

Battelle's blues are lighthearted yet deep

By Jennifer Hagar

Photographer M.M. "Midge" Battelle's new body of work, "Blessings and Blues," (opening with a reception at 7 p.m. Friday at the Hilda Neily Gallery, 432 Commercial St.) is the fruit of the most elemental of the photographic processes, cyanotype and heliogram. Using these, what began for Battelle as a lighthearted experiment broadened out to encompass nature's balance and the seasons of life and death.

The images are non-camera, non-darkroom pictures developed in the sun (helio) and put through a water bath which turns them blue. (Cyanotype is derived from the Greek *kyano* meaning dark blue.) The simplicity of the process, developed in the mid-19th century, allowed Battelle an uncluttered way to experiment and play. A long-time resident of Provincetown, she is known for her photo transfers, black-and-white photography and mask projects. She has also taught non-darkroom photo techniques at the Provincetown Art Association and elsewhere.

After a period of not doing art, Battelle began again early in the year, tentatively resuming her photography. As the weather warmed and unfolded into the glories of a Provincetown spring she became inspired by the garden next door. The garden's owner, the late Suzanne Sinaiko, had for years kept the much cared-for and

admired garden in the East End. Battelle was able to watch the life cycles of different species there go from bud to flower to seed in the still-professionally tended garden next to her home.

When she started the cyanotypes, Battelle opened her senses to her surroundings and used what was available, including fauna from her yard, objects given to her by friends, and children's toys. She was startled by the beauty of the images that resulted when she placed objects on the chemically treated paper and exposed them to the sun — an echinacea sprig, for example, imprinted in a delicately elegant way on the rice paper that Battelle chose for its "vulnerability."

A subtext or narrative came to mind when she used a dead mouse that her cat brought home. The mouse body, flanked by black-eyed Susans, added tones of mortality, cessation and loss, yet it spoke no less eloquently than the pure flower forms.

Battelle had just returned from a meditation retreat with a heightened awareness of the Buddhist concept of impermanence when she made this image. She was introduced to Buddhist meditation in 1983 and has been influenced by Vipassana, Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. A Buddhist vision, she feels, is a very positive way to look at things and that look permeates her work, life and relationships. "The pictures began to look

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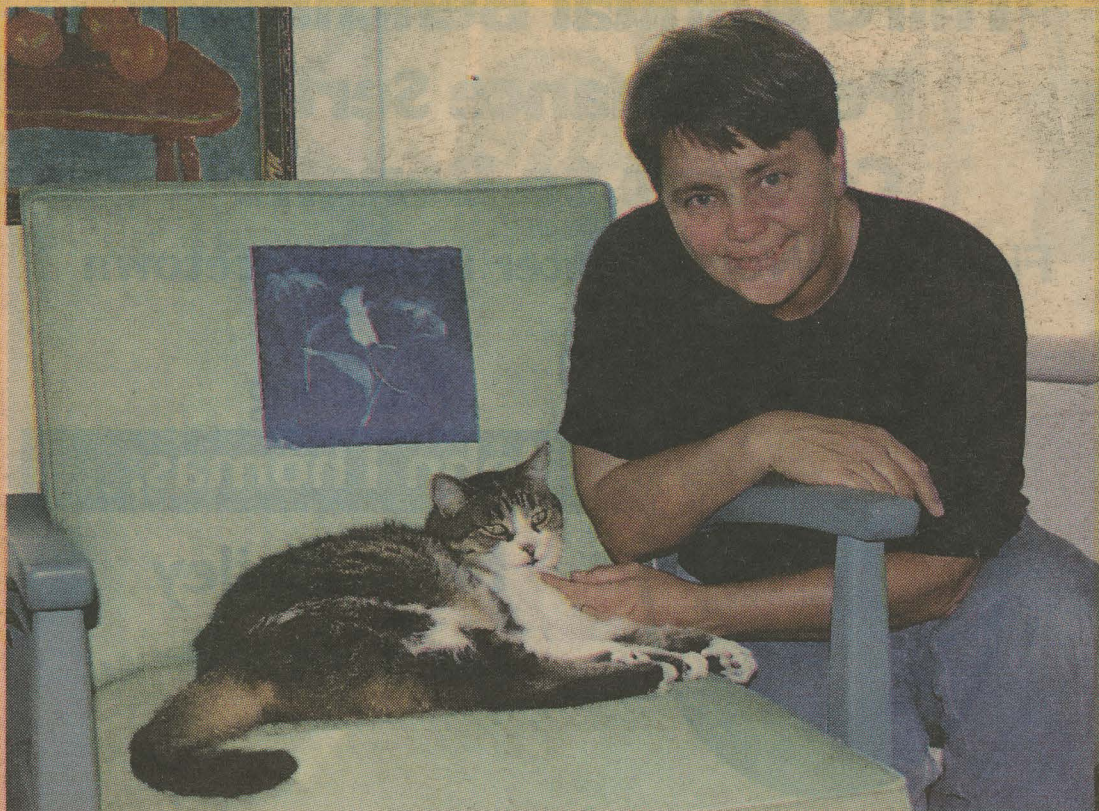


