

Julie Blackmon

Domestic Vacations



Blurring the line between fiction and autobiography, Julie Blackmon's photography explores the wonderment found in daily life. The constant chaos of a household full of children and the need to escape is ever present. By fusing the real and the imagined, Blackmon show us that sometimes the best vacations are the ones not far from home. Blackmon discusses her Domestic Vacations series in an exclusive interview with the Photomedia Center.

Tell our readers a little about your background and how you came to the medium of photography as an artist.

I am the oldest of nine kids. Growing up in that kind of environment with all those siblings, well, it just seemed like a terrible thing at the time. It was embarrassing, in some ways, because my mom was always pregnant or nursing, and no one else had that many kids in their family. Every minute of every day was crazy and chaotic, for example, absent father much of the time, kids crying.

It took until I was in my early twenties to really appreciate it and to realize that I was pretty lucky to have had such an eccentric childhood experience. In some ways, as stressful and dysfunctional as it could be, my childhood was also pretty rich and delightful.

Somehow, amidst the stress and chaos of it all, my mom found the time to really direct us in a lot of ways, for example, teaching us how to draw and paint, or how to play instruments. We all had our lives threatened if we didn't practice our piano every day. So I guess the arts were always a part of our lives.

In college, at Missouri State University, which was just a block away from home, it didn't take me long to discover photography, and when I did, I was immediately hooked. And the subject matter at home was endless.

But then there was a period after getting out of school that I wasn't able to do much beyond typical snapshots. Got married, had three kids. It was another 12 years before I got back into it.

There are similarities in the progression from your previous work "Mind Games" and "Domestic Vacations." Both explore childhood activities. But the "Domestic Vacations" series has a different feel, besides the obvious difference from black and white to color. Can you elaborate on this progression between the two sets?

I live in the same neighborhood I grew up in, along with my husband and three children. About five years ago, I bought an enlarger, set up a darkroom, and started photographing my kids outside playing. That turned into the "Mind Games" work. I entered it in a national project competition and ended up getting an award on it, which motivated me keep going and exploring my world at home.

After a couple of years, I came to a point with it where I felt like I was ready to go on to something else. So, I thought I'd try working in color. I did this because I wanted the work to reflect contemporary culture a little more. And color seemed like a good way to start, in terms of emphasizing certain modern details that were part of our lives, like Bratz Dolls or iPods. But still, I didn't know what I was doing for a while.

Across: Cherry, (year).



Across: *Powerade*, (year);
 Right: *Cupcake*, (year);
 Below: *Party Lights*,
 (year).

The image, "Nail Polish," is set in my sister Millie's house. I was just playing around with the idea of the mother on the telephone, and I didn't think of it as being such an interesting backdrop because her house really looks like this and I was so used to it this way. But after I got "Nail Polish," it was like, okay, maybe this is something I could work with, this surreal sort of setting, and maybe I don't have to show real life exactly, I can show my interpretation of everyday life.

So I started looking at everyday life around me a little differently. About that same time I started looking at a lot of painting, even before I got "Nail Polish" I was sort of on a search for an idea. I loved the Dutch and Flemish genre paintings of the 17th century. I especially loved the paintings of Jan Steen. The subtle humor seemed timeless in a way, and some of the crazy





PC, (year).

scenes reminded me of my childhood, with all of us kids—even now, since we’re all together so often.

This is probably the biggest difference between the color and black and white work. Just the humor or the lighthearted look at contemporary culture.

Your photos of children have a playful yet unsentimental feel of how children navigate their world and space, which is very authentic. How do you generate and capture ideas that continue this thread?

I guess I just get ideas from the world around me. My youngest is nine now, but he continues to inspire me, as do my nephews and nieces that I’m around every day.

The environment is very much an actor in the images. Tell us about the locations and more about the world described in “Domestic Vacations.”

