

2016

## Disruptive By Design

Raegen Pietrucha

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/innovation>

---

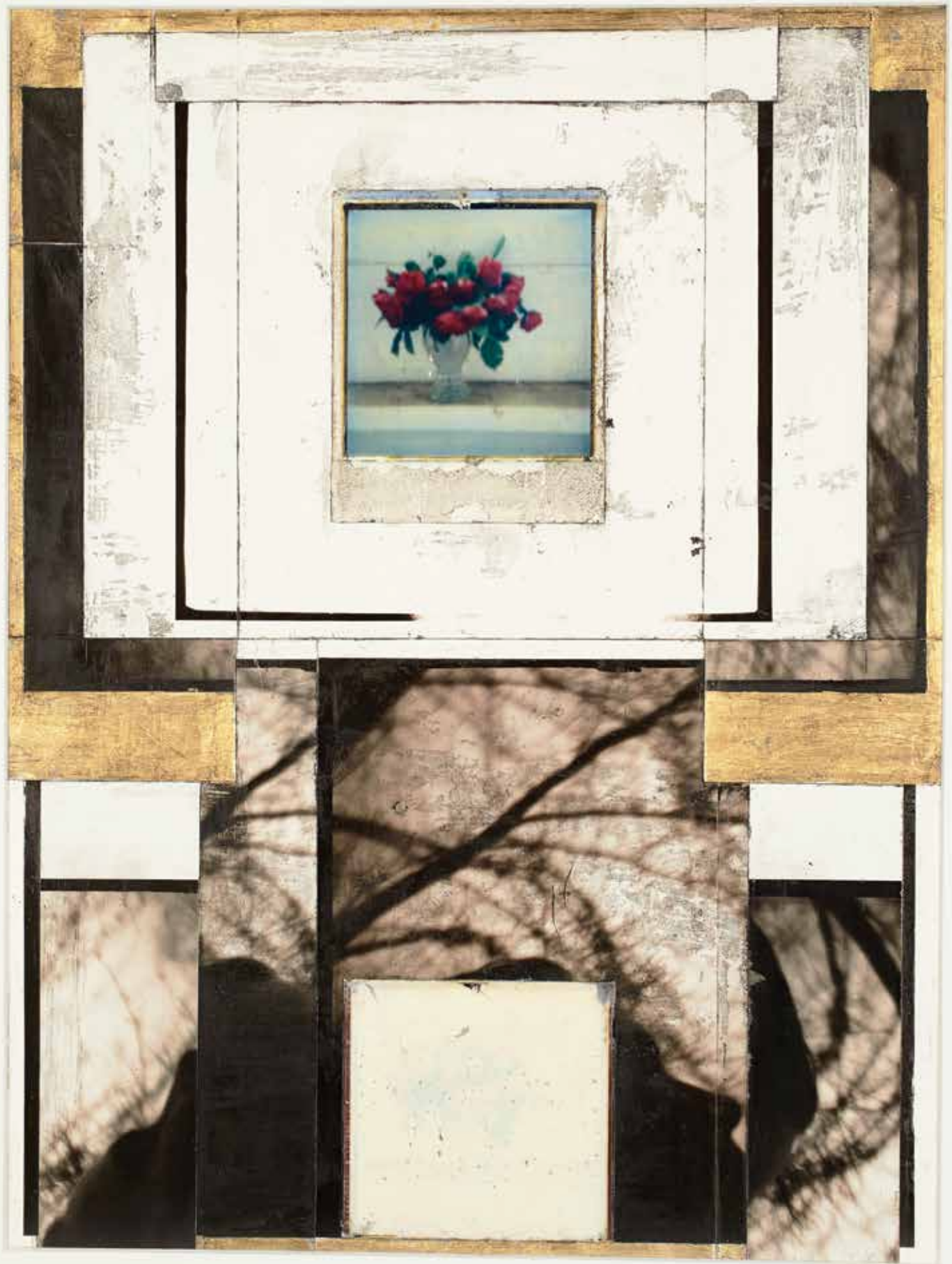
### Repository Citation

Pietrucha, Raegen (2016) "Disruptive By Design," *UNLV Innovation*: Vol. 9, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/innovation/vol9/iss1/8>

This Features is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Features in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Features has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Innovation by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).



[ From the artist's portfolio *To Embrace* by Catherine Angel ]

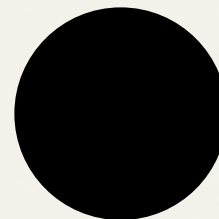
# Disruptive by Design

**T**he song you can't get out of your head. That image burned into your memory. The scene that melts even the most hardened hearts.

