San Francisco Bay: Four Photographers

Words:
David Best

The San Francisco Bay Area has long been an important center for creative photography. Pioneers like Carleton Watkins and Edweard Muybridge were based in San Francisco and were noted for their explorations of the wild, wild West. Later, the likes of Arnold Genthe, Imogen Cunningham and Dorothea Lange produced important bodies of work centered on this spectacular region. Ansel Adams grew up in San Francisco, and was instrumental in founding the pioneering Group f64 in Oakland, whose influences rippled exponentially throughout the photographic world (and continue to this day).

The region has also been a leader on the educational front, starting in an era when photography wasn't considered on par with traditional art forms. The San Francisco Art Institute's photography department was founded in 1946 by Adams and Minor White. It was the first fine art photography department in the United States, with Lange, Cunningham and Edward Weston among its founding instructors. Many early graduates (among them Larry Sultan, Michael Bishop, Jack Fulton and Linda Conner) went on to become important artists and teachers of the next generation of photographers.

As photography struggled for acceptance in the art world in the 1970s and '80s, several other important photography schools emerged from various colleges, each wielding significant influence. San Francisco State University was a hotbed of photographic creativity, along with the California College of Arts in Oakland across the bay. These schools had a significant influence on molding the current generation of photographers living and working in the Bay Area, including Richard Misrach, Jim Goldberg, Judy Dater, David Maisel, Robert Dawson and Catherine Wagner.

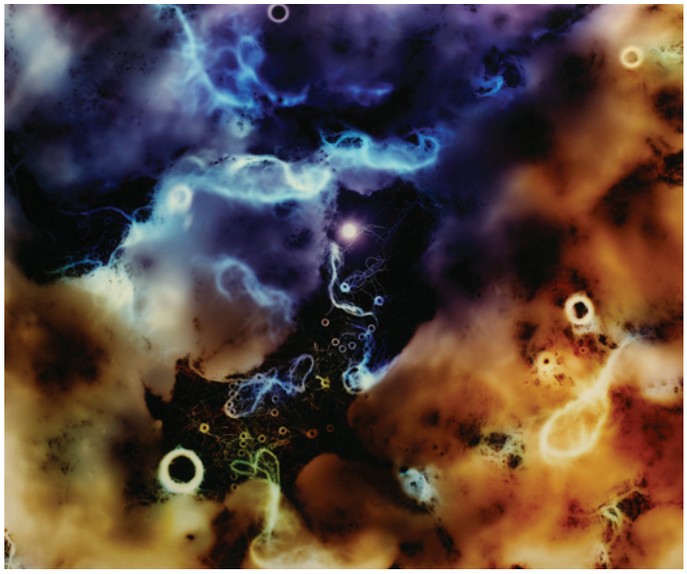
The four photographers presented on these pages represent an eclectic (and admittedly arbitrary) sampling of some of the exciting directions being explored by contemporary Bay Area artists.

Meghann Riepenhoff

It's often difficult to trace the genesis of an idea, the germination of inspiration. San Francisco photographic artist Meghann Riepenhoff remembers exactly what motivated her current series of pictures: really bad sculpture.

"I was in residency at the Banff Center for the Arts, playing with the idea of 'otherworldliness,'" she recalls. "And I was thinking about how light and color can suggest their presence through absence. I started making these really horrible sculptures. I wanted them to represent our solar system. Once I had completed several I thought, 'God, these are awful. What can I do with them?' The next thing I knew I'd taken them down to the darkroom and starting using them for photograms."

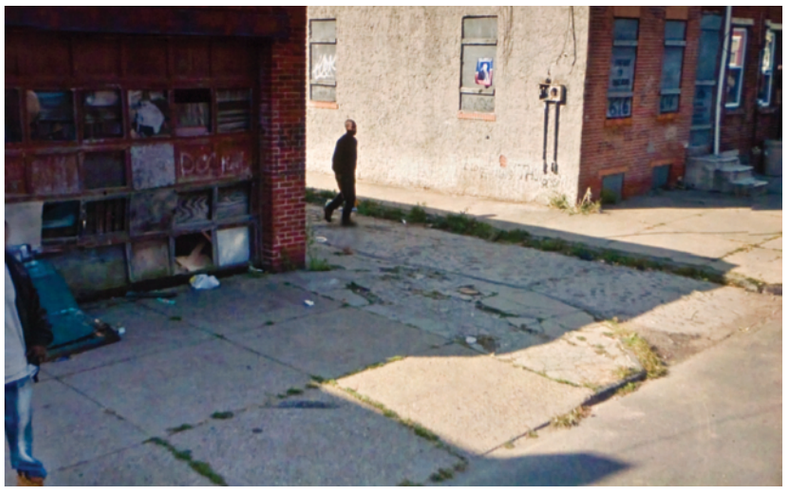
Riepenhoff has long been interested in the sciences. She was fascinated by space exploration as a child, and had glow-in-the-dark galaxies strewn across her bedroom ceiling. She remembers reading in *National Geographic* that astronomers still don't know what 96% of space is composed of. "I love the idea that we are living in the midst of this giant mystery," she says. "I like the famous notion posed by



