

Age of innocence

Elena Shumilova's intimate project capturing her children and pets has been the subject of much speculation and acclaim. Here she explains her process, from how she captures her ethereal images to her methods of working with light. She talks to **Oliver Atwell**

Some of our most cherished memories are contained within the pages of old photo albums. Looking through the faded photographs that pad the bound volumes, it's difficult not to feel a tinge of nostalgia and longing for days gone by, ones defined by playful innocence and endless days of newly discovered wonders. Yet as beautiful as these images are to us, they are nothing compared to

the artful tableaux created by Russian-born photographer Elena Shumilova.

In each of the images that form the ever-growing body of work that documents the life of her children, Elena wonderfully captures the sense of incredulity that somehow evaporates as the years churn on. Every image basks in beautiful light, shallow focus and carefully considered composition

'I shoot the life around me,' says Elena from her small cottage in Russia. 'Quite simply, I'll shoot my children and friends when we go out for walks. That's what will decide the locations of my images. The dogs and animals you see in the photographs are all our pets. There are no special props used and all the clothes my children are wearing are everyday clothes.'

'It is tiring, though,' she

'Goodbye Summer'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 135mm, 1/320sec
at f/2.8, ISO 500



► admits. 'The behaviour of children and animals is, as I'm sure you can appreciate, unpredictable, no matter what ideas I go out with. The key thing – and you learn this as a mother – is to stay calm. If you get frustrated, that transfers into the images.'

Elena describes her images as essentially circumstantial – she photographs her children because they are there with her in a setting that is an irresistible bucolic landscape. 'I've tried to be effortless with my style,' says Elena. 'I'm just trying to capture life as I see it and

translate the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional form. I get great joy out of instilling originality into something as simple as everyday life.'

Working with light

The light is the first thing that strikes viewers of Elena's work. Look through the various blog posts and comments on her work and, without fail, each one will express admiration for the ethereal light that seems to dominate the scene. The light is undoubtedly the masterstroke in Elena's work, and it's something that



Above: 'Foggy Land'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 135mm, 1/320sec at f/2, ISO 640



Left: 'Sunday Ride'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 135mm, 1/320sec at f/2.5, ISO 100

she has carefully considered and learned to master throughout her short time taking photographs. 'I love working under all sorts of light' says Elena. 'It can be candle light, sunlight, street lights or the kind of light you'll see diffused by fog, rain or snow – anything that can help to give an emotional depth to an image. I never use flash or reflectors.'

Looking through her work, it becomes clear that there is one particular application of light that Elena favours: backlight. Helpfully, she breaks this light down into four states: diffused backlight, direct backlight, backlight through a window, and backlight from objects such as lamps and candlelight.

'One of the learning curves that I had to face – and one I never would have imagined had I not come up against it – concerned the foliage of trees,' she explains. 'The leaves of different trees will interact with the light in different ways. That's particularly important for me as I often shoot in woods and parks. So, for example, some trees such as pines and lindens, create very difficult conditions – the light will not be diffused enough and, as a result, it will be very harsh. The trees I particularly favour are birch, oaks and alders because they have the right kinds of leaves that will diffuse the light beautifully. When the light is diffused in this way, I tend to shoot when the light is at an angle of 45° and below.'

If Elena plans to shoot using direct backlight, she will wait until the sun is close to the horizon and the colour temperature has

BEHIND THE CAMERA

AFTER graduating from university, Elena (pictured) spent several years working as an architect and designer. 'My passion for photography began in spring 2012, when I received my first DSLR,' she says. 'I'm not sure what inspired me. I understood that I wanted to shoot professional photography and I quickly realised that my children would make the best subjects.'

'That same year in the summer, I upgraded to a Canon EOS 5D Mark II with a 50mm lens. Ever since then, I've been shooting every day and processing at night. By around autumn, I felt I'd found my own individual approach to photography – my inspiration was everyday life. Then, in the winter, I got myself a 135mm lens – an optic that is now my absolute favourite.'



Elena's favourite photographers



© NICK BRANDT

Nick Brandt

'Nick Brandt is a photographer with unimaginable skill,' says Elena. 'He's also a photographer who is able to draw out the mystery of the natural world. The fact that he is able to shoot these animals without the use of a long lens stuns me.'