Art is crafted to make an emotional impact. But beyond the emotions it inspires are the ideas it promotes, concepts that have the power to transform both artist and audience. Through their unique brainchildren, artists introduce us to new ways of thinking and undermine our sense of complacency and certitude, forcing us to question, to rethink, to see ourselves anew.

Four UNLV fine arts faculty are disrupting our perceptions of artists, the arts, and our world.

**BY  
RAEGEN  
PIETRUCHA**



**PORTRAITS  
BY  
JOSH  
HAWKINS**





## Going Off Script

*Nate Bynum says today's actors need to be more than just performers.*

**A**ctors, by trade, are people of many faces. But some of the faces Nate Bynum wears might surprise you.

Bynum has played dramatic roles, comedic roles, and even musical roles. He's a screen and stage actor, favoring neither one over the other because he simply loves being creative. He is also a senior professor of theatre. A writer. And one day, he may even go on to be a producer and director.

Bynum has disrupted his craft by embracing a down-to-earth, businesslike approach to his fine art. And he's moved beyond it into other areas that make his life—and the lives of the artists he teaches—more sustainable professionally.

"Acting is fine," Bynum says. "I love it. It's what I do. But I would like to see actors become writers, directors, and producers—to learn the business end of it as opposed to thinking being an actor is the end-all. It's not. As an actor, you're the last person hired, and there are lots of actors to choose from."

With more than three decades of experience in his industry, Bynum is no stranger to the realities of acting. From roles in movies like *Iron Man 3*, *My Dog Skip*, and *The Rainmaker* to TV shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and *Crash* to plays like *The Killing Ground*, *Seven Guitars*, and *Urinetown*, he's seen it all—and brings that knowledge to bear practically as he approaches his roles.

While Bynum is a student of many different acting approaches—classical, method, masque, and more—in today's acting world, it's the role that determines the amount of preparation an actor can do. For the roles that allow for some groundwork, Bynum goes deep. He does character studies. He researches speech patterns, occupations and geographical regions related to the role. He practices with dialect and accent tapes. He examines the tone and nature of a given part as well as the show and director to which it belongs.

"The idea is this: You want to walk into the room and be the visual perception of what they see in their minds, so you have to make a choice as to which vision you want to or can present," Bynum says. "That helps take away that part of the challenge of convincing them you're right for the role. It then becomes your acting that helps you."



For the roles that require him to act on his toes, Bynum relies on his well-honed improvisational skills. Perhaps this is why he so values the art of improvisation.

"I teach and use improvisation regularly because you never know what you might face out there," Bynum says. "For instance, I never knew I was doing *Ironman 3* until I got on the set. We did three auditions, but they didn't tell us what we were shooting. It was very private because it was a big-budget movie."

"As an actor, you have to be able to adjust for the unexpected. I always tell my [student] actors, 'Know your lines. Know your character. Be willing to go with the flow,' because the stars you work with may come on set without having looked at the script, and they'll say, 'I'm going to go with this. We know how it has to end. Just follow along with me.' Well, that's your job. That's what you have to do, so that must be part of your training."

But only part. Bynum believes that training for today's actors must go well beyond creative flexibility. The interdisciplinary stage and screen acting curriculum he created at UNLV reflects this. In addition to film and theater courses,

Bynum's curriculum includes screenwriting, Shakespeare, voiceover, and production classes.

"When I got here, the first thing I realized was that we're four hours away from L.A., but we weren't training students to work in L.A.," Bynum says. "That made no sense to me."

Bynum knows Los Angeles well. He recently shot four commercials there: one for Cox Cable, one for Sears, one for FedEx, and one for a new pharmaceutical that strengthens bones. He's also being considered for two movie roles and one TV role.

Bynum is quick to note, however, that he's actually got much more than this going on—and indicates this is the case because he's branched out beyond acting.

"If you know how to direct, produce, write, and do other things, there are just going to be more opportunities for you professionally," Bynum says. "That's why I write more than I act now."

