

Grace Chillingworth is Reminiscing

By Lucy Gomez



Grace Chillingworth poses with her camera on March 30. Chillingworth is an Austin-based photographer. *Photo by Lucy Gomez*

There's a house in Buffalo, New York that photographer Grace Chillingworth thinks about frequently. It's on the lake, an hour away from the city, and it's surrounded by corn fields and animals grazing the rural land. Inside, it's decorated with family heirlooms. The house belongs to her mother and she's been waiting for the right time to photograph it.

"I'm obsessed with [it]," Chillingworth said. "It just feels very nostalgic."

Nostalgia is at the center of her work. Having been based in Austin for the past four years, Chillingworth's photos are very much rooted in bringing elements of the past into the present. One of her recent projects involved photographing abandoned furniture outdoors as the sun went down.

"The theme is 'traces of you' where I'll find a piece of furniture, literally just in the dumpster at my apartment, and I'll take it out to a nature scene," she said. "I think there's something really interesting about taking something someone's thrown away and then putting it against nature."



A used couch is photographed among nature. The photo was taken as a part of photographer Grace Chillingworth's series "Traces of You." The project involves juxtaposing the old with the natural. *Photo by Grace Chillingworth*

A lifelong lover of visual storytelling, Chillingworth's connection to photography runs in her family. She has memories of her mom behind the camera, documenting her childhood, and recently found out that her great-grandfather practiced photography as a hobby.

When she was 12, Chillingworth got her first professional-grade camera for Christmas and around that same time, her mom began entering her in photo competitions.

"I didn't really realize that would have an impact on me until later," she said. "It was so exciting. Me and my friends at the time were interested in the same things and we would go out and do little photo shoots as kids. I feel like most of my work is kind of based on wanting to feel childhood again."

Chillingworth characterizes herself as an introvert. She says that as a child she preferred to play outside on her own, collecting bugs. That has translated into her work today, as she uses the feelings from those quiet moments to inform her craft.

Photographing events such as weddings and baby showers provide her with consistent, reliable work, but she finds that the more personal projects are where she distinguishes herself.

Chillingworth said she aims to provoke emotion with her photos and for viewers to resonate with them as much as possible.

For her, the biggest complement is when someone is able to look at her work and be reminded of a memory. She describes her photos as introspective and leans into a more minimalist, stripped-back aesthetic.

“I want people to feel [like they’re] looking inwards,” Chillingworth said. “I think it’s important to take a moment alone sometimes to think about how an art piece makes you feel.”

Color is also important to her when she’s planning photoshoots. She prefers softer, pastel-like colors and has looked to film directors like Wes Anderson for inspiration when she leans into more playful and whimsical palettes.

“I had gotten this yellow, corduroy couch that I was going to shoot with and that was [very] Wes Anderson,” she said. “Any A24 movie, too. I’m really paying attention to how it’s shot [and] the composition.”

Chillingworth uses color to visually reflect a person’s presence in an image and in some cases, she even turns to music to explore this. She sees similarities between this and synesthesia, a condition that allows people to see color when they hear sounds. Lately, the ethereal and cinematic tones of artists like Radiohead and Indigo De Souza have been on rotation for her.

“I feel like everyone has a color,” Chillingworth said. “My boyfriend’s kind of orange-y blue, whereas my mom’s kind of purple.”

She says she especially loves taking portraits of her mom and finds that there's a unique sense of tranquility that comes from the moments when it's just the two of them.

"She's the most important figure in my life [and] I want to have a solid deck of portraits of her," Chillingworth said. "She doesn't pursue art much [anymore], but she still has an eye for it. Since she's my mom she can be real and be like, 'This is working and this isn't.'"

In many ways, Chillingworth feels her mom's presence when she's shooting, just by holding her camera, even when she isn't physically there. Her mom still lives in Buffalo, but has come to Austin several times when Chillingworth is working on a project. She credits her mom for being her biggest support system, helping her to develop her craft out of a genuine love for the art and not just profit.

With that comes peace of mind of letting her artistry move at its own pace. Though the photo industry can be competitive and cities like New York and Los Angeles appeal to some creatives like Chillingworth, she feels no pressure to follow the crowd. She says the greatest reward is knowing that her work can inspire and people can recognize pieces of their own histories in it.

"I value a slow environment," she said. "I just want a house and some land and to be able to focus on my things away from all the noise."

A house like the one in Buffalo, perhaps.