

Craig Harris, Brooklyn, NY
NARRATIVE PLUS



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I can see the photograph before it's a photograph," says Craig Harris, explaining how he was able to shoot a subtle, complex image for the cover of the book *Sweet Agony* right in his neighbor's kitchen. "Once I see it in my head, I know I can get it on film.

The actual shooting goes quickly." After speaking with the jacket designer at length on the phone, Harris went down the hall to his neighbor's apartment, stuck a colander in her hands, and photographed her standing in the window of her kitchen. His other still lifes, many of which appear to be carefully primed and propped studio shots, are also often done on the fly. "I like to have an element of chance in my photos," Harris says. And he doesn't get bogged down with technique: "I don't obsess about cleaning the negative. I don't want to get precious."

Much of his work evokes a slightly ethereal, dream-like feeling that prompts the viewer to wonder, "What year is this? What place?" Perhaps because of this quality, Harris has found his best outlet to be book jacket work, with commissions from publishers like HarperCollins, Random House, and Norton. "My photographs have a narrative aspect, but that doesn't eliminate other ideas and interpretations coming into play," he says. "Photography allows me a way to communicate a sense of place that couldn't be conveyed verbally."

Harris, 29, moved around quite a bit growing up—Texas, Arkansas, and Connecticut being major stopovers. After enrolling at New York University with psychology studies in mind, he realized the fit wasn't right ("I needed to find that one thing I could pour everything into") and shifted to a class in black-and-white photography. "I was fueled by an endless energy to work," he recalls, having found "that one thing." He started shooting still lifes professionally for *Mirabella* and *Homestyle* magazines while still an undergraduate. During a sojourn at the Art Institute of Chicago, he apprenticed with local professionals. ("That was my 'semester abroad'—Chicago," he jokes.)

After graduating in 1995, Harris began placing work with Photonica stock photo agency, where his images were picked up for advertisements and book jackets. Then, frustrated by the gap between what he "was doing" and what he "wanted to do," he departed for Vermont, where he remained for two-and-a-half years, first living in a cabin heated only by a woodburning stove, then in an abandoned schoolhouse. All the while, he continued to work steadily for magazines and, increasingly, for book publishers: "I like working on books—they're something people care about and pass on to other people," as opposed to the ephemeral nature of magazines. While in Vermont, Harris identified with, and was inspired by, the openness and "strong moods" of the landscape. He also began focusing on people. "I like finding that part in the person that is their strongest self," he says.

Now back in New York, Harris works out of a studio on a hard-edged industrial street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which he shares with his dog, Boo, an exuberant 115-pound Anatolian Shepherd.

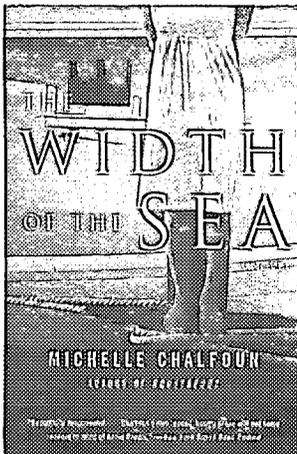
"The great thing about photographing," he reflects, "is that it gives you an excuse to be around the things you like—a reason to explore." His personal work is an ongoing series of still lifes conjured from mechanical detritus and flea market finds that investigate "adaptation and evolution." "I try to bring my personal vision to my commissioned jobs," Harris notes. "It allows my assignment work to sit next to my personal work, and have it be clear that they come from the same place. It's a sign something honest is being made."—*Angela Voulangas*



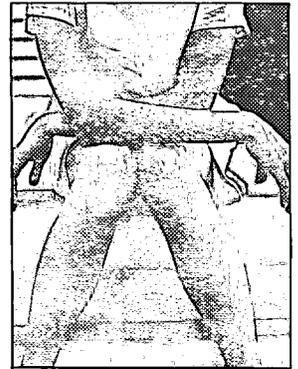
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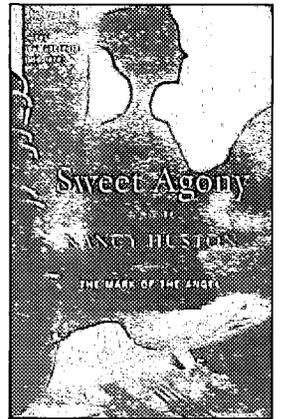
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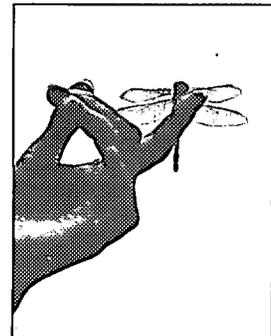
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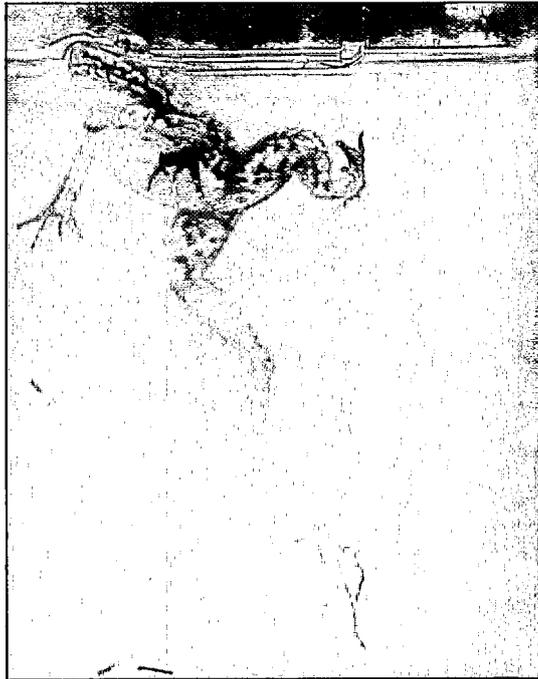
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1. Photo for cover of book *Towns without Rivers*, published by William Morrow.
2. Photo for cover of book published by Anchor Books. Designer: Gabrielle Wilson.
- 3, 5, 7, 8-11. Personal work.
4. Photo for cover of book published by Perennial. Designer: Erik Fuentecilla.
6. Photo for cover of book published by Vintage. Designer: Claire Williams.

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