

LandEscape meets

Donna Carnahan

I'm Donna Carnahan, international photographer from Houston, Texas. I opened my first studio during the worldwide pandemic, here in the Arts District Houston, just west of downtown.

Born in Texas, inspired in Italy, I created La Donna Foto in Houston. Ever since my aunt gave me a vintage 1960s camera, I have had a passion for photography. My career path transitioned from finance to photography when in 2015 I traveled to Florence, Italy where I became intrigued with the beauty of Renaissance art.

With an eye for composition, I have traveled throughout Europe, and extensively within Italy while immersing myself in learning the language, culture, history and art.

My collection represents majestic beauty recorded while on foot on the Amalfi coast. Bringing back my photos from the Old World reminds me of the renewal of my own mind and refreshment of my soul I experienced at the seaside and exploring the gardens of Villa Cimbrone.

Images of Italian summers can be good for the heart, soul, and mental health, as we all get through these times together. Surround yourself in the majestic beauty of Italy and feel the romantic vibes open your heart.

Donna Carnahan

An interview by **Josh Ryder**, curator
and **Melissa C. Hilborn**, curator
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Hello Donna and welcome to LandEscape. Before starting to elaborate about your artistic production and we would like to invite our readers to visit <https://ladonnafoto.com> in order to get a wide idea about your artistic production, and we would start this interview with a couple of questions about your multifaceted background. You have

always had a passion for photography: what did address you to switch from a career in finance to photography? In particular, what does appeal you of Renaissance art and of Italian landscapes, in general?

Donna Carnahan: Thank you very much for including me in your 15th Edition of LandEscape Art Review. I am honored that you chose my fine art photography collection, La Donna Foto, for your readers.



Donna Carnahan, Houston



Ironworks, Valle Delle Ferriere, Italy



Ponte Vecchio, Florence, Italy

When I was very young, my aunt gave me my first camera, a vintage 1960's. Receiving my degree in Finance and subsequently working a variety of positions in my field, enabled me to invest in the American stock market. I saved enough over a long career, so that I could semi- retire and travel to Europe.

In 2015, I was inspired by the beauty of Renaissance Art in Florence, Italy. While living in Florence the following year, I climbed up the stairs inside the Duomo to view the beautiful frescos. It was then that I experienced the Stendhal Syndrome. I felt overwhelmed by the

beautiful works of art painted on the ceiling and while outside looking at the complexity of the Florentine landscape. I had not heard of this syndrome, until I learned of it when I began to tell my Florentine friend about my experience.

Inside the famous L'Accademia Gallery, where Michelangelo's David statute resides, as well as the Uffizi museum full of world-class beauty, my eyes saw the masterpieces. For me, walking on the streets of Florence, I felt as if I were experiencing an outdoor museum. All of the beautiful fountains, statues, frescoes, ancient buildings, and sculptures inspired me to record

hundreds of photos, so that I could savor them when I returned to my hometown of Houston, Texas. Overlooking the city of Florence from Piazzale Michelangelo, I gazed upon the Ponte Vecchio with the beautiful hills in the background and knew I wanted to continue photographing this magical place.

The body of works that we have selected for this special edition of LandEscape and that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article has at once captured our attention for the way you sapiently captured the beauty of European landscape in such spontaneous, fresh way: what was your technical equipment to create this interesting series?

Donna Carnahan: My collection represents many trips and visits to 10 regions of Italy, over a 5 year period. Living in Italy for up to 6 weeks at time, over this 5 year period. I used several Canon digital cameras, and even at times my smartphone when my camera was stolen. Being spontaneous meant recording shots while sailing on ferry boats or hiking up to higher grounds in order to have better vantage point of the landscape below. Post production, using various editing tools on my laptop, included increasing the hues and cropping out unnecessary. Increasing or decreasing the light exposure in my edits allows the viewer to experience more, the way my eye remembers the scene.

Your works seem to be laboriously structured to pursue such effective and at the same time thoughtful visual impact: what was your working schedule like? Did you carefully plan each shot?

Donna Carnahan: When I went for a hike up and over the Lake Garda in northern Italy, I always



Summer of Infinity, Ravello, Italy



Summer of Serenity, Lake Garda, Italy

bring my camera with the intention of recording many images of the heavenly view. Many times I am on foot and other times bicycling with a backpack. Each shot, I tried to frame a beautiful composition. I use the rule of thirds for interest.

