

# THE LEELA

M A G A Z I N E



A window to the soul

Tadhani 18

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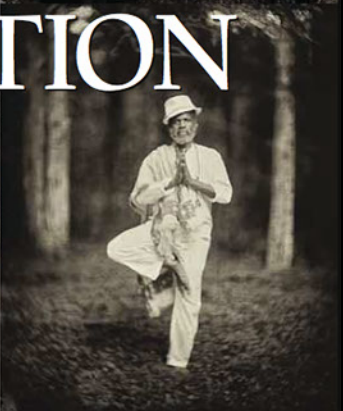
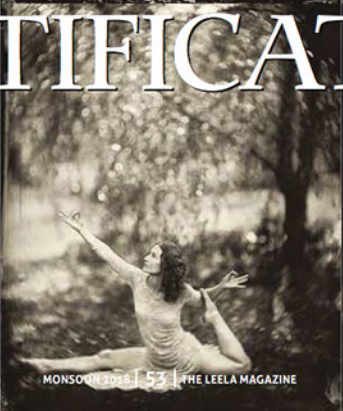
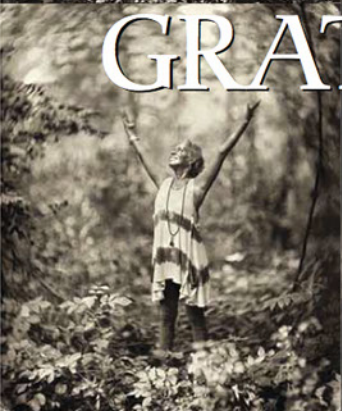
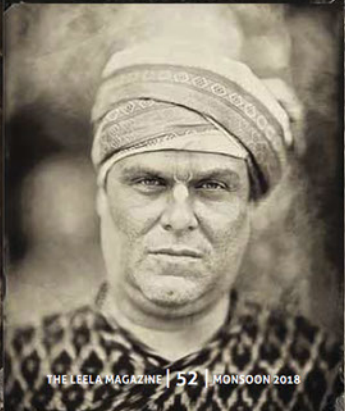
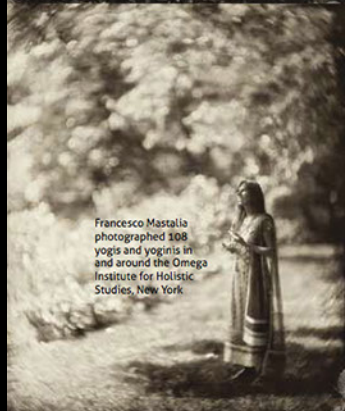
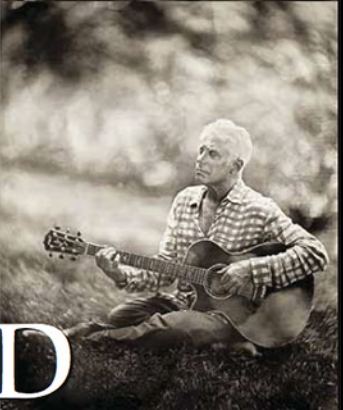
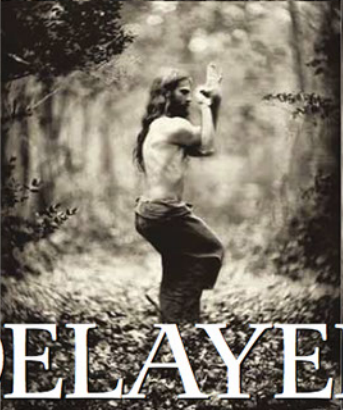
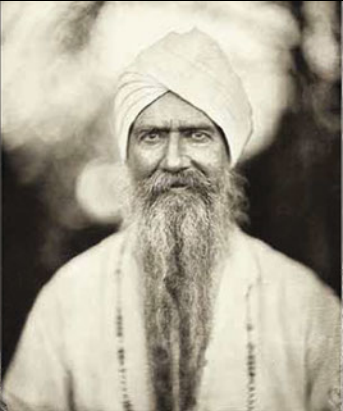
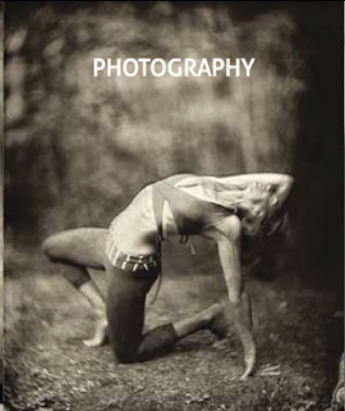
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The Leela makes a grand entry into Gujarat



PHOTOGRAPHY

# DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Francesco Mastalia photographed 108 yogis and yoginis in and around the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, New York

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In a world inundated with digital imagery, **Francesco Mastalia's** photographs buck the trend. New York-based Mastalia uses wet-collodion, a 19th century photographic technique, to capture subjects that enthral him. His latest book is *YOGA: The Secret of Life*, where he has portrayed the physical agility and serenity of 108 yogis and yoginis via the painstaking craft where each step has to be performed by hand. But, in the age of Instagram and instant gratification, why would a lensman prefer the slow and methodical approach? **Shikha Talwar** finds out.

American photographer Francesco Mastalia, has mastered the art of creating flawless non-digital sepia-toned images. He employs British photographer F. Scott Archer's famed wet-collodion process, a methodical craft that requires a photographer to execute a series of time sensitive steps before snapping an image. For his recent book, *YOGA: The Secret of Life*, Mastalia plays with light in natural, open settings to snap serene reddish-brown images (wet-collodion images develop in these shades) of 108 yogis and yoginis. Another of his books is 'DREADS', in which he showcases, among other subjects, the sadhus of India; Mastalia has travelled across the world to photograph indigenous, religious and tribal people. In an email interview, he told us more.