In addition to two scholarly articles he co-authored this year, "Stemming the Tide: The Presentation of Women Scientists in *CSI*" and "Using Reader's Theatre to Improve Reading Fluency in African-American Male Students With Learning and Behavioral Challenges," Bynum is in the middle of writing biopics (biographical movies)



#### ARTIST'S ADVICE:

**BRANCH OUT** "Acting is fine," says Nate Bynum, senior professor of theater. "But I would like to see actors become writers, directors, and producers."

on singer Joe Tex and comedian Flip Wilson. The writing project he's most excited about, though, is a period piece he adapted from the Margaret Culkin Banning story "Women Come to Judgment," which won a Harpers (Magazine) Prize in 1924. Bynum's script of the same name tells the story of a young feminist in the 1920s who, after graduating from law school, returns to her hometown to discover that a local court is ignoring a rape case. At the time, women had won the right to vote, but they were not permitted to sit on juries. Bynum's protagonist realizes that to gain justice for the rape victim, she will first have to fight for women's inclusion on the jury.

"I tend to write about topical material that has some social grit to it," Bynum says. "All actors are recorders of history. We document the world as it is now. However, because I'm also a professor, I gravitate toward this notion of, 'How can I contribute, how can I make a difference, and how can I get my voice heard through my art?'"

Bynum was recently informed by a major production company that his pilot submission of *Women Come to Judgment* was accepted. If that's any indication of the impact he's making as a professor and an artist, his unique approach to this business of acting has paid off.

## Strange Songfellows

*By marrying the contradictory, Linda Lister shakes up the opera scene.*

**D**issonance: inharmonious sound, an unresolved chord, a disagreement or incongruity. In most cases, it's the exact opposite of what a musician hopes to achieve.

That's not the case for Linda Lister. The opera singer, choreographer, composer, producer, director, and UNLV associate professor of voice actively creates discord by pairing the seemingly incongruent together. Through this discord, she aims to disrupt how we think about opera, education, and the arts in general.

Take, for instance, one of her more recent works, an opera based on the idea of Lady Gaga and Madonna "diva-fighting"—complete with meat dress—that Lister set to Mozart. Or her version of *La bohème* set in modern-day, hipster Brooklyn. Or the juxtaposition of two very different operas—Puccini's *Suor Angelica* and Hindemith's *Sancta Susanna*—that had mostly just nuns (yes, nuns) in common, and for which Lister garnered the 2014 American Prize in Directing.

Pairing Puccini's famous and emotional one-act opera with, in Lister's words, a "really bizarre piece" from Hindemith about a nun who perhaps had a sexual awakening ... or perhaps is crazy ... or perhaps is possessed by the devil ... or perhaps is just a wild child who doesn't belong in a nunnery is the type of thing that inspires Lister creatively.

"As I've progressed as an artist, I look for something that's really going to impact people—not just a pretty song," Lister says. "With opera, you've hopefully been true to what the composer or librettist wants, but then you've got to bring something new to it, something different. That pairing was the most out there I'd gone with a production, and it took these singers going to the edge, to that weird place, for it to work."

For audiences, she admits, such performances can be a bit unsettling.

"By pairing two very different works together, people are hopefully thinking critically about how they interrelate, compare, and contrast—[these] different



#### ARTIST'S ADVICE: DO

**IT DIFFERENTLY** "As I've progressed as an artist, I look for something that's really going to impact people," says Linda Lister, associate professor of voice and director of opera. "But then you've got to bring something new to it, something different."



composers from different time periods, backgrounds, and languages,” Lister says. “Some of them may not like the newer work. That’s fine. They can be challenged by it.”

When Lister chooses music for her students to perform, she considers their unique talents and selects pieces that highlight their strengths but also teach them something. If, for instance, a student was assigned a Mozart piece to learn *recitativo* (recitative delivery, which adopts the rhythms of ordinary speech), Lister might also throw in something *verismo* (a more impassioned form of expression) to provide a greater breadth of experience.

Lister says she works to create a “safe space” for her singers so they can reach a place of genuine vulnerability during their performances. “That’s what people really want to see in live performance,” Lister says. “In this day and age, what our industry struggles with is, what’s going to get people out of their houses with the megascreen TV? If you can give them something they can feel live, that gives them goosebumps because you’ve brought them to this emotional precipice, then you’ve given them what they want, something no screen can provide.”

In addition to composing and teaching, Lister sings on a forthcoming CD, *Moments of Arrival* (Centaur Records), and has co-authored a book with Auburn University colleague Matthew Hoch titled *Voice Secrets: 100 Performance Strategies for the Advanced Singer*. Drawing

from both research and her practical experience, the book provides informative tips on everything from music memorization to reputation management, language learning, and more.