Stellar Nursery, Meghann Riepenhoff

Sandwich and Coffee, New York City, 1985, Janet Delaney

5212, Todd Hido



Camden, New Jersey, 2009, 2010, Doug Rickard

"I've always been fascinated by the meeting point of seemingly opposite forces: the toxic and the beautiful, the ephemeral with the ethereal, the personal with the cosmic."

Carl Sagan, that we are on this insignificant dot that's hurdling through space, and the mystery that that suggests. I'm not a physicist. I knew I'd never get into space on a shuttle flight. But I thought as an artist I could play with these ideas, and make my own universe with my photographs."

With her project "Instar," Riepenhoff is conjuring her own world using darkroom magic to create a series of unique photograms. These camera-less images are constructed in total darkness. She starts with a straight negative of an unaltered landscape, then places objects she calls "domestic detritus" on the photosensitive paper — children's plastic toys, items from the dollar store — objects she considers to be toxic consumerism materials that will ultimately end up in our overflowing landfills. This is her way of repurposing them, trying to find enduring beauty from materials that are ultimately poisoning our environment.

"The overarching thematic link in my work," she says, "is using the insignificant to evoke the immense. I'm investigating the potential for these disposable personal objects to resonate at a massive scale. I've always been fascinated by the meeting point of seemingly opposite forces: the toxic and the beautiful, the ephemeral with the ethereal, the personal with the cosmic. I'm very playful with my materials.

"It's difficult to know why we do things. There are moments when there seems to almost be a slippage of reality, when we can peal back the layers of our understanding and reveal the elusive properties of the human condition. I want to try and express these things visually. I want my images to look otherworldly, to be enigmatic, to suggest things like bioluminescence, intercellular reactions or cosmic interactions. I want them to suggest things like explosions on a huge or tiny scale. My photograms begin to address what I was unable to express with my straight photography.

