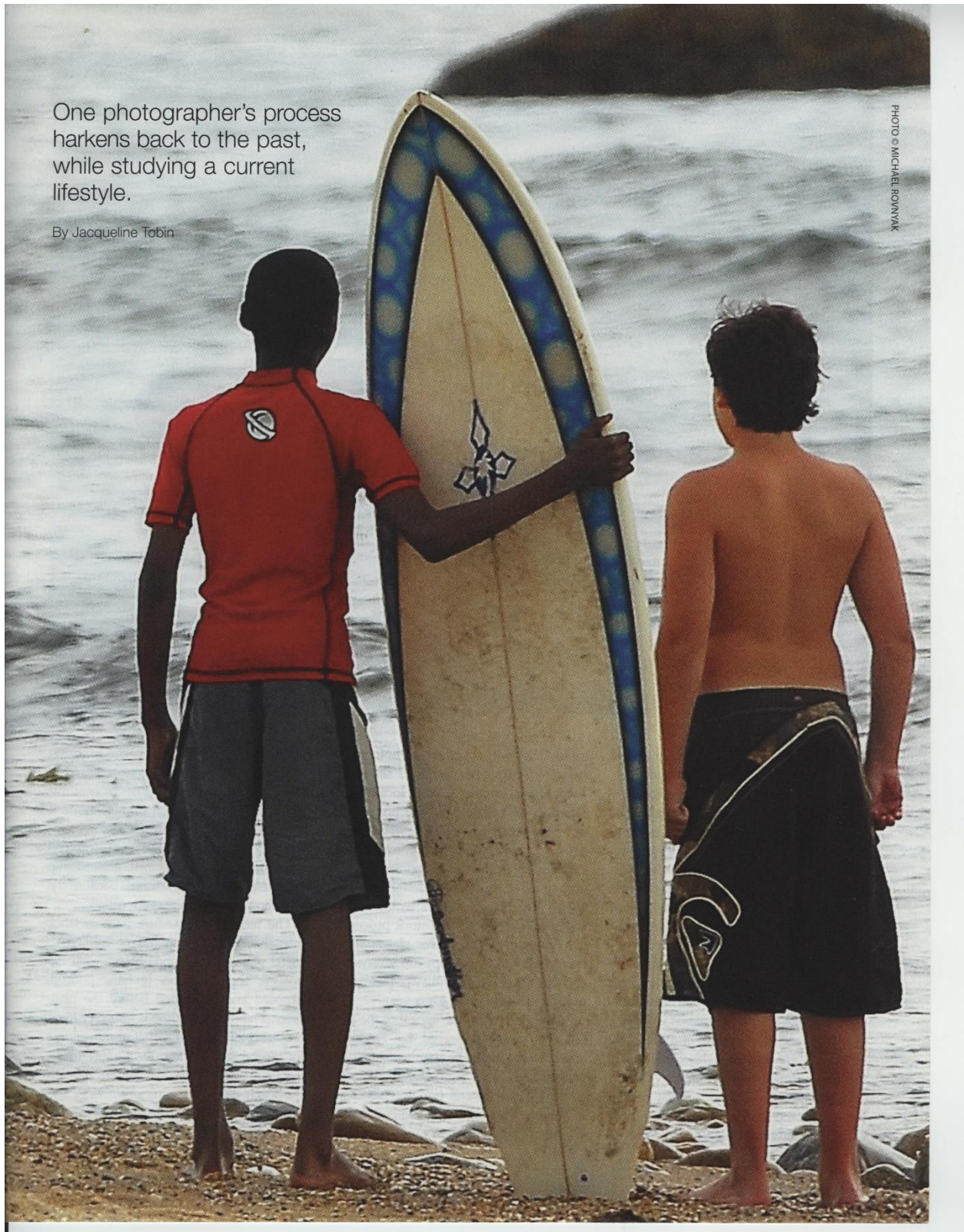


Joni Sternbach and her Deardorff, Ditch Plains in Montauk, NY.

One photographer's process harkens back to the past, while studying a current lifestyle.

By Jacqueline Tobin

PHOTO © MICHAEL ROMNYAK





"Jen," Oceanside, CA

In this fast-paced, somewhat automated era of digital photography and Photoshop actions, it's refreshing to see a body of work that incorporates traditional photography with an alternative process. In this case, the photographer is Joni Sternbach, the body of work is *Surfland*, and the process is a 19th-century technique known as wet-plate collodion photography—more specifically, tintypes—first used during the American Civil War.

"The photographs [in *Surfland*] are a unique blending of subject matter and photographic technique," Sternbach explains. "Using the instantaneous wet-plate process, I am creating one-of-a-kind tintypes that are imbued with a feeling of ambiguity, timelessness and mystery."

Sternbach, who was born in the Bronx, New York, and graduated from New York University/International Center of Photog-

raphy (ICP) with an M.A. in Photography in 1987, started her *Surfland* series five years ago at popular surfing locale Ditch Plains in Montauk, NY. The project has drawn its well-deserved share of attention, becoming a book of the same name, an exhibition that travels around the country, and spurring increased interest in workshops and classes taught by Sternbach showing how to use this historic process to create unique photographic plates. Sternbach says her workshops are always full and that there is a growing wet-plate community that gets larger every year.

