

Spotlight Erika Masterson *Portfolio Contest Winner*



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Fact File

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Prints are available at 8 x 8 inches for \$125 and 11 x 11 inches for \$225.

A child’s wanderings unfold in Erika Masterson’s photographs. She takes us on a journey that incorporates fantasy and reality to chart a young woman’s paths to identity. Masterson’s daughter is the individual embarked on the investigation titled *Sara’s Sojourn*, and she is a critical stand-in for the artist. Sara is our guide and escort through a wilderness that has its dark, unfathomable moments.

As children, we often ventured into imagined landscapes. As adults, our preference for safety and our insistence on order and reason may prevent us from venturing into landscapes we imagine to be perilous. Children offer us a way back into the woods. Ironically, we grownups are often in better hands when we place our trust in the simple bravery of children. These photographs situate us outside the frame, observing an intrepid, glowing sprite as she interacts with nature. Masterson says that collaborating with her daughter has helped her release “all the unrealistic ideas” about life that she carried with her as she entered adulthood. “I believe we have to become that child once more and let God guide you to what is real.”

It’s clear that our young surrogate has a mission in the wilderness. “Her quest for happiness and peace beckons her,” Masterson says, and adds that Sara, in these photographs, “is a wounded spirit in search of repair.... She sleeps in the forest, battles wild beasts and conquers her fears. She is tearing down the walls that bind her and following the path to her destiny.” For the photographer, the experience of making this work, which involves combining portraits and landscapes, has been “absolutely cathartic.”

“In this project,” Masterson says, “I did have an image in mind with each one. As they are composited images, I chose the scene first and then photographed Sara to convey my message. The post-processing was for sure the most time-consuming part.” The “base images,” dating from ten to 20 years ago, and the experiences compelling the work, have been amassed “over a lifetime.”

When Masterson assembles these images, one of her powerful inspirations comes from a

Bible verse, John 1:5, which states, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Sara, then, embodies that light. She is undaunted by the darkness around her. Masterson casts her daughter amidst a densely vegetated landscape; some of those landscape photographs, which become stage sets for Sara’s journey, were made when she was still in utero.

The photographer’s daughter was a good collaborator in realizing the journey. “I don’t think it would’ve worked without her, as the connection between us as mother and daughter is very strong.” There’s grace evident in the girl’s figure, an easy naturalness that nearly convinces us that these scenes were actual encounters between her and the landscape.

Something otherworldly is, nonetheless, taking place in these photographs. Portals appear in tree trunks. Sara hovers and huddles in uncanny, still spaces. A bird lands on her outstretched hand. Spirit, Masterson implies, is present if we allow ourselves to see it. She helps by carefully using photographic tools to accentuate and animate light as an active force in the work. Dreams also play a role; Masterson’s unconscious, nighttime imaginings have “had a big influence.... I keep a journal and through my journey there were several dreams that helped guide me through.” But her work does not draw from fairy tales or myths. Again, the Bible guides her. “These images are more in the spiritual realm of reality. The good and the dark. Things seen and unseen. God is my main guide and I truly believe that we co-create.”

Knowing that childhood is evanescent, it behooves us to recognize that Masterson’s work with Sara reflects a moment in real time when the girl was in the process of change. “There was a huge rush of creativity for me. I wanted to show my journey through her.” Consequently, “much of it happened in a short period of time.” This compression focuses the journey and ensures that we embark on it with confidence that Sara, through her mother’s intercession, will lead us into, through and out of the woods.

— **George Slade**



Contemplation, Satellite Beach, FL, 2015





Dreaming of the Holy Spirit, Satellite Beach, FL, 2015



Still Waters, Satellite Beach, FL, 2015



Rest, Satellite Beach, FL, 2015



Passage, Satellite Beach, FL, 2015





Awareness, Satellite Beach, FL, 2015

