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Chief



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FEATURES

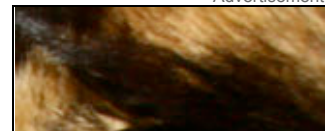
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Robin Schwartz

Photographer Robin Schwartz is an animal person. Just take a look at her photography if you don't believe me. Her pieces offer compelling portraits of humanity reflected back through mostly non-human eyes. Robin's animal subjects seamlessly cross the line between our world and their own with a surprising range of personality

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and emotion, creating a perfectly unnatural juxtaposition that plays on our preconceived notions of what it means to be human.

Her latest work, collected in her new book [“Amelia’s World.”](#) finds her further exploring these themes, this time bringing her daughter along on the journey to serve as both co-conspirator and muse. The assembled images are simultaneously whimsical and reverential, providing captivating glimpses into artist Schwartz’s uniquely personal vision.

I had the chance to sit down with Robin on the day that she received her first copies of the book. Our conversation meandered over coffee in a cavernous space somewhere in Chelsea. Robin was grateful to finally get a chance to discuss her work and I was happy to be there to listen.

Chief Magazine: So you don’t get to talk about your work much?

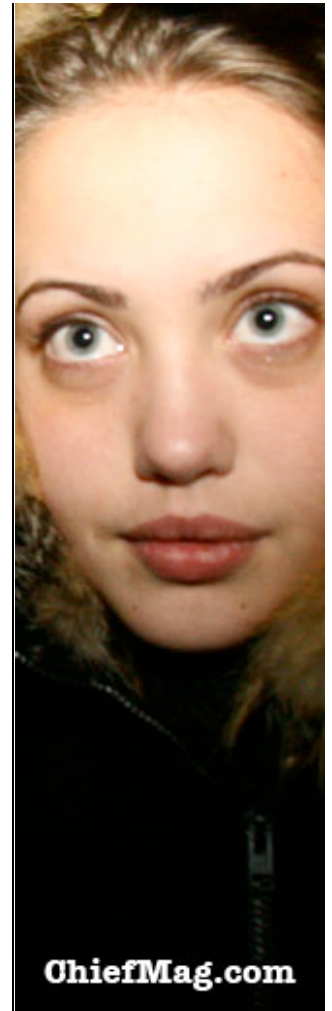
Robin Schwartz: Between all of my commitments [Ed note: Besides being an awesome photographer, Robin is a wife, mother and assistant professor, among other things], I don’t really have the time. Plus, I think it’s easy for artists to get caught up in their own work and not share it with others in the community. Maybe it has something to do with a sense of competition, too.

How’d you get into photography?

It goes back to trying to stop time and save memory. Even when I was a kid and had a camera, I only photographed my cat. And this sounds morbid, but I knew he wasn’t going to be around forever. And still, I only really photograph what I want to remember. So mostly that’s Amelia and animals. I don’t just walk down the street and shoot. It allows me to be a little more focused. You know Amelia sits in my lap now and she’s so big, it’s this sense of, ‘Whoa, what happened?’ She used to be little. It’s hard to warp your mind around it. So I photograph to cheat death. It doesn’t work, but I do it anyway.

And were there any early breaks that got you started?

I walked into Pratt with a box of about 300 prints when I was 21 and Arthur Freed really took care of me. I definitely would never have gone to graduate school without his help; I never even really applied. I’m not sure what he saw in my work maybe he just thought I was a hard worker. It’s all a bit foggy. I was really



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nervous. Basically from the time I was 19 until I was married (10 year span), I never really had a steady place to live. I just kind of bounced around, and by Arthur admitting me into graduate school, I was able to continue collecting Veteran benefits. My father was a Veteran, and during the time I was in school, this money was what I was living off of. So this essentially kept me off the streets and allowed me to keep photographing. So I really owe him everything, but I'm not sure if he's aware that he made such a difference in my life. I contacted him to thank him, but these days he only seems to speak in poems. He doesn't seem to be into conversation anymore.