#### Early days

I knew very early on in my life that I wanted to be a photographer. I received my first camera as a gift, when I was a teenager, and

immediately fell in love with the picture-taking process. I got completely hooked to the art form when I saw a print being developed in a dark room for the first time. It was in that moment that I experienced the magic of photography.

I attended various photography schools to learn as much as I could about it and then worked as a freelance assistant to almost 30 photographers. This gave me an opportunity to experiment with different styles, and also made me realise that I really enjoyed interacting with my subjects. I think this is why I now choose to do documentary photography over commercial photography.

#### Fascination with the wet-collodion process

For almost 150 years photography had virtually stayed the same. It was a process based on two fundamental principles of chemistry and optics. It is in our lifetime that we saw the most dramatic shift in photography: it went from the darkroom to the desktop. From using a chemical process to manipulating binary codes and from using light-sensitive silver to exploiting electronic image sensors. My interest in the collodion process began when digital photography started to take over. I love the darkroom. It's the place where I feel I am a photographer.

I see photography as a craft, the computer is very precise and linear. It is not affected by any outside forces. Whereas the collodion process is affected by many elements, including temperature, humidity, age of the chemicals, and the forces of nature. I like the unpredictable nature of the collodion process and what it offers.

#### Breaking down the technique

Invented in 1851, the wet-collodion process is a very mysterious and magical photographic technique. It is a labor-intensive craft that requires each step be performed by hand.

The process begins by hand-pouring an emulsion of collodion (a solution of nitrocellulose in a mixture of alcohol and ether) mixed with light-sensitive salts onto a black glass plate. Once coated, the glass plate is immersed into a solution of silver nitrate to render it sensitive to light. The plate is then carefully placed into the camera's plate holder in a dark room. After setting the plate in place, the photographer lifts the dark slide of the camera and the lens cap and simultaneously also starts counting the seconds before snapping an image. Immediately after the exposure is made, the plate is brought back into the darkroom for development. It is immersed into a fixing solution, and as it clears,



100-year-old Tao Porchon-Lynch is the world's oldest yoga teacher



Allison West, Director of Yoga Union and the Yoga Union Backcare & Scoliosis Center, in SoHo, has been a practitioner for over a decade

“Don’t photograph what’s there; photograph what’s not there”

an image comes to life. To me, these images are ambrotype or immortal (from ancient Greek) in nature as they capture something that can last for an eternity.

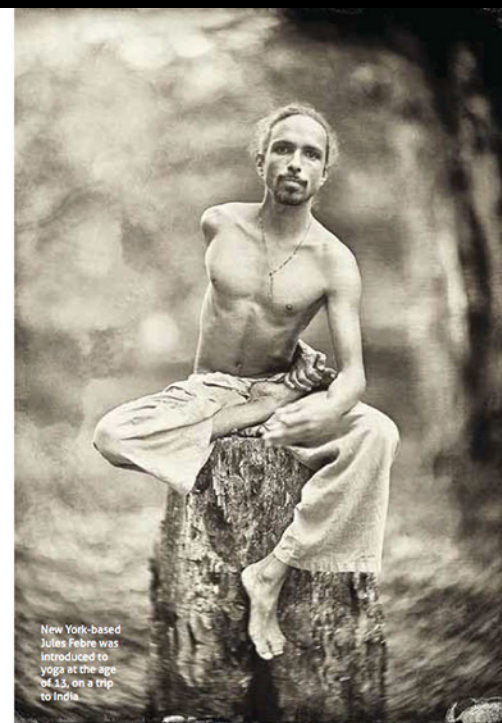
**Photography mantra**

My mantra is, “Don’t photograph what’s there; photograph what’s not there.” The collodion process is sensitive to ultraviolet light and is beyond our visible spectrum. It always reveals an unknown element on development. It’s a process that makes something invisible visible to the naked eye.

**YOGA: The Secret of Life**

The inspiration for the book came from seeing yogis performing the extraordinary postures. It was captivating seeing them bend, twist and stretch themselves into precise alignment. It is a powerful display of what the human body is capable of. I envisioned this physical expression as a form of art, and wanted to document the strength, beauty and grace of the human body.

All the photographs have been taken within 100 miles from my abode, in Rhinebeck, New York, home of the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies. The project began here, and one yogi led me to the next. After photographing each practitioner, I would ask them who they felt would be important to include in the book. I was taken on a guided journey. It was interesting to see how many yogis make their way to Omega and this region. I anticipated it would take me three years to complete the photography for the project, but as the practitioners kept coming to me, I completed it in just 18 months.



New York-based Jules Febre was introduced to yoga at the age of 13, on a trip to India

**India experiences**

I share a very special relationship with India and have also been the country many times. I travelled to Varanasi to photograph sadhus for my first book, DREAMS: a photo-documentary on the history of dreadlocks, “jata.” A couple of years ago, I was documenting Brother James Kimpton and a non-profit he ran, “Reaching the Unreached,” based in a small village in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

**Black and white versus colour**

All of my personal work and signature photography has always been in black and white. I only photograph in colour when it’s a special request or a requirement for an assignment.

**Great photographs**

A great photograph is one that gives the viewer an emotional experience, one that makes them feel something deep inside. This emotional experience originates from the photographer and what he felt while creating the image. ○