



London Amara poses with her camera on location in Estero.

THE **art** OF FAILING FORWARD

London Amara finds beauty — and perhaps a key insight to life — in art's imperfections.

“**G**rowing up, I don't remember a line between doing and not doing art. It was just part of my lifestyle,” says artist London Amara about early life in rural Ohio. “I came from a family of makers. My mom has a degree in art education and dad is a hands-on entrepreneur. They were like hippies but without the drugs, Amish without religion.”

Today London is a successful and sought-after painter, sculptor and

collodion photographer with a studio in Bonita Springs.

Her family vacationed on Vanderbilt Beach, and those childhood memories drew her back to Southwest Florida upon graduation from Columbus College of Art & Design. Renting a small place on Fort Myers Beach, she would kayak to work at the Silver Sands Hotel and remembers, “I thought I had died and gone to heaven.”

Eventually working in furniture design, faux finishing, and then real estate, she says, “I was looking for ways to make money, so I could buy

STORY BY GINA BIRCH | PHOTOS BY LOGAN NEWELL



back my time and space to be able to work on my art.”

Inspired by the outdoors, she likes to “throw paint and burn things” using oxidized processes for a bold twist. Photography didn’t come onto her radar until a year ago, and now it is in full focus. She remembers, “I took a class (photography) in college but barely passed. It was too slow and precise, and I didn’t have the patience.”

Collodion is anything but your everyday photography. The birth of the art form dates back to the mid-1800s.

The process begins in a darkroom that has to be close at hand. In the field, a blackout tent becomes her portable darkroom. She must also haul an array of chemicals, 5-by-7 to 12-by-20 glass slides, and a cumbersome tripod-mounted camera that looks like it belongs in a museum.

In the dark tent, she coats a glass or Plexiglas plate with a complex solution that dries in 10 to 15 seconds, creating what London calls “a syrupy surface.”

The plate is then submerged in silver nitrate to create light sensitivity. A placeholder protects the glass as it is moved from the darkroom and slipped into the camera, still dripping. The image appears upside down and backward through the viewfinder.

Her camera lens comes from an old bomber plane, and the film speed is not 800,

400 or even 200 — it’s 1, and it requires lots of light to work.

Immediately after exposure, the plate is returned to the darkroom for processing.

“When my first image came through, I was so taken by what was happening in front of me that I cried,” London says.

The plate is an exquisite negative. When its image is transferred to paper, it is silvery, almost haunting, and it grabs you. There are very few photographers in the U.S. who do this labor-intensive art, and the results are one of a kind.

London is in the middle of a two-year project called *First Language*, a photo documentary of the places in nature that have played a role in shaping the artist and woman she is today.

It might sound counterintuitive, but for her next shoot, she is looking for failure. Instead of shunning imperfections in her plates, she is looking for and finding beauty in them. “It’s failing forward. It’s difficult, because we are programmed to do the best version we can of something.”

However, “When I push it to failure, some of the coolest stuff keeps popping up.” Each plate takes about 45 minutes to make, and that doesn’t account for location scouting, equipment hauling and set up. “It’s scary, but it feels like good medicine.”

The inspiration came during a frustrating week working out of her father’s garage in Ohio where particles of petroleum in the air were affecting the sensitive chemicals London uses. “I had these wild swirls and white smoky things all over and I kept changing the chemistry to get rid of them.”

By the end of the week, she figured it out, but when she looked at the perfect photos, they bored her. Her realization is something that could be applied to many things in life.

“The thing I wanted to happen had already happened, it was just different,” she says. “I just needed to relax and enjoy the experience. It took all of that stress to come full circle and for me to realize I was exactly where I wanted to be all along.” **G**

GRANDEUR
MAGAZINE.COM

Find photos of London’s work and a video of her in action.