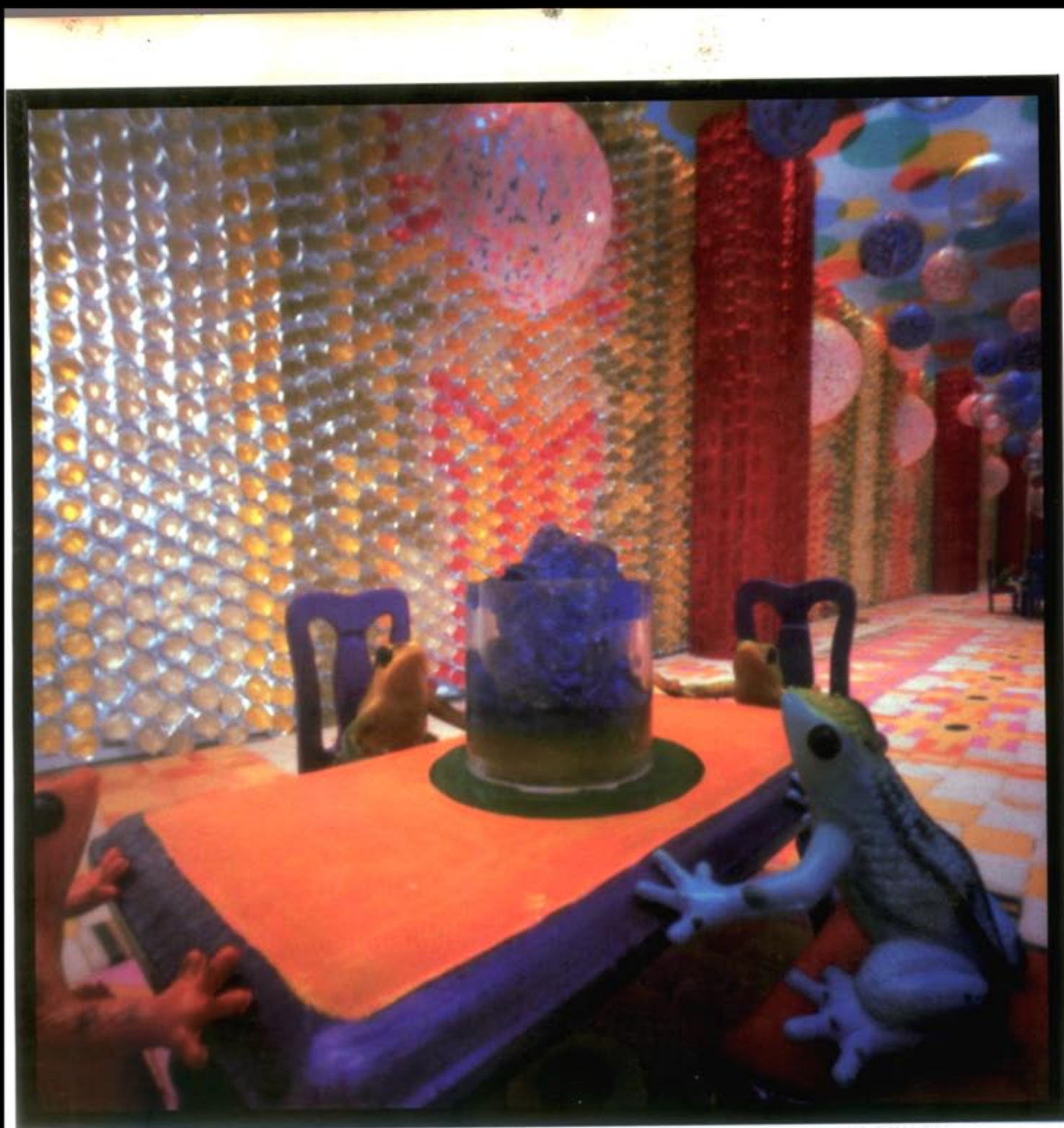




Langoustine, sugarpalace series, 1995 by Bethany de Forest.

“This **Pinhole** Thing”