Meghann Riepenhoff

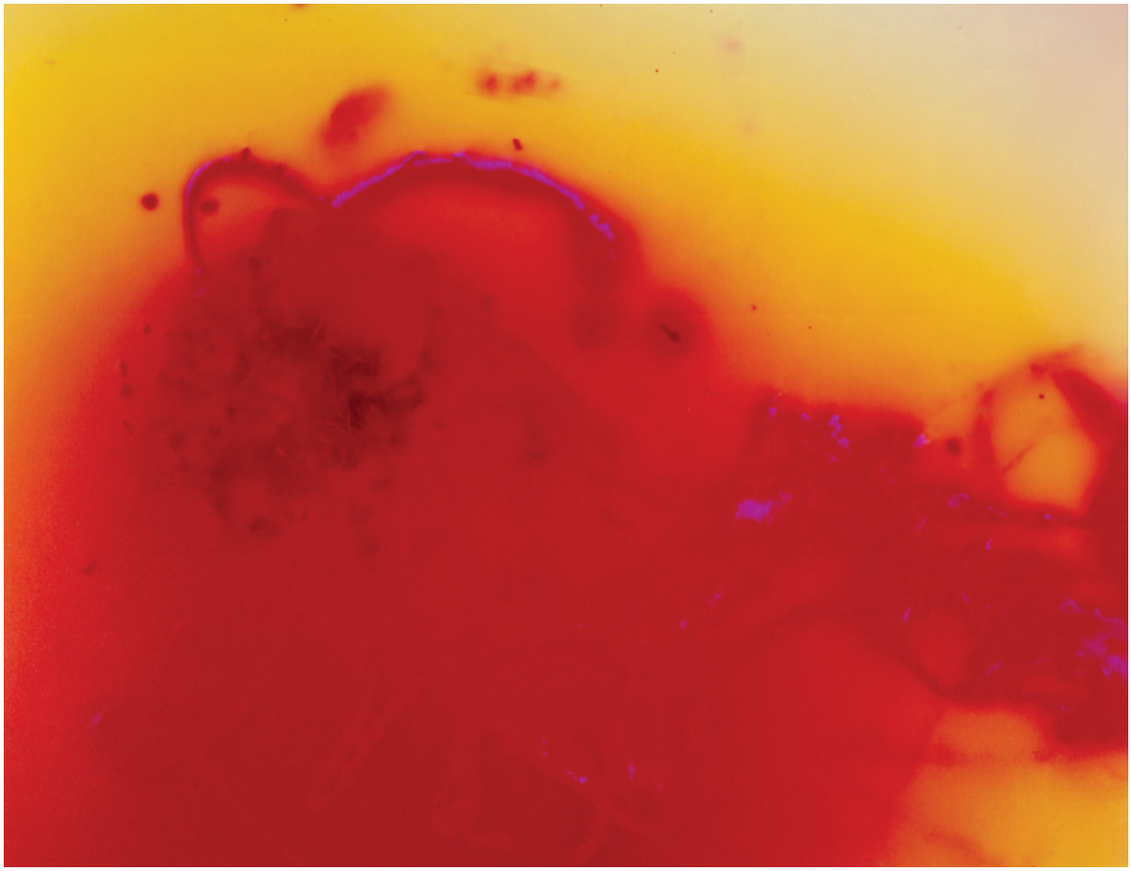
"I feel that our verbal language can be, frankly, insufficient for dealing with a huge portion of what we experience as humans," Riepenhoff says. "That's why I choose to express myself as a visual artist. I've always loved scientific imagery. I'm able to investigate the potential for the insignificant to evoke the immense; for the personal to resonate at a massive scale. There are all these levels of experience, and the intangible ones are the most difficult to speak about. They are fueled by emotional interactions and by interpersonal situations. These are what drive my thinking and my art making."

Janet Delaney

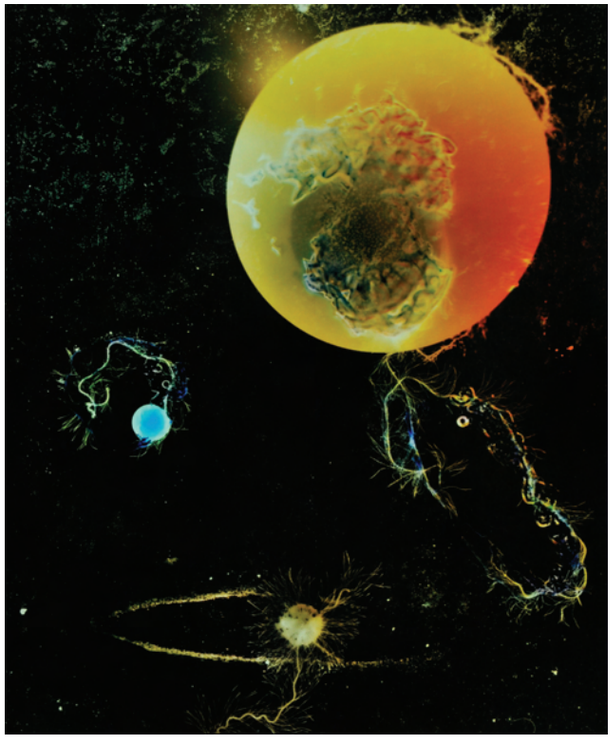
"I photograph ideas," says Berkeley, California-based photographer Janet Delaney. "I photograph to tell stories. I'm taken by the gestures people make, and the combination of small coincidences that coalesce and cause a person to be where they are at any given moment in time. Their gestures may stand for something much greater than they appear by virtue of how I frame it, and I think there can be a celebration of our shared human experience. Maybe it's a love affair. I don't want to be overly romantic, but there's a sense of awe I feel when I'm out looking for photographs."

