

Robin Schwartz, William Paterson University, Class of 1979

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Robin Schwartz, award-winning photographer and much-revered professor at William Paterson University (WPU), found her rewarding career focus at WPU decades ago. By discovering a satisfying academic niche as an art major, she weathered difficult personal circumstances. Her father had died and her mother struggled – unsuccessfully - to keep their family home. She was able to avoid homelessness by being a full-time student all year long (including the summer session) and thus being entitled to continuous dormitory housing. As the daughter of a deceased WWII veteran, she received the financial aid enabling her to maintain her full-time student status.

She now lives in a converted firehouse in Hoboken, NJ, with her husband Robert Forman, a renowned artist, and their 17-year-old daughter Amelia and is happily engaged in her successful academic and visual arts career. But memories of her undergraduate days at WPU are vivid. “You never know what people are going through and I try to make myself accessible to

any student or professional colleague who needs support.”

The theme of support is also the underpinning of her teaching philosophy. “When you teach photography, it’s a lot like teaching people how to drive,” said Ms. Schwartz, associate professor of art at William Paterson. “You don’t tell students where to go, but you give them the technique to do the best they can. Most of all, I tell my students to photograph what they care about. Photography can be hard work. It requires persistence and a strong work ethic. Choosing a subject you love is the only way to ensure that you’ll stay with it.”

Ms. Schwartz found her deepest joy photographing animals and depicting their relationships with people and other species. Animals have been the dominant theme in her work for the last 30 years. Her book project, *Amelia and the Animals*, a series of photographs featuring her daughter, Amelia, from ages three through 14 with a variety of animals, has garnered international acclaim. Her work can be found in the collections of the world’s top museums at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art in New York and has been featured in the *New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and *TIME*, among other major publications.



This year Professor Schwartz achieved another milestone: she was honored with a 2016 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Photography for her distinguished achievements as a photographer. She was one of 178 prominent scholars selected from nearly 3,000 applicants in the United States and Canada for the fellowship.

“Robin Schwartz is one of the finest examples of an artist and a teacher,” said Daryl Moore, dean

of the University’s College of the Arts and Communication. “We are enormously proud of her, both as a professor and a graduate of William Paterson, for being selected as one of the few Guggenheim Fellows this year. It is a testament to her exceptional work as a visual artist of merit and relevance.”

Robin Schwartz grew up in Linden, New Jersey, and animals and art were always constant interests. “As a child, I was enamored with the painters Henri Rousseau and Marc Chagall and the stories I saw in their paintings,” she said. “These painters inspired me to connect to animals through art. I always drew monkeys, girls, and cats and learned to paint them in oils at the city’s free Saturday art classes for children.

“I was an only child, 10 years old, when my mother went to work full time. With both parents now working, I was alone after school and during the summer with no organized activities. Because of these circumstances, I finally won the argument to be allowed to have a cat in the house for company.” To entertain herself, Robin photographed her cat in constructed set-ups with a Kodak instamatic with flashcubes.

After high school, Robin Schwartz enrolled at William Paterson and moved on campus as a resident student. She majored in biology, mostly to please her father. “I came from a working-class family. My father worked as a tool-and-die machinist and would never have let me be an art major. He would not have viewed it as a promising financial career path; I was supposed to be a teacher.”

When she was 19 years old and a first-semester sophomore, her father died unexpectedly. “Suddenly I was on my own and responsible for my life,” she said. Although she had an interest in science, she changed her major to art and acquired an SLR (single-lens reflex) camera.

One of her most valuable experiences at William Paterson was taking two semesters of color theory with Professor John Day, who studied under the painter Josef Albers at Yale University. “He taught me how to add and subtract color and how to think in color,” she explained. This knowledge would later enable her to earn a living printing color photographs while attending graduate school at the Pratt Institute in New York City.

During her sophomore year at WPU, she had the remarkable opportunity to be among 20 students selected from New Jersey state colleges to work on the Native American pueblos in New Mexico. Ms. Schwartz taught photography to teens and adults and helped build a darkroom. In lieu of a

textbook, she wrote an instructional pamphlet. Most importantly, it gave her the rare permission as an Anglo to photograph people living in the pueblo. “Most Pueblos require a permit to photograph, sketch or paint on location. Some Pueblos prohibit photography at all times.” “While on the Zuni Pueblo, I had to carry with me, at all times, an official document issued by the Zuni Authority, giving me permission to photograph,” she said with gratitude for that “amazing” experience.

In college, Ms. Schwartz bolstered her academic lessons with weekly trips to New York City to visit museums and photo galleries and attend lectures at the International Center for Photography. “The images of Eugene Smith and August Sanders were the basis for finding my connection to documentary photography,” she said. Ms. Schwartz credited the 300 prints she took at Zuni Pueblo as the main reason for her acceptance to the MFA program at Pratt Institute, where she was awarded a Ford Foundation Individual Artist Grant and a graduate assistantship.