Lister will also be working with a doctoral student, Bonita Bunt, who is translating the operatic version of *Hamlet*—currently in French—back into Shakespeare’s native tongue. From there the two plan to organize a performance and entire Hamlet festival that includes contributions from UNLV scholars working in English literature, film studies, psychology, and more.

And, of course, Lister’s always got a new odd couple she’d like us to meet. This time, it’s two distinct versions of Orpheus, the lyre player and father of song from Greek mythology. Lister has paired a well-known Orpheus opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Christoph Gluck, with a more obscure French version, *Les Malheurs d’Orphée* by Darius Milhaud, to get us to think about the character—and opera itself—a bit differently.

“Opera is still an important art form,” Lister says. “There tends to be this intimidation with respect to it because of the foreign languages and musical complexity, but it’s not that different from other music forms once you learn more about it. Opera was the popular music of its day, not a museum piece. It was the hot thing. It’s about people living, loving, dying—just like any other drama. They just do it while they’re singing.”



**This opera singer, choreographer, composer, producer, director, and UNLV associate professor of voice actively creates discord by pairing the seemingly incongruent together. Her juxtaposition of two very different operas—Puccini’s *Suor Angelica* and Hindemith’s *Sancta Susanna*—that had mostly just nuns (yes, nuns) in common garnered Lister the 2014 American Prize in Directing.**

#### ARTIST’S ADVICE: MAKE IT COUNT

“I feel so much more fulfilled having done *The Track*, even if it never makes a dollar, because it’s raising awareness,” says Brett Levner, assistant professor of film.



## Shooting for Progress

*Brett Levner, leaving reality TV behind, uses film to fight underage sex trafficking.*

**A**s she tells it, Brett Levner had no idea that the dark drama occurring outside her Berkeley, California, home would profoundly alter her focus as an artist. In fact, recalls Levner—now a director, producer and assistant professor of film at UNLV—she wasn't quite sure what she was seeing when she looked out her window.

"I kept seeing this young girl—maybe 15, 16—on the street corner," Levner says. "She looked like a suburban kid with a T-shirt, jeans and a Hello Kitty backpack, but she was going in and out of cars, and they were bringing her back. At first I didn't understand what was happening. Then it occurred to me. I'd read an article about the rise of underage sex trafficking in the Oakland area. I thought, 'What is going on here?'"

Levner, then working as an adjunct at the Academy of Art University and the College of Marin, was new to teaching; the bulk of her career had been spent successfully producing

nonfiction and reality TV shows like *True Life*, *Bridezillas*, and *The First 48*. Right outside her window was a different reality, though—one she felt compelled to respond to through her art.

"I just wanted to do something more meaningful than my past work," Levner says. "I started thinking, because I'm a teacher now, I had a responsibility to do something that had a message. I felt I had to be a mentor and role model, and I thought if I made a film that could make a difference in the community and raise awareness, that would be a good example to set."

Thus Levner disrupted her own artistic trajectory, realizing that a project she could be passionate about was right in front of her. She tackled the difficult subject matter by creating a short film called *The Track* (after the slang term used to reference the particular area of town where prostitutes solicit customers), which combines fictionalized storytelling with a gritty, *cinéma vérité* shooting style native to the documentary film genre.

Levner's preoccupation with trafficking wouldn't end there, though. By 2011, she had joined UNLV's faculty and was thinking about producing a feature film. When she ran across an article in the *L.A. Times* about underage sex trafficking in California and Las Vegas, she knew she had her subject. It was time to tell the story of Sin City's victims.

Once again, she would call the film *The Track*.

Once again, she would create a fictionalized story around an underage sex trafficking victim named Barbie, whose path crosses with a mother from the suburbs, Caren, who is grieving the loss of her child. Once again, Levner would use the "run-and-gun" documentary shooting style using handheld cameras.

But this time around, she would be making a full-length film ... and studying up on the subject first. "The thing I screwed up with on the short was, I didn't do enough research," Levner says. "I wrote a story from my imagination, and I saw the repercussions of that in the authenticity of the performances. So I said to myself, 'This time, I'm going to do it right.'"