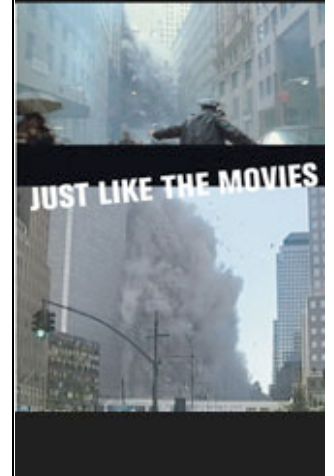
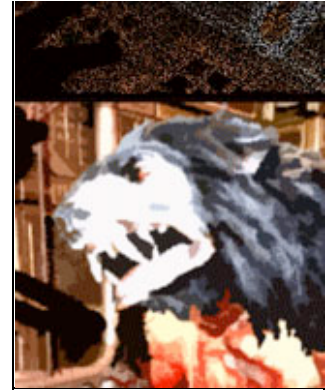
So growing up you had pets?

Growing up, the first cat I was allowed to have in the house I got when I was ten. Otherwise there were outdoor cats that used to get run over. I was an only child and it was important to me. I even thought my first cat was my brother.

And now you have a pretty big menagerie?

I have 2 dogs and 3 cats. One of the cats is a diabetic. He's a bit of a miracle actually. He gets two shots of insulin a day. I really love him. I think liking animals has something to do with empathy that doesn't have to do with any supposed hierarchy like I have a soul and you don't. It's a particular way of looking at the world that sees humanity expressed in all things. I actually dedicated my first book to my dog and my cat.

You've mentioned that animals have opened a lot of doors for you and that they're universally appealing?

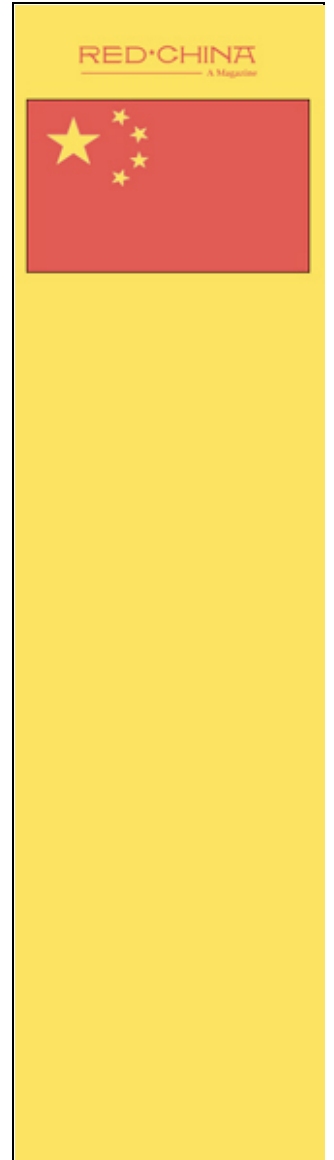




I just think that certain people are animal people, and there's some kind of bond there. One guy at one of my film labs, who's definitely a dog person, tracked me down and worked out a better deal for me. It's an important component between two people, especially when they're in a relationship. For example, I dated a guy once that definitely didn't get the animal thing, granted he was allergic, but it just wasn't going to work out between us. There should be dating sites for this kind of thing.

Those sites actually exist, though I can't think of their names right now*. Will you discuss some of your influences?

I feel most influenced by painting. It has taught me how to deal with light. But I have to say I certainly appreciate blogs. Being able to look at everybody's work. These days, I try not to have as much of an opinion about what I'm seeing. It's just nice to



be able to see stuff without all of that baggage. I'll take anything. I get ideas from anywhere I can and I'm happy to do it. It's just important to keep yourself open as an artist.

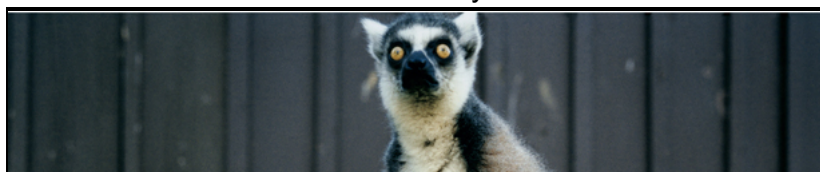


You've said that you're an obvious photographer. Can you explain that a bit?