At Pratt, she adopted the creative strategy conveyed to her by Arthur Freed, chair of the MFA photography program. “‘Photograph what you care about most’ was the advice that gave me permission to return to photographing from my heart,” said Ms. Schwartz. Her MFA thesis exhibition was titled “Pets and Strays.” She identified with stray dogs and hung out with dog packs on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Newark, Hoboken, and Jersey City. Hoping her documentation could make a social difference for the strays, she donated her photos to animal welfare organization fundraisers. The photographs were collected by the Museum of the City of New York and the Brooklyn Museum, among others.

In the late 1980s, Ms. Schwartz was photographing pit bulls in Baltimore, Maryland, as well as the Arabbers—men who sold fruits and vegetables on carts drawn by their beloved horses. The Arabber photographs were added to the Smithsonian American Museum of Art’s permanent collection and became part of a traveling year-long exhibition at Johnson & Johnson Corporate Collections, New Jersey.

“In order to photograph animals, you need to know about their behavior and have an understanding of their species,” said Ms. Schwartz. With hard work and patience, she honed her expertise, made connections, and gained access to the world of exotic animals. For her first book project, Ms. Schwartz worked with private primate owners and published *LIKE US: Primate Portraits*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

“It is important for me to portray animals as thinking individuals with distinct personalities, equal to humans and never used as props in the photos. I usually photograph within three feet of each primate, with a 35mm lens, never through bars or plexi-glass cages. Developing a relationship was essential to capture the intensity of eye contact.” Her second monograph, *Dog Watching*, was a combination of dogs and other species, Takarajima Books, 1994.

When her daughter Amelia was three, Ms. Schwartz brought her along on a photo shoot of Ricky, a two-year-old chimpanzee. Amelia was drawn to the chimp and the two embraced. “This was the photo that started it all,” said Ms. Schwartz. It is the first image in her Aperture 2008 book, *Amelia’s World*.

“Photographing my daughter Amelia with animals for the last 15 years represents the most significant era of my life,” she said. Amelia demonstrated a natural affinity for the animals and became a strong collaborator. Over the years, Amelia is shown growing up over a 15-year period, from bottle-feeding a baby tiger and hugging an elephant’s trunk to caressing a flamingo. All of the images incorporate the fantasy and storytelling that Schwartz is known for in her animal portraits.

“I wanted to show Amelia that I have this connection with her and in a way, the portraits of Amelia are portraits of myself because I’m the animal person in the house. It’s my legacy to her...to show her my commitment,” Ms. Schwartz said.

In 2012, photographs from the Amelia's World project were published in the *New York Times Magazine* and online. *Amelia and the Animals*, 2014, published by Aperture Foundation, was cited by Time LIGHTBOX as one of the Best Fall Books of 2014 and since the book was published in December, 2015 *Smithsonian Magazine* listed it as one of the best books of 2015.

Her career as a photographer reached new heights after she was invited to present master talks of her Amelia series at prestigious photographic events, such as The *National Geographic Magazine* Annual Seminar, LOOK3 The Festival of the Photograph in Charlottesville and The Eddie Adams Workshop. Whether in person, in print, or on the web, the project was seen worldwide and the digital images went viral.

Early this year, Ms. Schwartz created another media stir when she photographed and wrote the text for a three-page feature in the *New York Times Magazine* about Big Major Cay, a tiny island in the Bahamas inhabited by a dozen semi-feral pigs who accept food and even beer from the tourists. Ms. Schwartz worked from dawn to dusk, with her daughter, to capture the images. “On Big Major Cay, I felt transported into a Henri Rousseau painting, or possibly a *Lord of the Flies* situation, when the tourists arrived,” Ms. Schwartz wrote in the piece. “I’ve never seen people so happy to run around with pigs,” she said

Following her Amelia series, Schwartz was the subject of a flurry of interviews by a variety of print and online media, including *O, the Oprah Magazine*, *The New Yorker Magazine*, *Telegraph Magazine*, and *Italia Vogue*. When not working on her own projects, she has been called to do other animal assignments. She created and edited a *National Geographic Magazine* “Your Shot” assignment, “The Animals We Love,” and wrote a chapter in the National Geographic book, *Getting Your Shot*. She also photographed filmmaker and actress Lena Dunham and her rescue dog Lamby for Dunham’s short piece in *The New Yorker* magazine.

“There’s a mythology that you cannot make a living as an artist,” said Michael Rees, associate professor of art at William Paterson. “The truth is that you can if you’re willing to engage in the complexity of it—teaching, working, connecting, and exhibiting. There are disappointments and failure and then there are amazing successes and breakthroughs. Robin is committed to the creative life. She knows her craft, she knows her subject, she knows her audience, and she’s got a great eye.”

Ms. Schwartz is busy preparing to send her daughter to college next fall. The Amelia photographs always will remain a reminder of the time they spent together. “I am frequently asked what I will do after this project. I will continue to photograph from the heart, doing what I love. This is the beginning of a new chapter.”