



PROFILE



Laura Cantrell

IN PRAISE OF CHILDREN

BY LOU JACOBS JR.





isters Laura and Lisa Cantrell told me, “One of our earliest memories is burning our fingers on a print dryer. We were terrified of letting Daddy Lawrence’s prints have to make a second trip on the drum.” Laura also recalls being in the darkroom with her mother, but she didn’t make any prints herself until she was a teenager. This was obviously a photographic family founded by the girls’ father who developed his interest at North American Aviation in California, where he installed Hasselblads on space satellites. He met and married Kay Manning in 1957, but before returning home to Alabama, he worked briefly for William Mortensen, a renowned Laguna Beach, CA, photographer with his own pictorial style.



Back in Mobile, Lawrence became a commercial photographer, with the distinction of being the first one in town to use a 35mm camera in his business. “His style of portraiture,” says Laura, “was influenced by Mortensen in posing and lighting, and he became a master of light who was fond of pointing out ‘butchery by light’ in other people’s objectionable portraits.”

Among Laura’s first studio assignments were passport pictures that she shot after school. One day in 1978,

when her father was away on assignment, a call came from a railroad attorney with an assignment to photograph a terrible local train and car wreck. “Mom sent me,” Laura recalls, “and I covered every grisly aspect of the scene as I had watched Daddy do in the past. Months later my parents showed up at my house with several hundred dollar bills wrapped around a bottle of wine, my personal payoff for the accident photos. We celebrated, and I was hooked. A year later I shot my first wedding.”

Laura attended Birmingham Southern College and the University of South Alabama, though in neither school did she take photography courses. She dropped out after getting married. “My father had trained me,” she says, “and I can also credit PPA and a ton of wonderful seminars over the years for helping me learn my trade. At South Alabama a professor who read a business plan assignment I wrote was quite impressed. I had learned a lot in the family business and never wanted any career but photography.”

Laura’s mother retired from the business after Lawrence died in 1993. That left Laura as sole proprietor with one employee to shoot commercial jobs and weddings. Both photo categories were phased out later, and sister Lisa came aboard four years ago after a career in sales at Standard Register, a Fortune 500 company. Laura explains, “Lisa originally left that company to be with her family, and now we’re together and have her daughter, Laura Elizabeth, working part time.”

When the studio moved to its current location in 1992, Laura’s father worked largely from home, although he often hung out with her. She incorporated as Laura Cantrell Photography to place her name on the business she loved, and now observes, “As a natural course of my shooting weddings, the studio had changed from aerial, architecture and advertising photography to a broader product line including children’s portraiture and later to the development of a Baby Plan, a kind of subscription series starting in infancy.



Three years ago we stopped doing weddings to focus primarily on portraits of children.” Her father’s style of portraiture was more formal than Laura’s, though I’ve seen several of his somewhat dated images that are still delightful.

About her approach to portraits, Laura says, “I shoot for expression first, of face and body. A child’s hands can be quite expressive. A person’s face in the hands of someone who loves him or her has an appearance like no other. Capturing that for someone is a gift I get paid for giving.

“I believe in getting people to talk to me during a session to make their animation more natural. Even infants respond in their own language. A baby looking up into my face will coo, laugh and flirt with the camera while I snap happily away.”

Laura professes that her feelings about portraiture have changed: “I’d say my style has matured, and become more multilayered as I’m able to sense more about people. People say they recognize my work, even though it is unsigned.”

It seems Lisa and Laura’s father had been a photo equipment connoisseur. “He used a Linhof,” Laura explains, “and Hasselblads plus Leica equipment with every lens and accessory. In the late ’70s we went to Mamiya RB-67s in the studio. Early on we used tungsten lights and then Photogenic strobes before we went to Lumedynes.”

In the early 1980s Laura turned to natural light for numerous studio portraits. She says, “When Fuji came out with ISO 160 that you could rate consistently at that speed, we moved from



one electronic flash shooting room at our old location to three natural light indoor shooting areas. I like using strong southern light regulated with curtains and diffusers as opposed to a traditional northern studio light. Our location now features two stories of floor-to-ceiling windows facing south, but for variety we also converted a parking lot behind the studio into a courtyard that receives softer north light most of the day. It’s a comfortable setting for family pictures, especially larger groups, and it’s our most requested setting.”

Concentrating on child photography “just took over,” Laura says, adding, “Gradually every studio filled with props for kids. Around here the parents are also props. Being with children is like reading a great new book every day. One of my favorite pictures is a two-year-old in a formal dress in an antique chair on a pink rose background crying her eyes out! Every child is different, and my approach is modified with each of them.

“When a customer walks into one of my sets and goes ‘Wow!’ half the work

is done before I expose the first frame. I only introduce toys that are okay to end up in a portrait. My assistant is trained to stand off camera and prompt children to look in the right direction. We try to create a lovely environment that is age appropriate to give children a feeling of being in someone’s home. The Denny Company is one of our clients, and their backgrounds are often included in our pictures.”

The Cantrell Baby Plan is designed to illustrate the first five years of a child’s life, beginning as early as six weeks. The plan includes four portrait sessions to be completed within two years. The parents choose a portrait after each viewing and a matching set is printed at the plan’s conclusion. Additional prints can be purchased at any viewing. “It’s become a popular way to wean parents to professional photography,” Lisa says.

Laura designs slide shows for customers who make appointments for viewing. At that time they are first shown their images set to music in a theater-style room on a 5x9-foot screen. Custom title slides and transitions make each show unique. After the showing, Lisa joins customers in what she calls the working program. Kodak ProShots allows customers to compare images side by side, cropped if necessary, some projected larger than life. “We discourage paper proofs,” Laura states, “but if a customer insists or is from out of town, we use a ProShots feature to make low-res 4x5-inch images, four to a page. We charge a minimal amount for printouts and require a deposit plus an order deadline of 10 days.

“We’ve noticed a remarkable jump in sales since going to this presentation system three years ago. We’re now selling a large number of wall portraits

compared to the old way of paper proofs. Customers don’t necessarily order more, they order bigger and smarter. It’s a win-win situation for them and us.”

Once customers view their portraits, Lisa takes over. “My sales style has adjusted from being a previous cold caller and hard closer to a softer style.



It’s a natural for me because I have a true passion for beautiful portraiture, and my sister is an expert. My philosophy is, less is more, bigger is better and always have a plan. We have specials every month, and we take a week off at year’s end, then start all over again.”

The sisters at Cantrell Photography work hard to stand high in their profession, and to preserve the traditions of fine portraiture. Their father was and would be proud of them.



Lou Jacobs Jr. is the author of 25 how-to photography books, the latest of which, Photographer's Lighting Handbook (Amherst Media) was recently published. He has taught at UCLA and Brooks, is a longtime member of ASMP, and enjoys shooting stock during his travels in the U.S. and abroad

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