

# *Wakarimasen*



*The Search for Meaning in an Unknown Language*  
by Brooks Jensen

A Brooks Jensen Arts Folio  
March 2007

Wakarimasen.

Ik begrijp niet.

Je ne comprends pas.

Ich verstehe nicht.

δεν καταλαβαίνω.

Non capisco.

Eu não compreendo.

Я не понимаю.

No entiendo.

*I do not understand ...*

# わかりません

Life is a search for understanding. From the moment we are born, we look, we reach, we touch, we absorb. We accumulate, organize, listen, think, speak, learn. From the noise of the world at large, we build our world in specific.

Noise  
Data  
Information  
Knowledge  
Understanding

We think we know.  
We think we understand.  
But, do we really?

With scratches on a surface, we write and know what we have written — such sublime ideas and complicated understanding — the miracle of written language. We have communicated. Our words bring understanding.

But, do we know how fragile our understanding is?  
What happens to our understanding when *language* fails us?

What if we forget what the marks mean? What if we don't know the symbols? What if we *never* knew? What if someone — if *the world* — is trying to tell us all it knows, but we cannot read the meaning of the messages, written in an unknown, perhaps even *non-human* language? What if the message with the deep wisdom we seek is right in front of us and we do not understand? What if our only response is ... *wakarimasen*?