BY ROSALIND SMITH



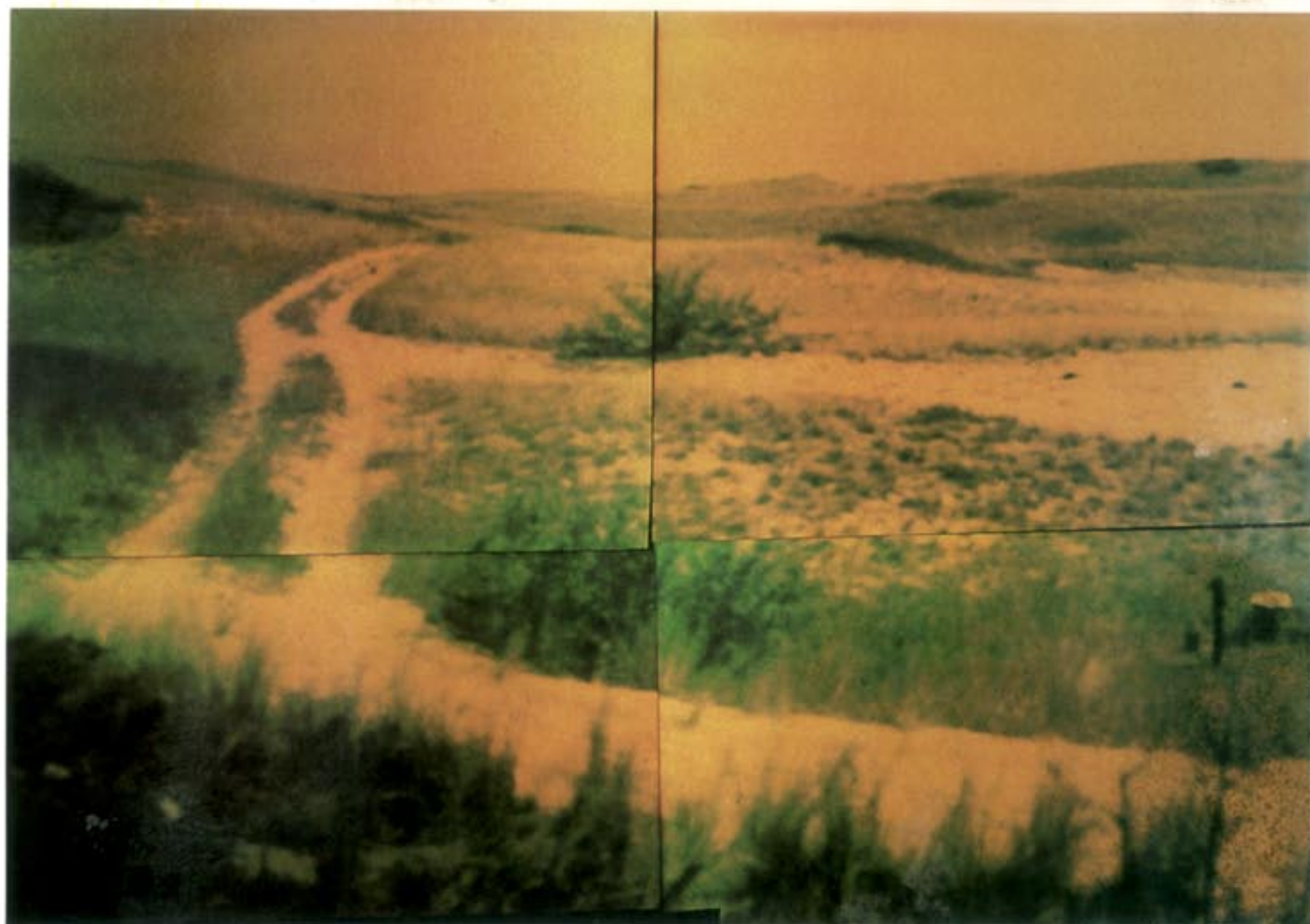
Frogs at the table, candy room series, 1998 by Bethany de Forest.

This pinhole thing is such a wild passion," says Marion Roth as she describes how she turned an old dune shack on the back beach of Provincetown into a giant pinhole camera and created images of the untamed environment of the dunes.

A recent Guggenheim fellowship recipient, Roth is sharing her experience with Canadian photographer Dianne Bos and Bethany de Forest from the Netherlands. We are seated at my kitchen table in Provincetown having a "pinhole klatch" with coffee and cinnamon buns supplied by the local coffee shop. Informal? Yes!

Exciting? Beyond words! The animation level is so high I am ready to empty out my oatmeal box, punch a hole in it and become an instant "pinholer."

The magic of pinhole photography is usually based on a homemade camera (though there are excellent pinhole cameras available, such as the Beseler Pinhole Camera developed by photographer Peter Olpe of Switzerland). There are no lenses, shutters or viewfinders, and the light reaches the film through a tiny pinhole. Placing a sheet of film or photographic paper (which Roth uses for her large images) inside the camera, exposures may take from 30



Path into the Dunes, 1998. Photograph made with a dune shack pinhole camera by Marion Roth.

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seconds to a full day. Our photographers agree that often the camera holds secrets until the film is developed. With the lack of traditional focusing equipment, the odds of getting a great shot are "iffy," but then chance brings wonderful surprises to the pinhole devotee as mysterious "moments" emerge.

This was especially true in Roth's work when she let her film curl loosely inside a cylindrical container and distorted the wide-angle view of tourist cottages along the bay. The enormous depth of field brought everything close and kept the distance in focus, turning the horizon into a wavy, surreal setting of sea and dwellings.

Two years ago the National Seashore awarded Roth a three-week residency at C-Scape, a small shack built in the dunes in 1910 and once home to writer Eugene O'Neill. It was Roth's first experiment with a live-in, life-size pinhole camera. "It was heaven," she says. "Turning the shack into a camera was a great adventure, like taming a wild animal. I was two miles out in the wilderness with heat, wind, rain and caterpillar moths. When the sun was right, I made a camera out of the 'living room.' I had



Jet Wing Over Prairies, 1991 by photographer Dianne Bos.

three views: a front window, back door and through the kitchen. I hung plastic over all the doors and windows, then created apertures for the different scenes."