Photo Sue Harrison
Midge Battelle with her cat
and cat-supplied mouse
piece "Field Mouse/ Black
Eyed Susans."

"Three Echinacea" and
"Taurus/Night Sky"
by Midge Battelle.



Battelle continued from page 33 like something that was there, had its say and passed on into the next thing," she says.

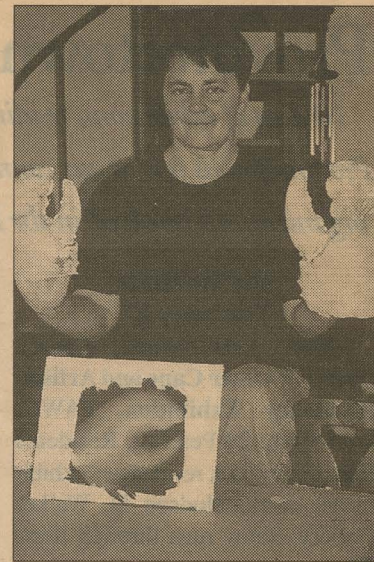
In a breathing meditation practice, Battelle says, one becomes sensitive to how all beauty and sadness rises and passes. The idea is not to become attached, which results in suffering. "The pictures started to be about the garden, and the garden to be a metaphor for all of life," she says. All of life looks beautiful, according to Buddhist beliefs, because it is out of balance but exists against a background of perfect harmony. "This is how everything exists in the realm of Buddha nature," she says, "losing its balance against a background of perfect balance."

Battelle refers to the larger order containing the messiness of life as the "shimmering beneath apparent reality." She sees its indication in the mysterious light seeming to glow from the head of echinacea flowers in one of her images, the flowers'

leaves stripped from the stems and floating in space.

The image made with a toy bull entitled "Taurus," Battelle's sun sign, beautifully combines the patience and earth-bound qualities of the bull with a sublime "shimmering" effect. The figure is suspended in a dark background like a night sky, where shapes made by jacks suggest stars. A drape of flowers over the bull adds a sacred element, a blessing, as if the bull's progress is graced and protected. One side of the animal seems to be disintegrating into shadow even as its belly, molded by light, reveals the texture of the paper, the tactile illusion of its hide.

Battelle realized that the psychological effect of the color blue also adds depth to the work. The melancholy of the blues, suggesting loss, suffuses the background. Yet petals and leaves flicker with white areas, the ghosts of a sunny day in the garden, leaving impressions of foliage liltling in the wind and light.



Photos Sue Harrison

Battelle shows the subject and the art and the playfulness it engenders for her.

"There's an imprint and memory that lingers in the atmosphere, but this last second is no longer with us; we're now in the next moment," she says. "These pictures are moments."

Battelle saw a delicate relationship between the blues of loss and

passing — and new growth nourished by the light of the sun. She began to see the individual pieces as part of a larger constellation, all elements "in momentary conversations with each other."

She was fed and encouraged in her work with the fact that she had

her own wall in the Hilda Neily gallery, a "courtesy wall" generously provided by Neily, a friend of 30 years.

"I've loved doing this work," Battelle says. "It's been revealing, playful and a deeply healing period of time."