

Interview by Erica Wagner, literary editor of *The Times (London)* and author of *Seizure*

Erica Wagner: How would you describe the work you do? "Photography" doesn't seem quite sufficient.

Tom Chambers: I don't see myself as being a photographer in the traditional sense - photo illustrator might be a better term if the images were created as commercial illustrations. In the fine art world my images fit best in the photography category as galleries are becoming more open to accepting digitally manipulated images. Currently a large percentage of photographers use the computer to adjust their images in one way or another.

What drew you, initially, to the manipulation of images? What medium did you begin working in?

I have a graphic design background and work as an art director for a kitchen appliance manufacturer. The equipment, computers and printers are available for me to use, and 12 years ago I remember thinking it would be crazy not to take advantage of experimenting with them. In art school I took a number of commercial photography courses so I knew something about taking photos. I started with combining pieces of vacation images on my computer at work and it took off from there.

You grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, famous as the home of the Amish; after high school, you say on your website, you joined the Navy and spent a year on a patrol boat base in Vietnam which "profoundly affected [your] outlook on life". Would you be willing to elaborate?

It's not that I was traumatized in Vietnam, but I was very sheltered growing up in the conservative area of Lancaster. I left high school and found myself in Vietnam. What's the famous line... "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto". To say the least, it was an eye-opening experience and in a short time I saw the world in a different light. I now see it not so much as black and white, good and evil but as grey... so many different sides, opinions and cultures combining together, softening the contrast.

You have a degree in graphic design: to what extent do you think artistic skills can be taught?

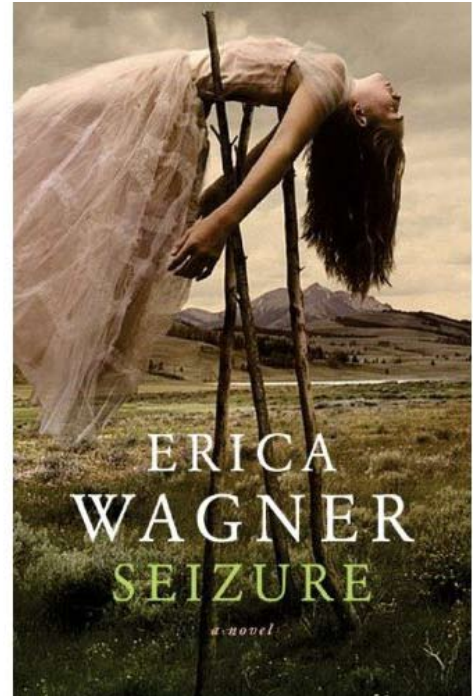
I remember seeing kids in their first year of art school seemingly without a lick of talent. It was amazing to see how they developed in a matter of 4 years. Where does that come from? ...practice, desire and the will to remain open to outside influences.

What inspires you?

Mexican religious art is a major inspiration and influence. I can't say I'm inspired by one medium of art in particular but a wide range from fine art to music, books and movies. Whatever it takes to make me step back and look at reality from a different angle.

Invidious to ask you to name favourite photographers or artists... but are there any which spring to mind right now?

My most influential photographers are Latin American... Graciela Iturbide, Flor Garduno, and Luis González Palma. A writer that comes to mind immediately is Cormac McCarthy. His book "All The Pretty Horses" put me in a different place. Other writers include Philip Roth, Wallace Stegner, and Russell Banks. I love a wide range of music including music by Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Tom Waits along with the "more contemporary" PJ Harvey, Wilco, and Arcade Fire.



Erica Wagner's book "Seizure"
Cover Photo by Tom Chambers