

FINDING the BEAUTY in the
UNRULY &
IMPERFECT



Photograph by Chad Husar

When Michelle Scott discovered her grandfather won the first Academy Award for documentary film making she was understandably intrigued. Uncovering the mysteries of his journey became the focus of her work and the adventure of a lifetime.

PHOTOGRAPHY by MICHELLE SCOTT

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You are a painter and a photographer. How did you develop such a well-rounded artistic sensibility and technical skill set?

First, thanks for the compliment! In my college years, I made a conscious decision that I would work to develop my skills as an artist. With that, it meant being well-rounded not only in my strong suit of painting, but also being open to new mediums that inspired me.

Are you formally trained in any of the disciplines you practice?

Yes, I have formal training with a BA from Kennesaw State University in Georgia, with a concentration in painting and drawing. I also completed extra courses in photography during this time, getting me closer to a minor in Photography. I continued my education in the later years with photography seminars and classes to keep my skill expanding in the field.

Who / what most influences your aesthetic style?

As a painter, I was most influenced by the impressionism era; it is where I fell in love with paint. From the unruly color palette and imperfect lines of Oscar Kokoschka, to the contemporary bold, energetic, brush strokes of Atlanta based portrait artist Steve Penley. Romare Bearden's collages touched me with his southern soulful prints. In photography, I was

immediately intoxicated with Richard Avedon's, timeless, black and white portraits. He was truly a master and his portraits always commanded your presence. Most recently, in exploring my new body of work on Kukan, I find myself looking towards the graphic compositions of 1940's movie posters, and old illustrations from Western novels. They help me convey the time period of the images I am working in.





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Please describe your reaction to finding your grandfathers' photographs, and learning of his work on this film.

When I first found the photographs in a dusty box at my dad's house, I was intrigued. After going through the first handful of images, I knew I had stumbled upon something special. I immediately wanted to see more and know more. When I inquired with my father who they belonged to and where they had come from, I was quite mystified. First

There is a stereotype of the starving artist: particularly with painting. Is there any truth to this, or have you been able to make a living with your art?

Well let's just say I have seen both sides of the spectrum. When I first moved to Chicago in 2008, I was trying to support myself half art and half freelance work. To some degree it was a success, but let's just say Trader

Joe's frozen burritos were becoming a staple in my diet. There were a few years when I actually surprised myself at the end of the year when I did the numbers. I wouldn't say by the world's standards I was widely financially successful, but it was pretty amazing that I had earned that much income from a brush, a panel of wood, and some paint.

I have always been a strong believer that if there is a will

there is a way. You will find a way to make it work. So with that, yes, I have been able to supplement my living with my art comfortably for the past four years.

The best advice anyone ever gave me on the subject was, "it's not going to be easy". You will be up late hours when people are sleeping. You will stay home to paint when your friends are out on the town. But if you are committed, I know you will

off, how could no one in my family never mention that my grandfather won an Academy Award? Secondly, I was dumfounded at what an extraordinary journey he had been on: over four years in China, solo, in uncharted territory. He dedicated his life to making a film, with no guarantees of being received back home. His passion captivated me from the start.

What was the catalyst for you to start this series of work?

The catalyst for starting this work was after I had learned more about the history behind the images. I wanted to go about the best way I knew of getting them preserved,

and carrying them on to new audiences in this generation. To me, this meant creating a large body of work that was still contemporary while using these historic images. After connecting with Robin, the producer for “Finding Kukan”, it became clear

this was something that needed to be shared. I create this work for the impact of hopefully inspiring new generations with a tale of courage and dedication. I want to honor my grandfather, and preserve his memory and his extraordinary talent.

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How long have you been working on this series, and how has it evolved from the beginning?

I have been working since beginning of 2009. It has had lulls in between, but after signing a contract for a solo show at 2 Rules Gallery in Georgia, it has been a clear path of getting it to some sort of completion. It has evolved because at first it was just something I was doing for myself and for my family, but now is more about bringing this story to the people in my generation.

What personal impact has this project had on you and your family?

It has brought the family a little closer in regards to connecting with the past. I have traveled around to the brothers' houses in different states, collecting whatever information they had, and hearing their stories. It has been

wonderful. We have all been involved and more committed to preserving his work. It is my goal to have everyone, all the Scott's, come out to the show opening in October. It would be the first time we have all been together in years!

What has been the greatest challenge of creating the Kukan series of paintings?

My greatest challenge would have to be finding the actual images. There are still a large number that I have seen published in brochures and flyers that I can't seem to locate.

On a personal level, it has been challenging at times when I'm alone in my studio, working tirelessly. Sometimes the fear gets the best of me, and I wonder..."what the hell am I doing! What if no one gets it, or for that matter even cares!" The thought of doing it for my grandfather and for myself is what keeps me going.

*Above: Portrait of a Lady
 Right: Comeback Kids*



What has been the greatest reward?


The greatest reward was at my first showing of this work, and seeing how the imagery, and the story, was having an impact on people. I knew I was on the right track when I was approached by a collector who said, “the painting and story moved me to tears: I have to have it.”

That reaction is the kind of impact I was going for.

Can you please share your future goals and aspirations for your work as an artist?

My future goal, one of which is currently in the works, is to have this body of work be shown in conjunction with the original film, photographs, and newspaper articles about Kukan. I believe the story is worth sharing. I want to create a traveling show where the story continues to be brought back to life.

Can you please tell us about the documentary film being made about Kukan?

“Finding Kukan” is a documentary film in progress that tracks Robin Lung and other investigators, such as myself, as we reach into the past and the mysteries surrounding the Academy Award winning film “Kukan.” How did the inexperienced film makers Rey Scott (my grandfather) and Chinese native, Li Ling Ai, go about getting the attention of the President of the United States and Hollywood Elite? How did he manage to trek across the undeveloped paths of China and get access to Chinese leaders such as Chiang Kai-shek without succumbing to danger? How was the film lost for all these years? As the investigation unfolds, we discover forgotten chapters in history. 



To discover more about Robin Lung's documentary "Finding Kukan" please visit her website www.nestedeggproductions.com

Michelle Scott - Mixed Media Artist
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