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Set Design: An Exclusive Chat with Photographer Jenny Okun

JUNE 6, 2013 Alexi Drosu Features, Photography, Set Design No comments

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Jenny Okun's photographs are the backdrop for LA Opera's production of Dulce Rosa. Image courtesy the Broad Stage. After reading Michael Webb's review of Dulce Rosa, a new LA Opera production at the Broad Stage adapted from Isabel Allende's story "Una Venganza," a few weeks back, we were intrigued about not just the opera. His description of the set, on to which Jenny Okun's hypnotic photographs are projected, piqued our interest. So we went right to the source to find out more about Okun's process of creation.

The project took shape over several years—a collaboration that included Okun, her husband, Richard Sparks, and Lee Holdridge. "Lee, Richard and I talked about all the possibilities for years," recalls Okun. "Then I started working on the images when we got the go ahead with the LA Opera. Richard and Lee worked out the story, then Lee wrote the music, then Richard and Lee edited and refined both story and music together, as I was out roaming the globe to get the shots."

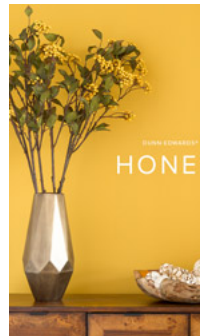
Roaming the globe in this case for Okun meant crisscrossing Latin America to capture images that would create a mood and tone evoking a South American country in the 1950s. Her travels took her to Costa Rica and Peru, where, in order to get a shot of the docks in Lima, "I needed to hire a car to get into a dangerous area but couldn't find one," she says. "Eventually, a driver said he'd drive in one street and out another but wouldn't stop. I had to roll down the window and shoot from there."

Once she returned, Okun spent another four months making artworks from the photos she took (ultimately, for the opera's 14 scenes, she wound up with 200 image changes). "We brought Yael Pardess [the media art director and set designer] into the mix and decided on which images to use," Okun reports. "She then designed the wall shapes and windows, and I then spent another couple of months rejigging all the images to work with the wall designs."

Then Okun and the team workshopped the opera three times with singers, piano accompaniment and Holdridge's digital orchestra tracks, which gave her the outline of the opera to work with as she painstakingly edited and arranged the images to create the final projections.

In the end, says Okun, "I spent 1,500 hours over two years working on this project. I have listened to the opera at least 700 times, and now when I see one of my images in the studio, I hear music."

There're still two performances remaining at the Broad Stage: Thursday, June 6, and Sunday, June 9. Craig Krull Gallery in Santa Monica is showing Okun's photographs from the performance through July 9.



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