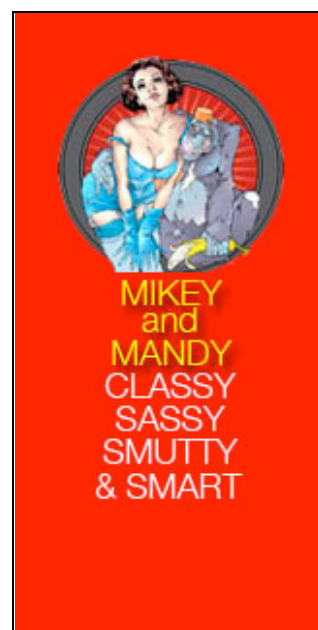
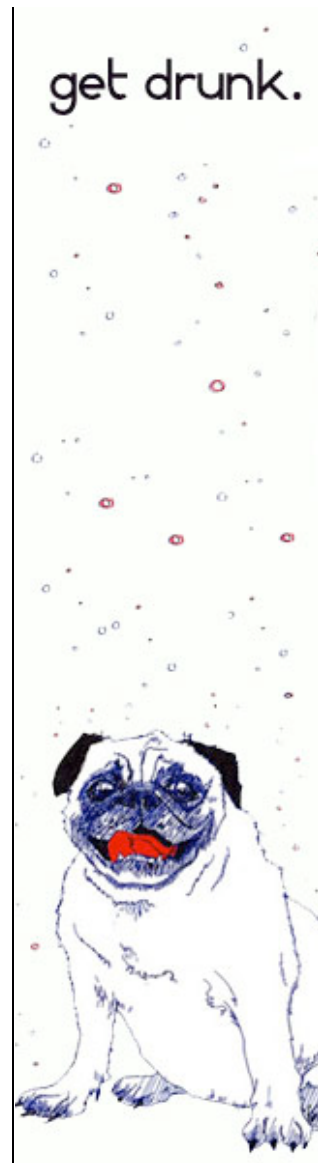
In general, I talk to people and they know that I'm not a spy. They're aware of what I'm doing and I ask their permission. Nothing is done on the fly. So there's a trust involved there. It's never a one shot deal. I try to form relationships with these people.

How has your work continued to evolve?

In working with Tim (Barber from [Tiny Vices](#)) on the book, he really liked the images where Amelia was doing something and being engaged. So based on his edit, I shot differently all summer, which also makes Amelia happy. So I don't let her look at me anymore I tell her to do something, have fun. Which has been great. It's allowed me to be less controlling and really turned into documenting this kid and what she does. So I'm less self-conscious in a way.



And you also made the transition into color?





“Amelia’s World” was my first foray into color and I work with it differently. It’s exciting and a nice change after 25 years of black and white. I met a woman in Dumbo named Julie Pochron (of [Pochron Studios](#)). She does my exhibition prints and edits with me. She initially showed me how these prints could be made. It was serendipity. It wasn’t just a lab or business relationship. She took a real interest in helping me. Because of Amelia, I couldn’t print in the darkroom any more, the chemicals aren’t good for you and I just didn’t have the stamina. Color is fun. I can add and

subtract well in color.

How did work for “Amelia’s World” come about?