Delaney has long been interested in telling stories about the larger world we inhabit. Early trips to Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica opened her eyes to social injustice, and how other cultures struggle with the basic issues of existence. Her years living in the impecunious San Francisco neighborhood known as "South of Market" evolved into a project depicting the lives of people being evicted for the sake of redevelopment/gentrification. Now her photographic interests span the globe: Jodhpur, Paris, Chichicastenango and a recent trip to Beijing. Her goal is to eventually travel to all the major cities in the world. She feels compelled to follow wherever her broad interests take her.

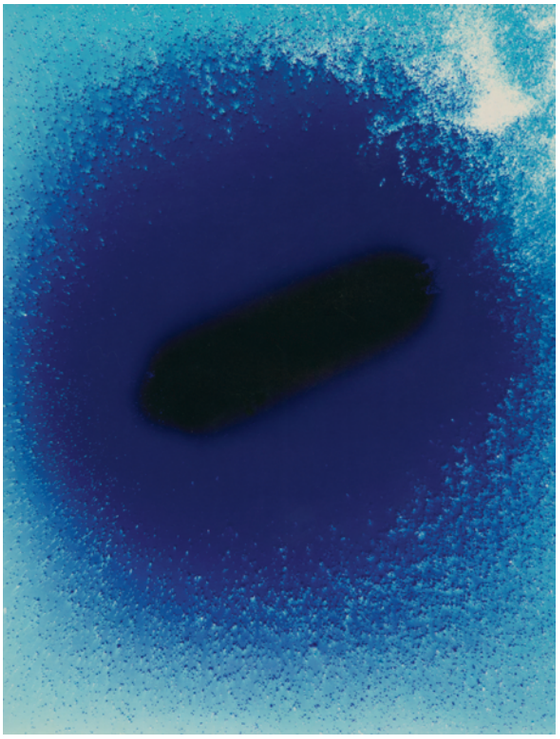
"Carrying a camera keeps me alert," she



Darkmatter #8



Hover Planet



Eluvium #18

"I'm taken by the gestures people make, and the combination of small coincidences that coalesce and cause a person to be where they are at any given moment in time."

says. "I'm engaged with the present moment; basically trolling for pictures. I carry a Rolleiflex, which is small enough to be able to carry with me everywhere but large enough to remind me to use it. Shooting film makes me take things a little more seriously. When an opportunity presents itself, I usually don't have time for more than one or two shots, if I'm lucky. It happens in a split second."

One split second, which proved propitious, occurred in a coffee shop in New York City in the mid-1980s. Delaney was having coffee with some photographer friends, and had already shot a few frames of her fellow diners. As they rose to leave she saw a man dunking his sandwich into his coffee cup. Three women were outside the glass window, resuming their roles in the world. A coffee truck drove by. The ketchup bottle glowed red in the slanting rays of the sun. The result is a fun, multi-layered photograph with many possible interpretations. It is a personal favorite of Delaney's.

Why does she photograph strangers? "Perhaps it is a form of visual eavesdropping," she says. "I want to have a moment of their lives become a part of my life. I find myself taken by their gestures, their expressions, their circumstances. I am entranced by the people I photograph; those who pose for me and those whose images fall surreptitiously on the film of my Rollei. I photograph in order to see more clearly. They become postcards sent from a different state of mind. In the end, I use photography to isolate experience from time."

Janet Delaney

At their best, these images are vessels for larger stories: childhood, rituals, flirting, class issues, race, aging. Delaney writes these stories with her camera. They are the notes she takes while traveling. On occasion, there is collusion with her subjects, but not always. With her large Rollei camera she cannot hide — she is obviously a photographer out taking pictures. For the most part she wants to celebrate, or at least acknowledge, the circumstances of her subjects. There might be pathos, or a bit of fun at their expense, but that merely reflects what life on the streets is like.

"This is by no means the whole of my work," Delaney says. "I consider my 'People and Places' to be more of a stream of consciousness. These are my poems, my small vignettes. It's what I do alongside my bigger projects. I'm glad I've had photography be such an integral part of my life. I'm always coming up with some new idea or project I'm excited about working on. It's been a good journey. Photography has never let me down."

Doug Rickard

Doug Rickard travels thousands upon thousands of miles searching for images. He roams the forgotten, decaying back roads of impoverished southern towns, past the neglected ruins of abandoned inner cities, exploring the discarded, dilapidated remnants of the American dream. Although he has probably seen more of America's underbelly than all the Farm Security Administration photographers combined, he has taken a much different approach than theirs, exploring our country from his studio at home. Rickard sits at his computer scanning Google Street View for subject matter.