Levner's research would be the in-the-field variety. She teamed up with UNLV criminal justice professor Alexis Kennedy (Page 9), an expert in the field of sex trafficking, who connected Levner with a number of locals involved in the fight against this type of exploitation. Levner was introduced to Esther Rodriguez Brown, founder of The Embracing Project, a local organization that assists youth affected by sex trafficking and gang violence. Brown took Levner, along with *The Track* screenwriter/producer Matthew McCue and producer/alum Domenica Castro (2013), to the courthouse to meet the judge who sentences juvenile victims. They attended a Southern Nevada Human Trafficking Task Force meeting, where they heard a former prostitute and former pimp speak. They met former Nevada Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto, who was working diligently at the time to pass harsher regulations on sentencing for pimps. Masto provided background to the filmmakers on the legal challenges surrounding the issue.

The script was completed in 2013, and in 2014, Levner launched an Indiegogo campaign to help fund the movie. She raised \$25,000, which was supplemented by additional financial support from private investors, thanks to the work of producer/alum May May Luong (2006). Cash in hand, Levner began auditioning and casting for the film. Missy Yager (from *Mad Men*), Sam Trammell (from *True Blood*), Mike Doyle (from *Green Lantern* and *Law & Order: SVU*), Michael Munney (from *Veronica Mars* and *The Young and the Restless*), Bre Blair (from *Game of Silence* and *The Baby-Sitters Club*), Clarence Gilyard (from *Die Hard* and *Walker, Texas Ranger*), and newcomer Mariah Kirstie all joined the roster.

*The Track* was filmed in just 17 days during October 2014. It was shot in various locations

around Las Vegas, including the UNLV campus. Postproduction work—editing, sound design, music, and color correction—was completed in March of 2016. Every stage of the project provided UNLV students with unique professional development opportunities.

“It was a tremendous teaching tool,” Levner says. “A lot of my students worked in exchange for hands-on experience and credit that you typically have to work your way up the ranks for. Here, they got to jump that hurdle and go directly to being on the set of a feature film. From editing to the music and more, they brought so much to the project, and I couldn’t have made this film without them.”

Screenings of the feature film began in April 2016, and it officially premiered on June 12 at Los Angeles’ Dances With Films Film Festival. It also secured two awards at the Las Vegas Film Festival: Best Local Feature and Best First-Time Feature Director. And although Levner is waiting to hear back from potential digital distribution partners, the impact of the movie has already been felt. A charity screening Levner organized raised more than \$4,000, and the film has become an important tool for Brown, a social worker in both the film and in real life, who has shared it with some of The Embracing Project’s victims and at Las Vegas detention centers.

“I feel so much more fulfilled having done *The Track*, even if it never makes a dollar, because it’s raising awareness,” Levner says. “It’s also been a wonderful artistic exercise that helped me hone my skills, improve, and continue on my educational journey as a director. It’s a story that could’ve been told by many people, but I became the conduit for it, and I’m proud of that.”



***The Track* was filmed in just 17 days during October 2014. It was shot in various locations around Las Vegas, including the UNLV campus. Every stage of the project provided UNLV students with unique professional development opportunities.**

## Balance Through Contrast

*For Catherine Angel, opposing modes create an unmistakable intimacy.*

If you were to visit an art gallery and see sharp, black-and-white portraits alongside mixed-media collages of objects duplicated and blurred, you’d likely assume you were looking at photos of two different artists.

Welcome to the work of Catherine Angel.

Angel’s photography disrupts the notion that artists should have only one style or aesthetic, that they must work toward cultivating a single, distinct “voice.” Her work is instead unified by an unmistakable, palpable intimacy—a sense that, whether in portrait or collage, we are nearing a personal space into which we’ll be trespassing, yet we simply can’t resist exploring it.

Angel, a professor of art at UNLV, deliberately divides her artistic modes. She uses, for example, her black-and-white, highly detailed large-format portraiture to probe the sometimes fraught relationships between herself and her subjects.

“I adore deeply personal exchanges, but I don’t find them easy in everyday life,” Angel says. “That is why a lot of my work is portrait-based. There is an intimate exchange, and it gives me permission to have that exchange. My deepest wish is that a stranger looks at a photograph I took of you during that exchange and is moved. Then there’s this intimate exchange of us all being human through this art, and that makes us not alone in the world.”

For her collages, she often employs toy cameras—their plastic lenses creating softer, blurry renderings—to create images evocative of memories, recollections involving herself as a human, a woman, an artist, and a cancer survivor.

“My nature is extremely private, so art gives me a place to practice not being that,” Angel says. “If I self-censor as a person in the world, I’m making work that’s about not self-censoring.”

All of Angel’s work arises from a form of personal engagement that is emotional, physical, or both. Her first serious photograph was taken at age 21. Angel says she made it while working toward a degree in dance, shortly after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Unsure that