Including the natural element of water, either the sea, stream, river or lake, as part of the focal point is not so much planned, as it is the fact that I am naturally drawn to the scene with water. I want to ensure the romance is captured in each image that I am sharing with my audience.

Your works drawn heavily from the peculiar specifics of the environment and as in the interesting *Summer of Infinity* and *Summer of Serenity* you always capture such insightful resonance between the landscapes and states of mind: how do you select the specific locations and how do they affect your creative process?

Donna Carnahan: Contrasting colors, richly colored floral foregrounds, and majestic mountainous backgrounds, as seen in “*Summer of Infinity*”, were selected and named for the infinite view out on the horizon at dusk, where the Tyrrhenian Sea spills out into the deep blue Mediterranean.

Sometimes I am deliberate in selection the locations. My Italian language skills help me to find, for example, the majestic view of a glistening northern Lake Garda overlooking the village of Torbole in Italy, surrounded by the mountaintops. It provided for “*Summer of Serenity*” where German writer, Goethe, drew his inspiration. It was from this vista in the late 1700s, where he first experienced the Mediterranean lifestyle and the scent of the olive groves he had only dreamt of.





Waterdrops, Valle Delle Ferriere, Italy

You have traveled throughout Europe, and extensively within Italy while immersing myself in learning the language, culture, history and art: how do your memories and your everyday life's experience fuel your creative process?

Donna Carnahan: When I begin to work on a project, for example, this art review, I look through my database of photographs on my MacBook and I can transport my mind back to the time the image was recorded. Seeing it can help me remember the feelings I felt, the scents I smelled, and the beauty that laid before me.

When I see a place I find aesthetically pleasing for the first time, my reaction is to immediately reach for my camera and begin shooting. I never want to let the opportunity pass by when the sunlight and scenery are harmoniously perfect. Sometimes, it is only a split second and then life passes by.

We appreciate the way your works constantly capture surrounding life of such enchanting landscapes, to address the viewers to appreciate also ordinary aspects of life in Italy, as in your interesting *Graceful Grapes*: how important is for you to highlight such little as epiphanic details of the landscapes that you capture?

Donna Carnahan: When I am exploring on foot with my camera, that is usually the best time to find the most intricate details, as it was for "*Graceful Grapes*". If I had been texting or not paying attention, I would have missed one of my personal favorite images. I was merely walking back to my apartment in Minuta, about 1500 meters above the Amalfi Beach, when I spotted and recorded this perfectly mature, femininely curvy grapevine, with the most beautiful bunch of grapes dangling, as if a bracelet on a ballerina, so elegantly displayed.



Stairway into Dusk, Ravello, Italy



Positano by Ferry, Italy

With their unique aesthetics, your works — more especially *Ancient Arch and Throat* — feature such seductive visual ambivalence, that draws the viewers through the liminal area of perception where reality and imagination find such unexpected point of convergence. As a visual artist whose work is focussed on real enviromental images, how do you consider the relationship between reality and imagination playing within your process? Are you particularly interested in arousing emotions that goes beyond the realm of visual perception?

Donna Carnahan: Oh, yes, I am interested in arousing emotions that make my audience wonder what exactly they are looking at. Many people from all walks of life have visited my studio in Houston. They spend quite a bit of time gazing at “Throat” which is, in fact, a cave on the coast of the island of Capri. The image appears to have a throat and teeth that are misplaced. After further examination, one can see the deep blue water at the entrance of the magical cave. The captain of my small boat was yelling, “throat!” “the throat of the cave!” as I was shooting.

Manipulation in visual arts is not new, but digital technology has extended the range of possibilities: as a visual artist who started her journey with an analogue camera, how do you consider the role of technology playing within your artistic practice?

Donna Carnahan: Ah, yes, the analogue camera required much patience and practice. I had to wait for my film to come back from the developer and perhaps learn that I missed my focal point all together back in the 1970s and 1980s. Or I would find that it was completely out of focus. Now, with the digital camera, I can see



immediately on my camera screen, if I am shooting well and don't have to waste any time wondering about the images. After all, I may only have that one opportunity to shoot the perfectly lit Italian landscape scene.