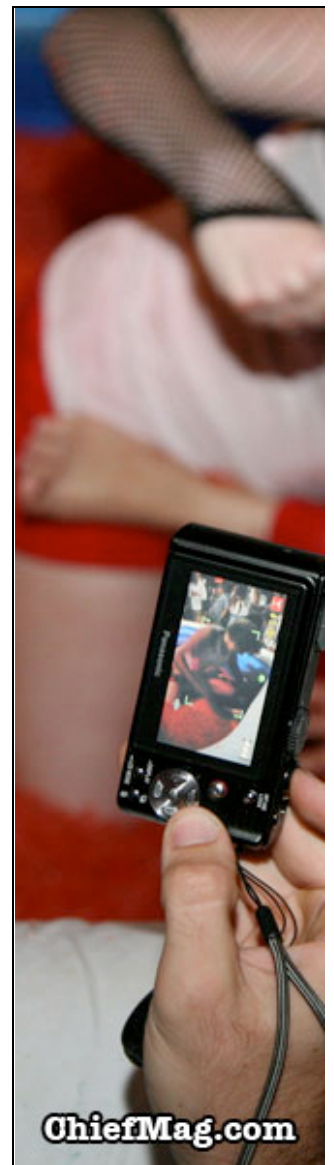
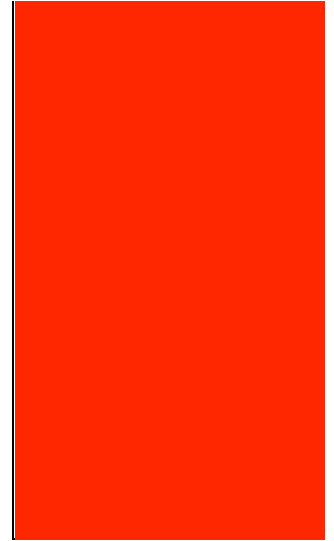
In order to be an artist you need to continually get new work done, balancing that with motherhood is very difficult sometimes. During the week I’m teaching and the weekends I want to be able to spend time with Amelia so this project makes perfect sense as long as this is something that she’s continues to be interested in.

I was at the circus and met someone that had a chimpanzee and so I got this monkey contact and they let me in. From there it turned into this networking thing. It’s a very small world. The image on the cover of book was the first image I shot. Amelia was around 3 and she went with me to visit a 2-year old chimp. The two of them just got along instantly, they loved each other. They were hugging and fell off the chair together arm in arm. It was pretty amazing to be there, watching and photographing. And the idea just grew from there.

On some level these shoots have got to be staged, right?

I don’t have that much to do with it, I really don’t. There are a lot of variables between Amelia and the animals. She has the attention span of a kid. And then you add in the animals that don’t pose for you so you’re dealing with these short time frames. It’s a bit like hunting I guess.

Then there’s the fact that I’m using a medium format camera ([Mamiya 7](#)). It requires a bit more preparation. I actually think that it’s made me a better photographer. I



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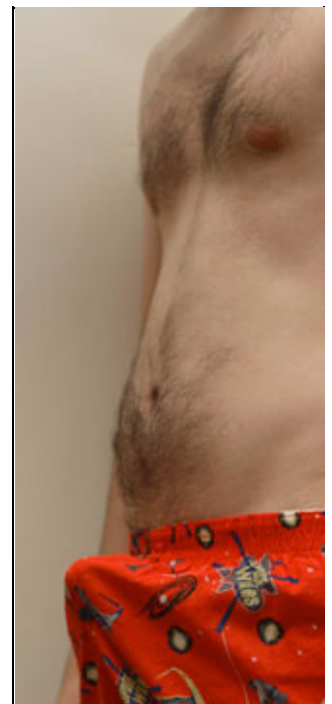
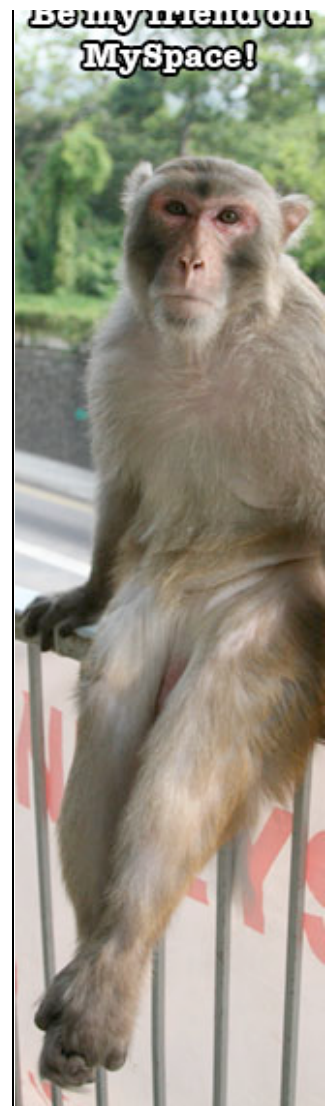
think a camera can't really do anything, but because I'm a bit stressed by the economics involved, it forces me to be more organized. I think anybody can take good pictures with a plastic inexpensive camera, but with my camera now versus when I shot 35mm, I can't be as cavalier with the photos that I take. So I'm a little more careful with what I'm shooting.



