



Arlene Distler/Special to The Commons

Christine Triebert inside her South Newfane studio.

The Arts

Stretching boundaries

Christine Triebert's photography featured in 'Through a Glass Dimly' at Mitchell-Giddings Fine Art

Christine Triebert will present an artist talk about the exhibit and her work at Mitchell-Giddings on Main Street in Brattleboro on Thursday, Oct. 15, at 5 p.m. A 20-minute documentary, *The Art of Christine Triebert* by Robert Fritz, will screen at this year's Brattleboro Film Festival on Nov. 6, at 6:30 p.m., in the Latchis Theater after the main feature. A question-and-answer session with Triebert will follow.



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By Arlene Distler/The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—Christine Triebert's latest photographic project is literally and figuratively cutting edge.

Using a new process, "pigment printing," and working rigorously with unconventional materials, Triebert realizes a poetic vision in "Through a Glass Dimly."

Twenty-one images are hung in the Mitchell-Giddings Fine Art art gallery on Main Street, downstairs from Candle in the Night, through Nov. 1.

As has been the case with Triebert's photographic projects over the years, she is stretching the bounds of her medium.

Her previous recent work includes Shadowgraphs, camera-less photographs that pick up shadows of natural material thrown directly on photographic paper in the darkroom, and Geomorphs, which focus on the detritus of destruction wrought by Tropical Storm Irene: pieces of plant matter and stones that washed up on her Rock River-fronting property, photographed and placed on panels that could then be moved around in varying configurations, reflecting the displacement all around her.

Triebert's new show exhibit takes a new turn: portraiture. The artist's work has always had a strong contemplative component, from her serene sepia landscapes to the Zen-like simplicity of the Shadowgraphs.

"Through a Glass Dimly" carries this sensibility into this new realm.

The title comes from St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament, Chapter 13: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

Many artists of various artistic disciplines have used this quote, perhaps the best known being the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman.

Triebert related the experience that propelled her into approaching her portrait project as she did.

"I went to hear Robert Jonas, who has been influential in my life in other ways, speak on the teachings of Henri Nouwen. He spoke for three hours about this man, a spiritualist from the Netherlands who was very progressive. He traveled and gave talks.

"The thrust of his teachings is that we are all manifestations of the divine, of Christ. I'd read several of his books. I decided that's what I want to photograph is that — the essential human spark — not the external things we judge ourselves by."

She adds when she first started the project, she was using a view camera in which she looked under a dark hood — literally looking through a glass darkly.

Triebert came up with a plan: use a plain white sheet "to get away from our 'roles' in the world and lay bare the

core human being. When you're born you are wrapped in white swaddling. When you die they wrap you in a white sheet...so that represents to me, the common element of humanity."

Triebert took neighbors and friends as her subjects. They exchanged clothing for a white sheet.

"Even jewelry came off," notes Triebert. "If someone was coming over for dinner I'd ask them if they'd come a little early to pose. No one turned me down.

"I'd give people a sheet and say do what you want with it...the individual comes out! But each is a manifestation of the divine spirit, the spark!"

* * *

Because I've known a few photographers and have one in the family, I have learned that they love the mechanics of the photographic process as much as the art of it. You have to be at least a little bit tech-y.

Triebert is no exception. When I visited her studio, her new work was lined up along the wall. We came to it in due time.

But first there was the gleaming, precisely-cut-to-size sheets of metal that these images are printed on.

In the beginning there was the metal, which must then be sanded and coated with a kind of varnish, so the image has something to grab onto, as primer provides for paint.

Triebert expressed thankfulness for all the players "behind the scenes." Clark Todd made support frames for the backs, and her partner, Carol Ross, painted them. But foremost among the entities she acknowledges is Brattleboro Sheet Metal on Elliot Street.

Triebert realized that in the ancient quote "glass" probably actually referred to "mirror," which in biblical times was polished silver; later, and to this day, it's glass backed with metal. Thus, the printing on metal.

It took a while, says Triebert, to arrive at the look of the images.

"I don't hit the ground running, I hit the ground working!" said Triebert.

As with the writer who starts by just putting pen to paper, or the painter who just "makes a mark" and goes from there, the physical act opens the creative gate. Eventually.

Triebert decided the view camera was too cumbersome. The switch to digital came with a bonus: the ability to use a variable-focus lens, allowing her to not just focus elsewhere than the center of the picture, but to shift the plane of focus.

The result is a photograph that has a suffused quality, and sharpness where she wants it, much as a painting.

This quality gives the work, as Triebert puts it, "an air of mystery."

The image is further made subtle and mysterious by scratching and otherwise playing digitally with the background, which starts out stark, smooth white.

The photographs are shot in color, then that color is muted, almost to the point of elimination. The resulting

images look like old photographs that were hand-tinted. Ironically, this cutting-edge process results in an image that is of the moment and retro at the same time.

I would like to have seen the photographs hung against black. On the bright white walls of Mitchell-Giddings, Triebert's photographs, subtle in color, tending toward gray-tones, recede.

That said, the images themselves are riveting — beautifully conceived and shot. A surprising byproduct of Triebert's "stripped down" modus operandi is a fascinating investigation into personality...how subjects choose to use their one prop.

Ultimately, these photos are not simply "portraits" but statements about the human condition — the heady air that most serious art aspires to, and that testifies to the depth of this artist's work.

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