



illuminations

PHOTOS INSPIRED
BY THE OLD MASTERS
SHED LIGHT ON
MODERN LIFE

This has been quite a year for
Jessica Todd Harper '93.

She had a solo show of her photographs at the prestigious Cohen Amador Gallery in New York, and several glowing reviews compared her work to paintings of Rembrandt, John Singer Sargent, and Mary Cassatt.

She has a new book of photographs, *Interior Exposure*, published in the spring by Italian publisher Damiani.

Oh, and she gave birth to twins boys in January.

Self Portrait with Christopher (Clementines), 2007. Art critic William Meyers wrote about this image: "The drama is the ambiguous tension between the two protagonists. . . He seems to be contemplating a criticism, and trying to decide whether or not to say it. Or maybe he already has, and is waiting for her rejoinder. At any rate, as the two finish their breakfast, there is something fraught between them."



ABOVE LEFT: **Self Portrait with Christopher, Papa and Ah-Choo, 2003.** This is an example of my just setting up the camera and walking into the picture without giving anyone any instructions. I like the two dialogues going on here—one between the dog and my grandfather, and one between Chris and me.

ABOVE CENTER: **Becky and the Mountain, 2002.** I saw the light first and then I found my sister [Becky, EW '00] and brought her up there. I put a pillow under her bottom so the curve of her hip would better echo the curve of the mountain.

TOP RIGHT: **Allison at Easter, 2005.** This was taken the last year Allison was with us. [Allison Wenger '93 died in August 2005] I think she looks really strong and delicate at the same time. She demonstrated an enormous amount of fortitude and grace while she was sick.

BOTTOM RIGHT: **Meggan**



“The babies, the book, and the show weren’t supposed to happen at the same time! But sometimes when it rains, it pours,” she says. The children, Marshall and Nicholas, will undoubtedly be the subjects of a great many photographs during their lifetimes, for family and domestic interiors are the subject of Harper’s work and have been since she first picked up a camera at age 15. Harper has been creating art for as long as she can remember. She took art lessons and spent a lot of time in art museums, drawing and painting the works of the masters “Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, and Renoir were my heroes as a kid,” she writes in an artist’s statement. “When I went to college I...fell in love with Vermeer, Memling, Pieter de Hooch, and other Northern European artists...

whose charged, quiet domestic scenes haunted me.” She landed in her first photography class after learning that a painting and figure drawing course she wanted to take at an Albany junior college was full. “It was quite accidental, but I fell in love with it. The next year I went to Emma.” There, she continued her photography, taking classes with Mark Van Wormer, who was “encouraging and supportive of anything I wanted to do in photography.” Harper shot for Emma’s award-winning art and literary magazine, Triangle, and she remembers that one year the magazine received a special commendation for her photography. “The school framed that and put it in the main hallway. I remember that moment. It’s one thing to have your parents recognize your

work, but quite another to have the school affirm it. It was very exciting for me.” Affirmation of Harper’s unique talent in photography has continued through her academic career (cum laude in art history from Bryn Mawr and an MFA at RIT); through a raft of exhibits and awards; and through her commercial work including magazines like O, Oprah Winfrey’s popular monthly, and Newsweek. She has most recently been teaching at Swarthmore and the International Center for Photography. Reviewing her Cohen Amador Gallery exhibit in the New York Sun, William Meyers spoke of the “ambiguous tension” between the characters in the photographs and the “rich sociological data” in the picture’s details.

Those details are part of her interior tableaux evoking scenes of domesticity—a glance exchanged, a quiet moment between characters that feels natural, despite the artful composition and the extraordinary light. It is nearly impossible not to linger on those images and try to imagine the relationships between the people. Harper uses her family and friends as subjects, and she herself often appears in the frame, “because I am one of the characters in the story.” Though the images are all about the people in her life, Harper says her creative process begins with the light. “I start out with the light. That’s the principal thing I’m drawn to. Then I bring the characters in.” In her photographs, sunlight slants into a room, illuminating

the life within. Her use of light is why she is so often likened to Renaissance painters. “They used this wonderful natural light. Interior spaces lit by this exterior light source. That way of working has a long tradition.” Traditions continued for Harper when several of her old friends from Emma, including Sierra Bainbridge, Abigail Feldman, Isabel Gunther, Bridghe McCracken, and Neelam Mehta, showed up for the opening of her New York exhibit. “It was the high point of the evening,” she says, an evening that she calls “a pinnacle of my career so far.” Hard to top a year like this, but Harper has already started photographing the new babies, and though she doesn’t know where it will lead, she’s got the light to guide her.