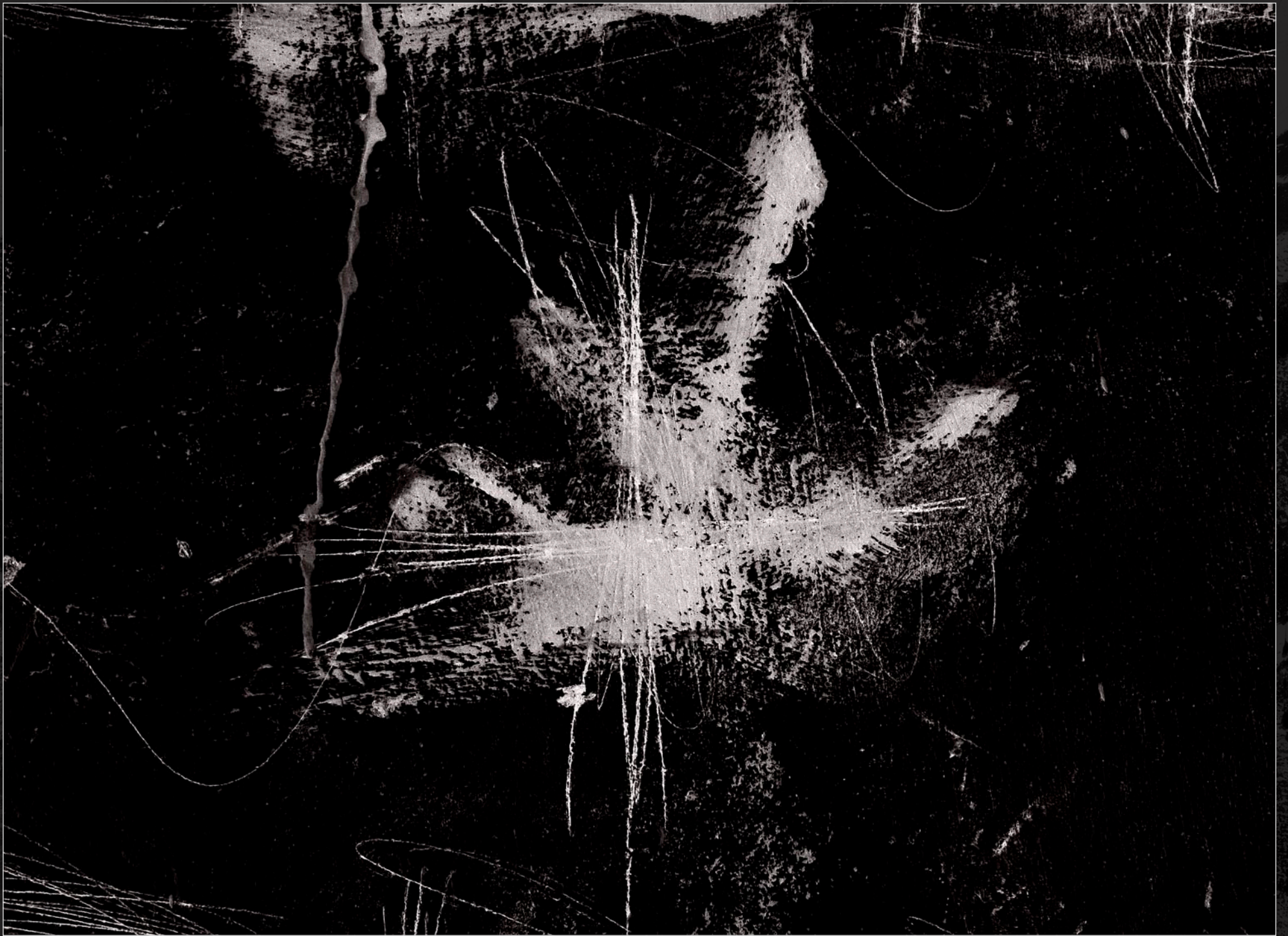










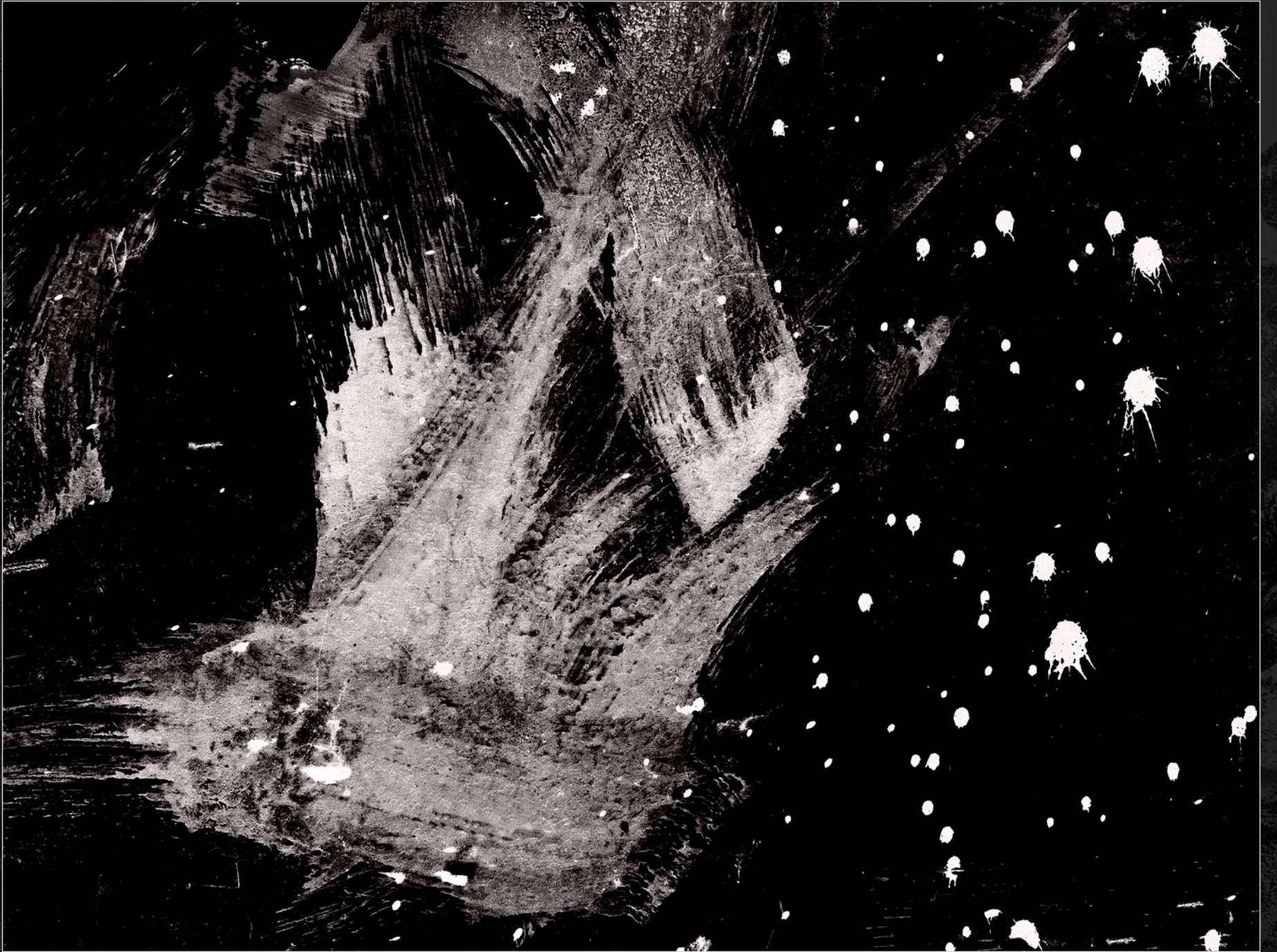




BROOKS JENSEN ARTS











# Afterword

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This project is the result of an accident — the almost universal way in which creative ideas infect us. Like so many photographers do on a regular basis, I was out in the world, wandering around, looking for something to photograph. A friend and I were exploring the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State and stumbled upon Fort Worden — an old, World War I artillery battery in the town of Port Townsend.

