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Jaclyn Salvaggio (above) in her darkroom at Simmons College, and developing a print (left): "I was just sort of going for this dreamy, fairylike quality."



The Process

Working with ghostly images

By Louise Kennedy

GLOBE STAFF

Photographer Jaclyn Salvaggio, 25, projects light through paper negatives, rather than film, to make softly blurred and feathered images that look like the beginning of a story — or the last wisps of a dream. Salvaggio, who graduated from Simmons College in 1999, will have a solo show at Gallery NAGA next winter. In her Simmons darkroom, she spoke recently about her work.

I start with just regular negatives. I've been shooting a lot of 2¼ now, with a Hasselblad. I make a small print, the same size as the negative. Then I rip the paper in half, to get the texture from all those fibers — and it's easier to get light through it, because it's thinner.

She holds up a small original print and picks at a corner of the back side with her thumbnail.

I just start by peeling. I try to peel it as thin as I can. It makes the difference between a 6-minute exposure and a 20-minute exposure. I just get a little piece going, and then when I have a good amount done, I just peel the whole back off.

Then I make a paper negative, and then from that I make a print. I was doing 11-by-14s, but now I'm doing larger ones, 19 by 19.

Then I've been toning them sepia. It's a two-step process. You bleach the photo for like five minutes, and the image almost totally disappears, which is

frightening. Then I rinse it and put it into the toner — which is the one with the horrible sulfur smell — and it comes back like instantly. Then I rinse it again, and then I put it into the hardener. I have to press them afterward, too — see how the paper curls?

This process is something I encountered in a class. I loved the ghostly, memorylike images I was getting, and I just started experimenting.

At first, I just used images I already had. These new ones are the first ones I did knowing that I was doing them for this process. I knew exactly what I wanted; I had it in my head. I was just sort of going for this dreamy, fairylike quality. All my models seem to have this fairylike quality — like little nymphs.

I sort of went into the project not knowing what I was making. I don't know if that's backward, but it's working. The moment you wake up in the morning and you remember a dream, and you can't quite remember it but you remember little pieces — that's what I'm interested in.

This process is a lot of being in the dark, rather than using my camera. When making the final print, the exposure times are extensive, because the image has been through so many steps already, and when it goes through the paper fibers, it just takes so long — 7 to 22 minutes. So — thank God for NPR! If I have a 22-minute exposure, there's nothing I can do in this room, in the dark, except wait.