"I've always been interested in the photographic tradition of Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Robert Adams, Stephen Shore and others," Rickard says. "And Eggleston, of course. When I discovered Google Street View, I realized I could do a parallel road trip, and strangely I would even end up in some of the same little towns that people like Ben Shahn and Dorothea Lange photographed for the FSA during the Depression. I felt like my project was a follow-up, in a way, that there were so many different layers of conversation around technology and around the shifting definition of photography. There was new ground to be explored in different ways."

A history major with a keen interest in the civil rights era, Rickard is drawn to places like Detroit, Camden, New Jersey, the Mississippi

Financial District, New York City, 1984

Woman with Tree, New York City, 1987

Flag Makers, New York City, 1982

"These photographs have an invasive feeling; the people are often not aware they are being photographed."

Delta and Arkansas, where people are most likely to succumb to the stacked deck against them. These are areas where there are no jobs, where most don't graduate from high school, where drugs, broken homes, crime and disorder overwhelm the social fabric of our society.

"It's rather strange to be doing something like this without being out in the world," Rickard says. "In a way, these photographs couldn't have been made in any traditional manner. If I were walking down the middle of the street with a wide-angle lens, in the places these pictures come from, it would be different because I would want to engage with people and build some kind of a rapport. I'd absolutely want to listen to their stories.

"These photographs have an invasive feeling; the people are often not aware they are being photographed, or they are looking back with aggressive or suspicious eyes. It's fascinating because these anonymous Google cars are driving around making pictures for the practical purpose of making maps, and I've turned them into something really subjective. It's mind boggling to have access to every street in America."

Rickard also found websites (one called "City Data") that have discussion forums people use to get advice on areas when moving to a strange new place. Someone might pose the question, "Where is the worst area to avoid in Buffalo?" or "What area has the highest crime?" Ricard used these forums to gauge the nuance of a neighborhood and as a jumping off place to start looking for images. Strangely, and sadly, he would often find his starting point in numerous cities on Martin Luther King Boulevard. The man who once symbolized hope and change for minority groups now has his name associated with some of the worst blight in America.

Doug Rickard

"With Google Street View it's as if the world is frozen out in front of me," Rickard says. "I can navigate 360 degrees around, up or down, and frame a composition like I would as if I were sitting on the roof of a car with a camera. It's just that I'm navigating in a world that is frozen in time. It's oddly satisfying in a traditional photographic way. I have much of the same control I would have if I were actually there; looking for vivid color arrangements, good composition and a strong hook to draw you into the picture. In a strange way I'm also looking for Cartier-Bresson decisive moments, which are rare.

"My original code name for this project was 'Empire' before deciding on 'A New American Picture.' I liked the term 'empire,' because if you visualize a chessboard, I felt like I was photographing the pawns on the board. The people in these photographs are being moved in a game where they have limited power or control. It is the kings, queens, bishops that decide everything, and the pawns who are easily sacrificed. I'm visiting places that look like a wasteland or a war zone, where there's this feeling of despair and isolation. These are forgotten places that everyone avoids, and it feels like I'm stumbling around in a decimated landscape."

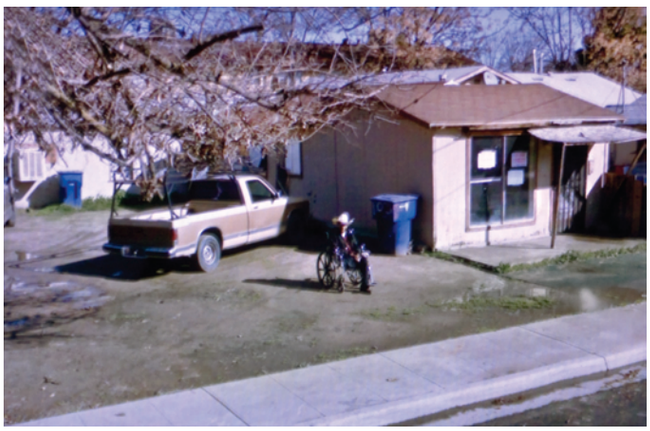
Todd Hido

Todd Hido has enjoyed tremendous success mining the memories from his past. He grew up in the 1970s on the outskirts of Kent, Ohio, at a time when the new suburban developments were subsuming the surrounding rural farmlands. His youth was strongly flavored by trips into the countryside where family farmers were making a last valiant effort to stave off the encroaching housing tracts.