Fort Worden was, in its day, one of the important defense facilities protecting the entrance to Puget Sound. Large cannons pointed toward the water, ready to blast any incoming enemy ships. Decommissioned decades ago, it is now a State Park recreation facility. Its miles of cement walls are the perfect target for the graffiti-prone and their profanities, a reality the Parks Service does its best to protect us from. Industrious — no, *creative* — Park Service employees periodically paint over the profanities with broad brushstrokes and whatever colors of paint are handiest. There is no attempt to beautify, only cover.

Nonetheless, the result — at least to my eye — is a dance of the most wonderful shapes and colors, the perfect raw material for a pho-

tographer predisposed to enjoy abstract photographs. I am such a photographer.

We spent a week photographing there. In every single room of the complicated, winding structure I found these fantastic, calligraphic brushstrokes. Having studied Chinese and Japanese calligraphy very briefly in my youth, to this day I still enjoy the dance of the brush. I cannot read Chinese nor Japanese, so I am free to see the calligraphy of the Orient without the interference of language. The master calligrapher may write lofty poetry about birds or griffins, love or the glory and gore of battle, but to my illiterate eye they are all the same. It is the shape and the stroke that fascinates me, not the sentiment behind the written word.

Photographing in Fort Worden, I was struck by the parallels between these non-sensical strokes of paint on the cement walls and the lyrical shapes of the calligraphic brush of the oriental masters. I could see the hand of Sengai or Hui-tsung. And, just as I cannot see words in the calligraphy of the Japanese master, nor could I see words in the shapes at Fort Worden. There is only the non-verbal, rhythmic dance of the brush.

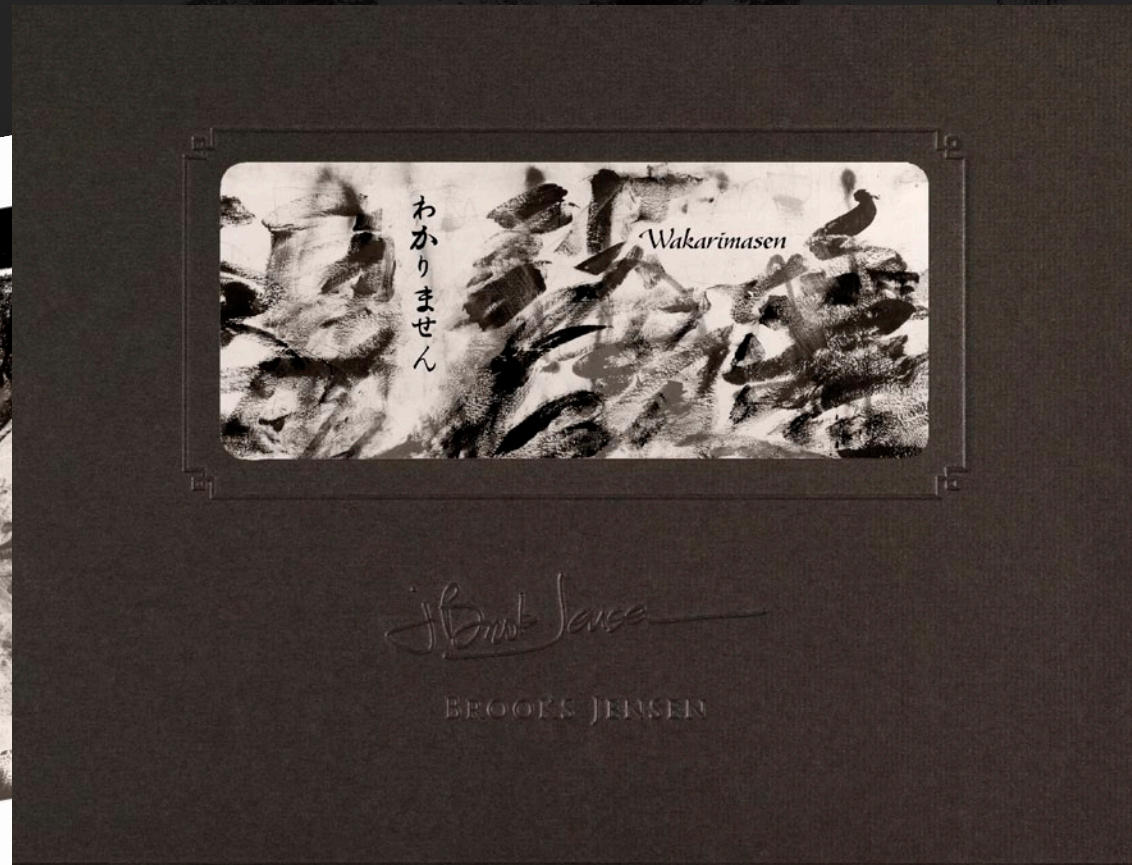
Still, when I look at calligraphy I know there is meaning in the strokes, language in the shapes, and I know that my illiteracy denies me a measure of enjoyment that is beyond the mere shapes. At Fort Worden, I wondered if these brushstrokes, too, held a hidden meaning, an unknown language that might be trying to tell me something if only I could read it. Probably not, but how would I know? When we are communicated to in a language we don't understand, how do we even know it's a language? To my cat, my words are just noise. How can I be certain that I am not equally ignorant when presented with such "writing" as I found on the walls at Fort Worden? How can I be sure that there is nothing being said in those brushstrokes just as in the brushstrokes of the master calligrapher? Perhaps this is precisely why the first and most important words we learn in the study of any foreign language are ... *I don't understand*. Perhaps this is more than a statement about language. Perhaps it is a metaphor for life.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brooks Jensen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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*Wakarimasen*  
by Brooks Jensen