A lot of people think the images have been photoshopped, but they're experienced the way I shot them. For example, when I shot the monkeys, I had this rule that wouldn't shoot through bars or glass. The rule wasn't so much photographic, but I used it that way, I wanted to be able to interact and not have that filter. That was a line I didn't want to cross. The photos appear as they were shot and that's all part of the fantasy. I don't really change much, like some people manipulate their images. Especially in this field, the people I really admire all use natural light and color.

Can you explain how the book grew out of this project?

Ryan McGinley saw my work at Julie Pochron's studio, I guess it was up on the wall and he liked it then he said something to Tim. So I submitted work, but there wasn't a lot of conversation that initially took place. Tim liked my work and included it a number of traveling shows, which was great for me. Then in the Fall (2007) he wrote to me, "Do you want to do a book?" and I wrote back and said "Sure," but then I kind of let it go. Then all of a sudden in January, he said he needed the book edit. And I was like "Oh Shit!" so I worked night and day to get the proofs together. He put this deal together with Aperture for a five-book deal series. It's been such an incredible



opportunity for me. I finished the edit in March and it was really a marathon process.

Is it difficult to separate the role of mother and photographer at times?

Yes, it can be difficult and a bit frustrating. She's a great kid, but her patience level is like anyone at that age. I have to go with the flow and seek her cooperation and sometimes I'm amazed we get anything done!

How has this project changed your relationship with Amelia?

It's definitely changing. In the beginning maybe she doesn't even remember the photos we took. Now Amelia is older and more articulate so I can talk to her and say, "What do you think?" So she has ideas and suggests things. I want this to be a glimpse into her life, whether it be true or not true.

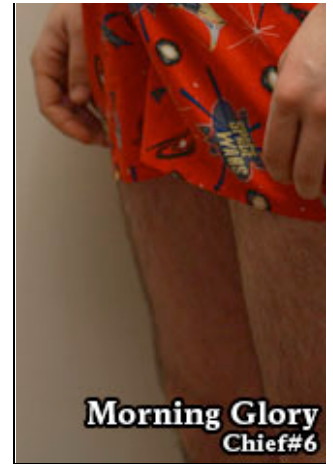


Amelia and I get ideas from a lot of places. Whether it be from paintings at the Met or whatever, it's things that are really important to both of us. There are stories and allegories that go along with that. Recently, I photographed Amelia at my dentist's place on Fire Island and there was a seal skin there. We had recently seen that John Sayles movie [The Secret of Roan Inish](#) so we were pretending based off of this experience that we shared and it's really fun.

Doing this important because it's something that we do together. Maybe in a couple of years, when she's a teenager, she won't want to talk to me. So I feel I need to take advantage of this while I can. She's the most important thing in my life. So as long as she lets me do this, I'm going to figure out a way to make new or fresh ideas with her. I want her to be able to look back at her childhood see me as being around and not just off in my own world.

Is there a clear demarcation between work time and family time?

The kind of camera that I'm shooting with is not that spontaneous. Plus the nature of this project is very deliberate in a way, the way you have to approach it. We're setting up appointments and going certain places. Amelia's relationship to this project is very interesting too. One of the reasons that Amelia does this is that she knows she'll never get to hang out with these animals otherwise. I mean, you can't just go up to someone and say, "Hi, my daughter wants to hang out with kangaroos." You have to have a reason to do it, not to mention knowing someone that has them.



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So these haven't replaced family photos?

Robert (her husband, who is also an [artist](#)) takes the family photos. He's got more pictures than I do now. I used to take them when I shot 35mm, but it was a lot cheaper then. I'd take more photos if I had more money.

Have the two of you ever thought about collaborating?

Well we collaborated together on Amelia and she turned out well.

What are you going to be working on next?

I'm looking for a gallery, but for the time being, this project has shown me that I'm not ready to leave behind Amelia or the animals in my work. They're what make me happy.

*For those of you who are interested, here are a couple animal-themed dating sites:

[Animal Attraction](#)

[Love Me Love My Pets](#)

Websites

[Robin Schwartz' Website](#)

Interview by: Scott J. Lachut

Photos courtesy of Robin Schwartz

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