© GREGORY COLBERT

Gregory Colbert

'Gregory's images demonstrate a harmony between man and the natural world that surrounds him,' says Elena. 'It's similar to the kind of thing that I show in my work. Colbert's images are deep and penetrating, and his mastery of his equipment is utterly inspiring.'



© ROBERT DOISNEAU

Robert Doisneau

Elena says: 'The thing that impresses me most about Robert Doisneau is his ability to find a harmonious composition within the disorder of the chaotic scenes that he discovered on his travels. The absolute force of the romanticism in his work is great.'



Above left: 'Take Me With You'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 135mm, 1/320sec at f/2.8, ISO 500

Above: 'Untitled'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 135mm, 1/400sec at f/2.5, ISO 320

changed. The light will often be slightly diffused through the dense heated beds of air of sunset or the foggy haze of sunrise. In these circumstances, Elena will shoot in locations such as fields or on lakes. However, these conditions can often mean that some areas of her subject will remain unlit. Therefore, she will only work in this light if the portrait qualities of her subject are not vital to the image. All that matters is that she has the traceable figure.

'If I'm looking to work with window light, I'll tend to shoot on cloudy days,' Elena says. 'I'll place my subject close to window and use an aperture of around f/1.5 or f/2.5. As there's such a shallow depth of field, it's necessary to ensure that the important elements

of my composition are on one focal plane. While hard light, such as at sunrise or sunset, can be a little strong for window light, there are circumstances where I'll use a thin curtain that will diffuse the sun's rays.'

While natural light is Elena's favourite condition to work under, she will sometimes find the right kind of artificial light to use. Here, Elena must consider high ISO settings and working with small apertures. 'The arrangement of the model is extremely important in these conditions, as the light and shades draw such distinct shapes,' she says. 'It's also very interesting to shoot outside by pools of water under lamplight. Then you'll get lots of

beautiful reflections in the water. Of course, in these conditions it will be necessary to shoot using longer shutter speeds. The problem is that I never use a tripod because by the time I've set it up the moment could be lost. I just have to rely on good old-fashioned elbows and knees, and holding my breath.'

Camera and post-processing

Considering that Elena has only been shooting since the spring of 2012, it's more than a little impressive just how adept she is at mastering her camera and the light it captures. Her priority is to select the right aperture in line with the depth of sharpness demanded by the scene and subject. She will set the ISO according to the level of illumination and, if the conditions are too bright, she will use a neutral grey filter.

'I'll tend to stick with using auto white balance,' says Elena. 'Also, Photoshop (the only software I use) offers great opportunities for colour correction, so it's never a great worry for me. Lens focusing will always be set to automatic and always on the centre point. I'd love to shoot using manual focus, but unfortunately, as I'm working with children and animals, I have to be able to focus quickly.'

Post-processing is kept to a relative minimum. First she'll correct the white balance followed by any exposure corrections. If it's necessary, she'll also take two variations of a shot (one light, one dark) and blend them together to get a little more detail in the image.

The right look

While these images are an honest documentation of the lives of her



'I do like creating images that hold people's attention for a while'

'Dust on the Way'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 135mm, 1/500sec at f/2.5, ISO 160

children growing up, that's not to say that Elena simply shoots when she sees something nice. A clear thought process has gone into each image. The careful arrangement of composition and the poses of her children are vital to their success. 'Often I'll feel that there's something I want to express in my images and sketch some ideas down,' she says. 'They won't always make sense to me at the time, but those little drawings are an essential step towards the end result.'

These initial sketches have helped Elena to understand one of the things she identifies as the most vital element of her work: the pose of her subject. In Elena's view, poses are everything. 'Poses communicate emotion and if they're caught at the wrong moment they can make an image look awkward and incomplete,' she says. 'I've spent many hours flicking through books

and my images studying this subject. It helps me to identify these vital moments when they occur naturally, when we're out for our walks or playing. Character is expressed through body shape, not just facial expressions. If anyone is looking to make images like these, then I'd recommend that they figure out body language way before they pick up a camera. It's not just a case of people. It's the animals, too. Each animal has its own character.'

It's these intense levels of insight into her subjects (they are, after all, her own children and pets) that make Elena's images such as success. But more than that, the images she's creating display a universality that so many can relate to, both parents and children. AP

To see more of Elena's images, visit www.elenashumilova.smugmug.com and www.500px.com/ElenaShumilova

Left: 'Summer Breeze'
Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 50mm, 1/320sec at f/2.8, ISO 200