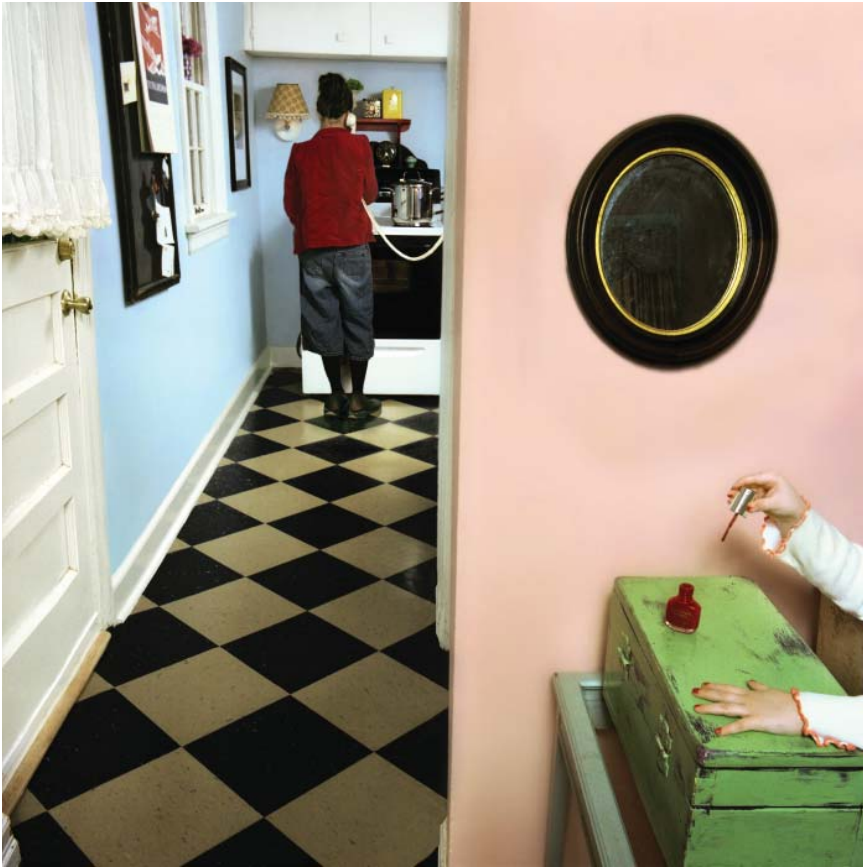
Most of this work I shot in my own house. But it’s been edited and fictionalized to give it that fantastical appearance. I consider my props and backdrops almost as important as the moment or gesture of a figure in a piece. And maybe I think like an illustrator or someone in animation because I love to make those props in my work—whether it’s an umbrella or a painting on the wall, come to life a little bit—sort of give them some personality.

Your more recent photos tend to show more deliberate staging and digital work. How do you capture such an un-orchestrated look, even though many present a manipulated photo?

While my work involves a lot of staging and digital work, usually the moment the photo revolves around—whether it’s a certain gesture or expression—is truly spontaneous and captured in the traditional “decisive moment” kind of way. So in that sense, the way I start out working is still very much rooted in photography. I may give the kids or my sisters some ideas of things to do, but usually the strongest moments are truly un-orchestrated. It’s afterwards that I can change the context of a certain expression or gesture, and imply a narrative.

It is frequently said that now photography has embraced digital processes, photomedia artists work much more like painters. Do you agree?

Yes, I think the digital process has blurred the line between the two. So what I’m doing feels a lot like painting, but it also seems a bit like filmmaking and illustration, too. And I could give a long list of influences that come from those areas.



Nail Polish, (year).



Flying Umbrellas, (year).

It is notable that many images make dynamic use of the edge of the frame, which gives the images an expansive feel. Others are simply loaded with elements and objects. How do you go about constructing your compositions?

The starting point is usually just photographing somebody in an environment I find interesting. Then I edit through what I've taken and pick out what I think are the strongest moments. It's not an entire image I'm considering at this point, just maybe one little thing. And then I usually work from that. I try to think what kind of narrative I could imply from, for example, a certain gesture or expression, and then how to enhance that moment, whether it's through lighting or different props or other moments added in later. And because I photograph on a tripod in the environment that will serve as the backdrop for the entire image, it makes it possible to go back to add in anything later from the same vantage point without it seeming to be collaged or photoshopped.

You use family members as models: sisters, nieces, your own children. Where is the line between acting and documentary portraiture?

That's always a bit of a challenge to answer. My work is based on my experiences growing up and now as a mother. But it's a fictional and light-hearted take on it. And the fact that the models are family members really just has to do with convenience and maybe a certain uninhibited comfort level between us that allows me to capture moments that happen because of that relationship. But it's not as though I only use family members because it's about my family, it's not that simple.

My husband is a writer and somehow his work tells the truth about our lives more than if he'd written it exactly as it happened. So maybe that's what I'm doing with my work. And hopefully there are truths within my own family experience that other people can relate to.



Above: *Birds at Home*, (year); Across, top: *The Power of Now*, (year); Across, below: *American Gothic*, (year).



Julie Blackmon lives in ----- .



Julie Blackmon, *Play Group*, (year).

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The Photomedia Center is a non-profit arts organization which promotes the creation and exhibition of fine art photography and digital media.