The role technology is playing in my practice is very important to the outcome. I am extremely grateful about having advanced, modern technology in order to complete my work and show it to the world in a timely manner.

Your photographs feature such vivacious sometimes even bold nuances, that in *Mediterranean Summer* speaks of joy and light-heartedness: how do you structure your tones in order to achieve such enchanting results?

Donna Carnahan: First of all, thank you for being so observant. It makes me feel highly valued as a photographer!

In "*Mediterranean Summer*" I remember walking around the Gardens of Villa Cimbrone during the hottest time of day, full-on summer sun, clear blue skies with a few cottony, white clouds and laying my eyes on the bold, orange, long-stemmed florals, in contrast to the hazed-over mountainous backdrop. I found myself admiring how much the orange stood out in contrast with the purple and white flowers. I couldn't help but to increase the orange hues in post production to create even more of a contrast. I wanted to make the colors pop off the canvas.

I wanted to allow the viewer to experience the sheer joy of being on the Mediterranean in the summertime. At the time, I did not know what lay only a few short months ahead, that would change the mood of our entire world.

In a controversial quote, German photographer Thomas Ruff stated that "nowadays you don't have to paint to be an artist: you can photography in a realistic



Bella Capri, Italy



Dream Realized, Vernazza, Cinque Terre, Italy

way". Provocatively, the German photographer highlighted the short circuit between the act of looking and that of thinking critically about images: how do you consider the role of photography in our contemporary age, constantly saturated by ubiquitous images?

Donna Carnahan: I think that photography is very much an art form, each image uniquely created by both the photographer and the equipment. No one can copy another's photography style and no two shots are exactly the same. The light is always playing around, the environment is constantly changing and there are so many cameras and smartphone cameras that make the details slightly different. I don't think anyone will ever get tired of looking at beautiful landscapes. There is a certain timelessness about them.

How do you consider the nature of your relationship with your audience? By the way, as the move of Art from traditional gallery spaces, to street and especially to online platforms — as Instagram — increases, how would in your opinion change the relationship with a globalised audience?

Donna Carnahan: My audience has evolved, since I first began to exhibit my work at a fashion designer boutique in Houston, Texas. "Art for Fashion" we named the event that kicked off my career in photography during 2018. It was at that time when I created my website, ladonnafoto.com and [instagram https://www.instagram.com/ladonnafoto/](https://www.instagram.com/ladonnafoto/). Opening my images for the entire world to see was a connecting experience.

Later, I was invited to exhibit my international collection at a variety of events throughout Houston, getting exposure from a wider audience, both indoors and outdoors.



Donna Carnahan, View of Infinity, Ravello, Italy



Throat, Capri, Capri, Italy



Ancient Arch, Valle Delle Ferriere, Italy

In March, I participated in FotoFest Biannual Portfolio Review Meeting Place, an international virtual experience where curators, editors, art collectors, museum directors, art consultants and gallery owners reviewed my body of work.

My collectors range in age from teenagers to 80's. I welcome in-person studio visits at 1502 Sawyer St. Houston, TX 77007, by appointment, and open studios on the second Saturday of every month. Admiring beautiful landscapes is a commonality that I believe is innate. Beauty is what unites us.

We have really appreciated the multifaceted nature of your artistic research and before leaving

this stimulating conversation we would like to thank you for chatting with us and for sharing your thoughts, Donna. What projects are you currently working on, and what are some of the ideas that you hope to explore in the future?

Donna Carnahan: Licensing my images is something I am currently working on. Working with interior designers is in the works. Also, participating in international photography exhibits, showing my work in a gallery, keeping an open mind and learning new camera techniques are in my future.

Exploring new places will always be in front of me, like traveling back to where my ancestors are from, Czech Republic. Participating in FotoFest 2022 is on my horizon.

I hope to return to Valle Delle Ferriere and hike the nature reserve on the Amalfi Coast to record more images. It will be a much different time, post pandemic. I will be curious to see what changes have taken place there, as nature further reclaims the ruins of the ancient paper mill, once powered by running water.

I want to go back to some of the exact same vantage points that you see here in the review and re-record them, to show the world the changes that take place over time.

Thank you very much for your thought provoking interview. It has been an inspiration for me to continue my work!

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