"My work is largely influenced by looking back at where I came from," Hido says from his home in Oakland Hills, California. "I often travel back to Ohio to shoot, and my work generally has the influence of my midwest upbringings. I often find places, and they can be anywhere, that remind me of my childhood. I've photographed in eastern Washington State and the open, rolling hills of California; there are many places that look

Detroit, Michigan, 2009, 2010

Durham, North Carolina, 2009, 2010



Fresno, California, 2009, 2010

"One of the things I hear most about my work is when someone will tell me, 'This reminds me of someplace I've known.'"

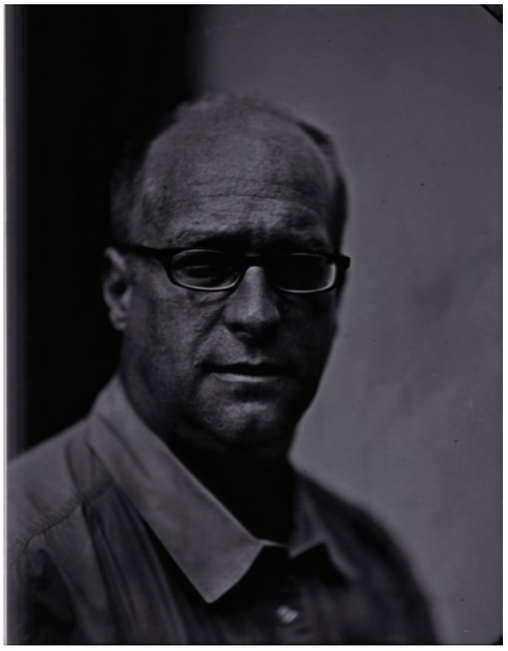
very much like Ohio."

Hido's work looks deceptively simple, often portraying a lone house or building. There's usually something that doesn't seem quite right about the scene. Shooting at night, he is mostly attracted to dwellings where there's just a single light burning in a window. He likes the idea that there are probably people inside.

"I start to wonder what their lives are like," he explains. "And I think my viewers do that too. One of the things I hear most about my work is when someone will tell me, 'This reminds me of someplace I've known.' They will access their personal history in looking at my photographs."

Another thing that attracts Hido is inclement weather. He is captivated by rainy, misty evenings and foggy nights. He will sit in his studio, looking out through large plate-glass windows, watching for inclement weather rolling in from the Pacific Ocean. He plans his shooting trips around the rainy season. When conditions look suitably gloomy, he will jump in his car and roam the working-class neighborhoods scattered around the periphery of the San Francisco Bay Area. One favorite place to shoot is the tiny coastal town of Pacifica, which is reliably foggy and retains remnants from its logging past.

More than anything else, Hido spends the bulk of his time driving around looking to find potential photographs. He claims that shooting is a slow grind, and very uneventful.



Todd Hido

Often he will fly to some promising location around the country working on his landscape portfolio by day, and look for lone and lonely houses in the evening twilight hours and into the night. He remembers a night in Hayward, California, driving around for five hours without finding anything at all. Just as he was getting ready to return home he turned another corner and saw a really great photograph, titled "2690," which has since become one of his iconic images. Now whenever he gets tired or wants to stop he remembers that evening because you never know what lies down that next street.

"I shoot everything analog," Hido says. "I've used film from the beginning, and still do to this day. A lot happens in the darkroom to give my photography the look that it has. I shoot like a documentarian and print like a painter. When I'm shooting everything is done with whatever ambient light is there, whether I'm indoors or outdoors. Then in the darkroom I try to give my work the look that it has. I'm very free in the darkroom to make things be whatever color I want. I'm not really married to any sense of reality. But I always want things to look believable. That's the only parameter I put on myself.

"Another thing that's important to know about my work is that everything I shoot is real. I don't have a crew of people that I'm working with who stage things and light things. Everything I shoot is just as I find it. My photography is very much about me going out in the world and discovering what's out there. I love driving around hunting for pictures. It's really quite fun."

Fact File

To learn more about these photographers, please visit their websites:www.toddhido.com, www.janetdelaney.com,www.meghannriepenhoff.com, www.americansuburb.com.

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