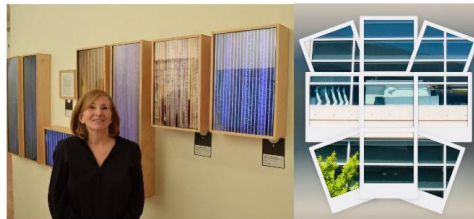


October 2020



Arc Studios News October 2020

**A Conversation with
Denise Tarantino**
Arc Studio #202
By Sherri Cornett



As an artist continuing to work through the pandemic, Denise Tarantino has found new tools and methods to keep her moving forward, to make her photographs reflect the enforced changes in her life – through the cancelled exhibitions, the challenges of online exhibitions, with reduced contact with collectors and her limitations stemming from her health issues.

Sherri Cornett: How did you begin the transition in how you work and navigate this strange, chaotic world?

Denise Tarantino: First, I was born with a genetic disorder – osteogenesis imperfecta (OI), which led to profound hearing loss and rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Then in 2016, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease (PD). Fortuitously, in late January, as part of my medical treatment, and before Covid-19 really hit the US, I learned how to build and incorporate a daily mindfulness practice into my life.

With this and the sudden gift of time, I found myself being much more present in my life and focusing on what brings me peace and ease. I have grossly limited my intake of daily news – the lunacy becomes too stressful on top of the other personal challenges. Though, I do read the art and science sections of the New York Times, so I have something to talk about!

SC: I have found it interesting to see how our different personalities are responding . . .

DT: Yes, I can be on the quieter side, a thinker. I'm more of an observer than a talker. I am adaptive to change, but, even if I am absorbed in my art making, it is still hard to shake the loneliness now that I am home so much. It has not been easy dealing with an unfamiliar and painfully slow pace. But, I know more of my neighbors now. I am more connected to my community and this is pushing me to make more of an effort to contribute to it.

SC: Has this changed your photography?

DT: My photography is always my go-to companion; it gives me clarity and hope. It enables me to process life. But, my previous "wink and a nod" humor is largely missing from my current photos. Maybe it will return and perhaps somewhat differently. For now, what I do see is a processing of gratitude and patience coming through the images. I've changed my go-to camera by working with a camera maker out of Hong Kong to upgrade and retro fit an old SX-70 Alpha 1. Given the changes in the agility of my hands, I had to design a camera that would be easier for me to handle. I'm also working exclusively in instant film. I see it as a metaphor for life, a reminder to live in the moment, to see how the world can change quickly, to see its imperfections as uniquely beautiful.

SC: How about the subjects of your photography – on what are you focusing now?

DT: I have two new, different bodies of work – Looking In and SoMa Redux. With Looking In, I am giving in to an uncharacteristic curiosity about what is happening behind doors in my neighborhood. I walk around looking for subjects and, when one intrigues me, I return every day, looking for clues, until I feel my curiosity is sated. I use my Polaroid SX-70 Alpha I. Instant film mosaics make the process of composing and shooting very intentional. I think of the final image as an arrangement, with two to fifty tiles.

SC: I have read about how people are becoming more nostalgic, in many ways, because of the pandemic. So, I am curious about your SoMa Redux series.

DT: Yes, I totally agree with that. I think many of us find comfort in thinking about what's familiar, given all the unknowns we're faced with in light of the pandemic. I feel like my medical diagnosis gave me a head start on the process of adjusting my personal expectations. I found it difficult to awake each day and to not be able to recognize the life I am living. I went through several years of questioning and trying to find a new purpose. I feel like I'm starting to see hints of my old self, but with a richer soul. *SoMA ReDux* is about my underwhelmed response to the lack luster, sterile feel of the quick construction which has become the SoMA area of San Francisco. I provide color to its forgettable landscape and building design.

SC: And, you have your *Personal Artifacts* series. They look like loving tributes.

DT: Yes, that series was what helped me land in a place of gratitude. My school years were strongly influenced by my Aunties and Uncles. They helped me shape my core values and moral compass. Something not everyone has access to. These are portraitures, composites of objects related to people who shaped who I am. The collection of objects and the short stories I include highlight their qualities and idiosyncrasies. Although most everyone in that series is no longer with us, I needed to call on these influencers one more time. I was angry and tired and it became clear to me that I needed to take a personal inventory and learn how to move forward with the life I'm given. I'm grateful for that.

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