

# Outer Circle

FALL 2007

10

## Diana Lui: Soul to Soul

Capturing life through large-format portraits • 6

## The Power of the Network: Art Center's Alumni Ambassadors

Representing Art Center around the globe • 4, 8

## Connecting the Dots: Art Center's inCircle Network

Alumni tool making the world a little smaller • 3



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1700 Lida Street, Pasadena, CA 91103

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# Soul to Soul

Diana Lui strives to capture images that tell a personal story, about both photographer and subject

Illustration by Martha Rich ILLU '00

These days, questions about what makes an image beautiful, compelling or even real are up for grabs. Anyone with a cell phone or digital camera can contribute to the visual debate through numerous online outlets. But in a world of rampant imagery, with more pictures available in more formats and accessible through more media than ever before, we still have a nagging issue: the human experience remains shockingly elusive.

It's an interesting time to be a photographer. As a result, there are many possible pathways to distinction: own a niche market through a memorable and reproducible style; diversify for career success in a variety of disciplines and industries; master new technologies as quickly as they emerge; experiment with entirely new ways of seeing.

**Diana Lui** PHOT FINE '92 offers a simpler solution: Travel the world with an old-fashioned, large-format, 8x10 camera, making portraits that elicit the essence of the people she meets. As part of this issue's focus on Art Center Alumni Ambassadors, *Outer Circle* interviewed Diana, an artist-photographer-filmmaker and Paris alumni ambassador, about her unique approach to her discipline.

**Outer Circle:** What did you learn at Art Center?

**Diana Lui:** I left UCLA with a mixed media portfolio that was a combination of photographs, drawings and paintings, and entered Art Center to study photography and fine art. I developed technically at Art Center. Technique is very important. There are so many talented people whose talent is never realized because they don't channel it through technique. Art Center also gave me the discipline I needed and enabled me to hone my skills.

**OC:** Why does portraiture figure so prominently in your work?

**DL:** When I left Malaysia at age 14, my parents brought me to Los Angeles. I had a very difficult time adjusting. After five years in the States, I went back to Malaysia and was shocked by what I had forgotten. I had a major existential and identity crisis. Photography became my way of channeling the need to remember things, to preserve things as they happened in my life and develop my own artificial roots through taking pictures. Self-portraits became a way to recognize myself existentially. Then I moved on to questions about my ethnicity. What is Chinese? Malaysian? American? I started to photograph people around me who were rootless in the same way I was, or had artificial roots, multiple backgrounds and ethnicities. Then I moved on to rooted people, people who had never moved. What started as a way to know myself became a way to know others. I like to spend time with my subjects and explore their layers. Using a large camera, as I do, doesn't actually intimidate people. It fascinates them and ignites their curiosity. I don't like stealing images of souls, so to speak. There is a true search for complicity between myself and my subjects. Sometimes the subject may feel uncomfortable because the experience is too "naked," but then they get used to it, and the process awakens something within them. My goal is to shake people out of the hypnosis of everyday life.

**OC:** How are travel and photography connected for you?

**DL:** When I left school, I married and moved to Belgium. It was such a different way of life. Quite surreal. I was disconnected from everything around me. I didn't have a place to paint, so the camera became my tool of choice. During this time I was traveling a lot to Malaysia. It was there that I started to reconnect with my roots. I was photographing a lot of people, and suddenly I realized that my portrait photography and travel will be forever linked—that remaining open to new encounters and people will be my *raison d'être*. There is a rhythm whenever I travel. There is nothing very precise, unless something presents itself precisely.

**OC:** Why do you use an 8x10 camera?

**DL:** Art Center had some great teachers who played key roles in fine-tuning my creativity. In my last year at Art Center, Tony Zepeda in the Printmaking Studio gave me a lot of room to explore. I started developing photo prints with bromoil and salt printing, photogravures and eventually with platinum/palladium printing that required the quality of a negative shot on an 8x10 camera. Nothing compared to the quality of these negatives. I landed in a medium which is essentially archaic but which revealed to me an entirely different way of photographing. I remember a conversation with Tim Bradley [Chair of Photography at the time]. He said that it's not really the technology that will change the way the photographer looks at life. It's our own vision that changes the world. In other words, it's not the tool that makes the image. It's how we use our imagination and creativity. The 8x10 camera serves the way I work with my subjects, which is essentially about the "intimate exchange," the recognition of two souls. I only take four to six shots per session. I take my time and wait for the moment to reveal itself. I love being in the present, because that is being in tune with nature.