Before describing the appeal of the wet-plate process—pioneered by Frederick Scott Archer in 1851—we should first explain exactly what it entails. A glass (for ambrotypes) or metal (for tintypes) plate is coated with collodion, dipped in silver nitrate solution, then exposed to light

and developed before the collodion dries. Since much of the equipment required in the technique must be home- or custom-made, it took Sternbach time to hone it and make it her own. She shoots in large-format, preferring to use a customized Deardorff camera, and has to ground ship her chemicals when she travels because the collodion and ether are quite volatile.

The technical procedure itself is labor intensive, with the chemistry applied to metal plates just seconds before each exposure; the collodion is hand-poured, exposed and developed before the plate dries. The exposure time is also very long, requiring stillness on behalf of the subject for several seconds. Sternbach's surfer subjects, she says, pose for her camera right on the beach, often attracting an audience and resulting in what she calls an environment that is part performance and part labora-

JONI STERNBACH



tory. "It has become lifestyle more than a photographic process," she says of the ongoing project, "and takes a lot of dedication on my part."

Last year, for instance, Sternbach did an artist-in-residency at Art Park/Atlantic, in Byron Bay, Australia. When she was invited she had no idea if she would be able to get the chemicals there. "You can't fly with [them] so I had to try to find [them] in Australia," she says. "I located three people on the entire island who shoot wet-plate—two of them were 14 hours away, but one of them, Craig Tuffin, was 30 minutes away and when I wrote him, he said 'Joni, how can I help?' Without Craig, I wouldn't have been able to make my *Surfland* tintypes in Australia. I was sort of winding down with the project before I got there, but going breathed a whole new life into it, and now I can see that the project is not quite done. It has brought me this incredible sense of discovery and surprise everywhere I go... and it's this wonderful way to be in the world, so in some ways I never want it to be done..."

In January, Sternbach's *Surfland* exhibit opened at the Southeast Museum of Photography in Daytona Beach, FL. On the museum's Web site, the work is described as "luminous and possessing the immediate quality of a singular print. The

large camera Sternbach uses seems to slow down time, so that her subjects possess a distilled and timeless grace and beauty that seems so far removed from the energy, movement and animation we commonly associate with the surfing life."

While Sternbach often travels up and down the east and west coasts in search of more subjects, she always seems to find her way back to Ditch Plains in Montauk. Says Sternbach: "Returning year after year to the same location has led me to examine the juncture between land and sea, exploring subject matter in a constant state of transition. Surfers are an integral part of this liminal state. I am fascinated by the physical and poetic way that they inhabit America's watery landscapes. I work with a large-format camera and wet process that is instantaneous, so it must be prepared and developed on location. Because all the process work is done in the field, I see my pictures immediately, as do my subjects. This is a key factor in helping me connect to and interact with them."

Sternbach first started working on *Surfland* at the tail end of summer 2006. It morphed out of two other projects shot on the same exact bluffs of Ditch Plains. Her first outdoor wet-plate series focused on abandoned structures in and around the water's edge. Then, by chance, while mak-

ing photographs on the bluffs, she came upon a surfer who agreed to pose for her. "I had taken some pictures without any people in them," she recalls, "but the one with the surfer in it definitely made the picture, grounding it and giving the image a sense of scale and context. I knew immediately it was going to be a great project."

Of the process itself, Sternbach says that she loves that it yields gorgeous results and that it is immediate. "You can see the image right there on the spot, like a Polaroid, and because of that, I work with the process and my subject simultaneously, so that we are seeing their picture and reviewing it together. It becomes this way of interacting with surfers that helps the project along. They just fit together really well."

She continues, "My interest in working with a lot of the older photographic processes, was to find a way to use them in a contemporary way and to resist the urge for creating sentimental or nostalgic images. With wet-plate, photos do inherently look old, so there's more reason to use that factor, to twist and challenge it. To me, it's well suited to my subject, people who are wet-suited and half amphibian looking, than it is with, let's say, an old building. An old building would look like an old building regardless of process, but because wet-plate translates skin and water so well, it draws you in. The images look vintage but they're not; they remind you of something old but you've never seen it before. To me, those are the kind of ideas that mix things up and work really well with photography, reminding us about the mediums' beginnings. More specifically, the project encourages us to think about surfers and surfing in a way we might never have thought about before."

The wet place process also holds an inherent sense of satisfaction for Sternbach. "I used to spin my own wool and weave my own cloth and sew my own clothes. This process is like that—you do it from scratch, and if that's your nature, you get to satisfy that part of it." **RF**

Jacqueline Tobin is currently the executive editor of Rangefinder Magazine. Previously, she was an editor at Photo District News for 26 years. She is also the author two books: Wedding Photography Unveiled: Inspiration and Insight From 20 Top Photographers, (Amphoto Books, 2009); and The Luminous Portrait (Amphoto Books, 2012), which she co-wrote with photographer Elizabeth Messina.