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## ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES SEA CHANGE

METICULOUS EDITING AND PRINTMAKING HELP SVJETLANA TEPAVCEVIC TURN HER "WAVE PORTRAITS" INTO COMPLEX WORKS OF ABSTRACT ART. BY CONOR RISCH

FOUR YEARS AGO S Svetlana Tepavcevic decided to try her hand at making photographs. But instead of picking up a digital camera—as one would expect from a beginner in the 21st century—she took classes in black-and-white photography and learned how to print in a darkroom. She felt drawn to the tradition and an "element of drama and mystery" she perceived in analog black-and-white photography.

Today Tepavcevic is earning recognition from the fine-art community for her work, in particular a series of abstract images of ocean waves that burst with energy and complexity, and which, through her careful attention to craft, have a handmade quality that can remind viewers of charcoal drawings.

George Eastman House director Anthony Bannon selected Tepavcevic's images for a juried portfolio exhibition organized by the Atlanta Photography Group late last year, and an audio slideshow of her images will be presented at the Griffin Museum in February. Tepavcevic was also among the 2010 Photolucida Critical Mass finalists.

Somewhat ironically, her series of wave portraits, which she calls "The Sea Inside," are made with a digital camera, but she says, "everything is about the final print," a value clearly carried over from her darkroom work. After seeing film, chemicals and photographic papers she used discontinued a few times, however, she decided to learn digital photography.

"It doesn't matter what it is as long as you master your medium and know how to express what it is that you want to express," she says. "To me the images that ultimately move me the most are the ones that transcend the medium."

Tepavcevic taught herself Photoshop and digital printing two years ago, but credits a class she took with photographer John Paul Caponigro and digital output expert R. Mac Holbert with teaching her the 10 percent that made her prints great. For the archival pigment prints of "The Sea Inside," she uses an Epson

Above: Temporality, fluidity, individuality and violence are all part of the complex beauty of waves, which Svetlana Tepavcevic captures in her black-and-white "portraits."

Stylus Pro 3800 and UltraChrome K3 ink to print on a heavy matte art paper, which adds to the charcoal drawing effect, she says. "I really care so much about the printed picture and everything I do is with that print in mind."

A Bosnian who was raised in the former Yugoslavia and who lived through the siege of Sarajevo, Tepavcevic was instinctively interested in photographing the waves, she says, partly because of her fond memories of childhood excursions to the Adriatic Sea.

"I'm drawn to something that's not rooted, like you are as a person," says Tepavcevic, who is an American citizen now and resides in Los Angeles. "Once you've had the enormous upheaval in your life of having to be uprooted—I've lived through the [Bosnian] War and I've lived through some things that most people haven't lived through, and I think that turning to nature is a consolation to me: It's finding faith in life again; it's relating to the environment, to the larger environment that we live in; it's finding beauty in life." The fluidity

and infinite repetition and variation of the waves, and the beauty of the ocean all struck chords with her as well.

The beauty of the waves, she notes, isn't a simple one. "I'm attracted to the duality, the inherent complexity—they're almost a metaphor for life. The same force that gives them life gives them death. In an instant they're gone and then the next one comes. So many times I get battered by them, and it's so hard to photograph. It's an inhospitable environment, they're so violent."

Tepavcevic creates the images by wading into the surf, running in and out of the water, mostly on the beaches in Malibu or other spots near Los Angeles. She works in the late afternoon with the sun at her back, using longer exposures so she can express the motion of the waves rather than trying to freeze them. She captures a lot of images, intuiting what might look good without necessarily knowing what she'll have when she's done.

Through experience she can make a quick first edit of her images when she returns home, recognizing the "keepers" that she'll bring into Photoshop to work on later. Using contrast and tonal adjustments she looks to create "an illusion of *continued on page 90*



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three dimensionality,” a process she compares to chiseling away at a block of marble as a sculptor might.

“There’s so much of me in the editing,” she says. “I’m very driven by emotion and I realize that these are not just photographic representations, but they’re also my personal representations, representations of my moods and my feelings as well as my emotional connection with the sea.”

Tepavcevic, who has a masters degree in communication, says she always admired visual art, and is finally doing what she was meant to do. Before she emigrated to the U.S., she worked during the war for the non-profit International Rescue Committee. She has also worked for the Annenberg Public Policy Institute and the National Immigration Law Center, and her experience with the war remained a central part of her life. When she picked up a camera four years ago, however, she began to put that portion of her life behind her. “You almost feel like you get addicted to [war], it’s a completely different existence on a different plane,” she relates. “You can’t transition from that life to what we call the ‘normal life’ that easily, and I think I can put that behind [me], or at least it’s certainly not overpowering my life.”

“At long last I found what I wish I had been doing all along, so I’m really cherishing every minute that I have.”



**Through her editing and printing process, Tepavcevic turns digital files into prints that resemble charcoal drawings and have a hand-made quality to them.**