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**Brooks Jensen** was born in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1954, but was raised most of his life in Portland, Oregon. He realized his passion for photography while in high school, as well as his interest in debate, writing, and art in general. These interests and abilities would mature and later gel together in a purposeful way as an artist, and as the Editor of LensWork magazine.

A learn-by-doing kind of guy, Brooks attributes much of his photographic education to the making of photographs, looking at the great photographs in history, attending workshops, and having a good peer group. A capable teacher, he taught college-level photography classes during his 20s, while working as an electronics buyer for a large chain store. That successful retail experience led him to offer retail consulting for the next ten years – which resulted in extensive travel, and many opportunities for photographic adventures. During this time he was also served for a number of years as the Director of the Portland Photographers' Forum, where he wrote regular articles – which was the precursor to his role as Editor of LensWork.

In 2002 he met photographer Maureen Gallagher, and they were married later that year. This relationship proved to be fateful and fruitful, as less than a year later they birthed the first issue of LensWork magazine. From their home-grown beginnings, the publication has received numerous awards and has subscribers in more than 65 countries.

Meanwhile, the passion for doing photography has not been lost, and Jensen continues to pioneer the print as well as the presentation. His earliest folio editions of Made of Steel were produced in 2003, using laborious pin-registration to marry the image and text on gelatin silver in the darkroom. In that series he produced three folios (The Shops, The Tools, The Portraits), with five images in each. It was an enormous undertaking, but opened the door to the concept of the handmade artist's book, and alternative ways of producing and presenting his work. Since then, technology has expanded the artist's toolbox tremendously, and Brooks is fearless in exploring the new possibilities.

While Brooks' writing serves as "the voice" of LensWork, he has also authored two books on photography and the creative process – Letting Go of The Camera and Single Exposures – both of which have been very successful. He also features a regular podcast at [www.lenswork.com](http://www.lenswork.com), where he shares his thoughts on just about everything imaginable (relating to art and photography, that is).

Brooks and Maureen relocated from Portland to Anacortes, Washington (the gateway to the San Juan Islands) in 2001, and moved LensWork Publishing into a beautiful historic building. They left the city life behind, and find that living and working in a small "arts" town has given them time to actually pursue what they love: photography.

**Website:** [www.brooksensenarts.com](http://www.brooksensenarts.com)

**Works with:** Ideas, concepts, questions, and wonder; cameras, audio recorders, video, text; computers, printers, websites, images and graphics. And, most importantly, people.

**Project specifics:** This project was photographed using and Olympus C8080W digital camera



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