*The Guangdong Museum of Art recently featured a solo exhibition of Diana's work, consisting of 88 large-format photographs taken on her travels around the world; some of the places she visited included the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway and China. Diana has shown work and hosted workshops in many different countries, including France, England, Germany, Belgium, Slovenia, Estonia, Venezuela, Mexico, Singapore, Malaysia and the United States. In addition to receiving numerous international awards, her work has been featured in publications including the Graphis Photography Annual and Art in America. For more information, visit [99medusas.com](http://99medusas.com).*



**Nationality:** Malaysian of Malay origin  
**Personal History:** Muslim  
**Occupation:** Writer, actor, bookshop owner  
**Location:** His home inside the tropical jungle of Genting Highlands, Malaysia



**Nationality:** German  
**Personal History:** Blind  
**Occupation:** Chair weaver  
**Location:** Die Imaginäre Manufaktur(DIM), a cultural institute for the blind, handicapped and mentally retarded, Berlin, Germany



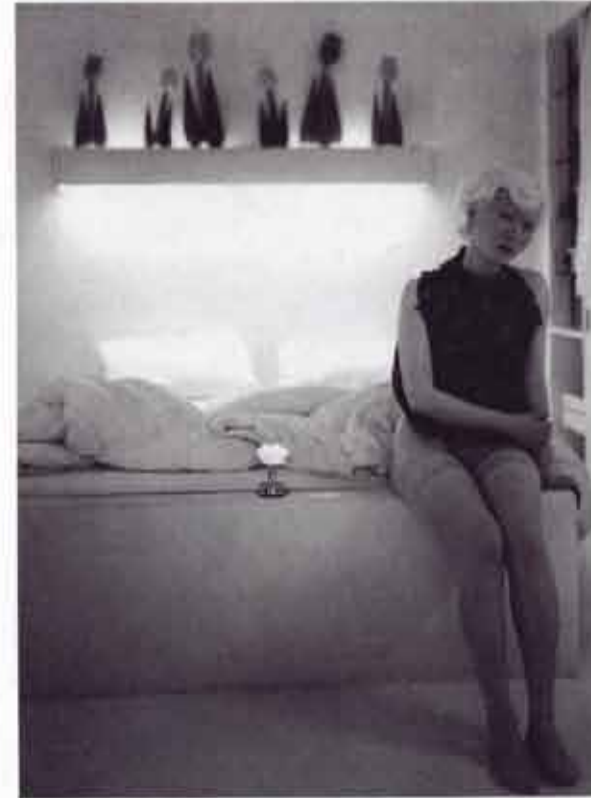
**Nationality:** Israeli  
**Personal History:** Left her family 15 years ago to become an artist  
**Occupation:** Well-known performance artist in Israel  
**Location:** Opposite the Museum of Contemporary Art Le Quartier at Quimper, Brittany, France



**Nationality:** Malaysian of Chinese origin  
**Personal History:** Studied ballet and piano for 12 years  
**Occupation:** Mother, piano teacher  
**Location:** Garden of photographer's home, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia



**Nationality:** Mexican  
**Personal History:** A powerful witch, full of love, surrounded by love  
**Occupation:** Witch, tarot card reader  
**Location:** Friends' home garden, San Pedro, Garza García, Monterrey, Mexico



**Nationality:** Swedish of Chinese origin, from Hong Kong  
**Personal History:** Immigrated to Sweden in childhood, now lives in London, has very delicate skin  
**Occupation:** Model, writer  
**Location:** Bedroom of a friend, the 10th Arrondissement, Paris, France

The portraits presented above are a selection from a large body of work Diana has been working on for 14 years. She works with an 8x10 view camera to ensure optimum quality and to maintain a 1:1 scale between the viewer and portrait, which is ultimately enlarged to a print that is six feet high.