In three weeks Roth produced eight pictures. In one, a blue window unveils a large sand dune, a second dimension added by two lemons and a vase of flowers on the inside windowsill. In another, a curved image of a sand fence seen through a rain-soaked window reveals a desert of sand and wild growth, a reminder that this area is where the glaciers stopped eons ago.

"One of my theories about pinhole," says Roth, "is that time is as important as light — almost more so. You get to experiment with time because your pictures erase movements such as people or cars. Things appear still, as if they were from another time. Using a pinhole camera, we don't stand back from reality as regular photographers usually do. Most photographers observe and allegedly capture a scene in the decisive moment. For us, it is more about the passage of time and the decisive hour. We need hours to create one image, and sometimes that can mean a problem — like the time I was thrown out of Battery Park in

Manhattan while trying to photograph the Statue of Liberty. I had this cookie tin on a tripod and a cop came over and told me this was a military installation. He was in a panic — he thought I had a bomb in my cookie tin!"

For Roth, the pinhole works because it is kind of funky — "like me," she says. "I like to tease the world and walk around with a can instead of a million-dollar camera. I have a Hasselblad, but this is my 'anti-Hasselblad.'"

"Those who have looked at pinhole photography as something to teach the Girl Scouts, and those who have said things like 'Why don't you grow up and use a real camera,' should think again," Roth says. "Marshall McLuhan suggested that with the advent of new technologies there will always be a resurgence of interest in past technologies. And that is exactly what is happening here. It might well be that as we advance technologically at such a fast rate, we play with light and timelessness in order to be human and get more in touch."

Bethany de Forest's world is an imaginary stage set, fairy tales where chicken feet become tree trunks and sugar cubes frame the

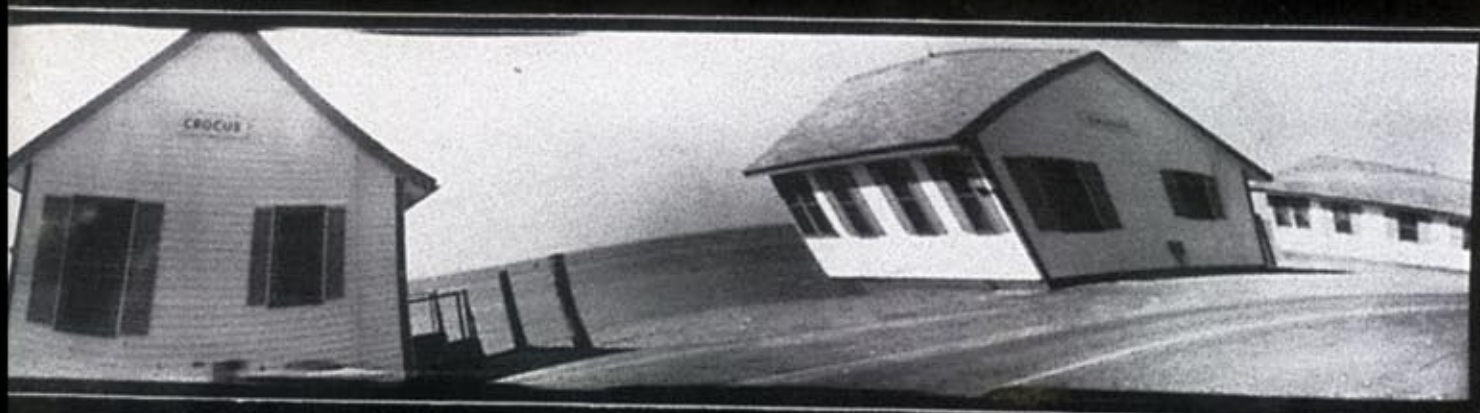


Top: Crocus Cottage, 1996. Above: The Pasture, 1997. Photographs made with a cookie tin pinhole camera by Marion Roth.

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walls of a make-believe frog's castle. A close-up of a dollhouse is made from colored candy. Strangely foreshortened animals, landscapes and people give the sensation of being on a roller coaster ride — yet the images are intrinsically poetic. To create an illusion of space, de Forest sets up mirrors within her set to reflect and enlarge the surroundings. Since there is no lens, there is an immense depth of field. De Forest's cameras are containers shaped and sized to suit each setting.

"What I like about the pinhole is you can take images with the sun against you and show the breaking of light," de Forest says.

"I can capture something unique, like rainbows of light, because the small hole captures the light breakage. You can see it with your eyes if you squint."

She continues, "I use a light meter inside because every setup requires a different lighting situation. I build everything like a stage, a diorama. I usually start with a box and a particular material that fascinates me. Like when I was pregnant, I wanted to eat a lot of candy, coconut and gummy bears — so the candy became my prop. In one image I created a castle wall of candy. In the castle there were bubbles floating above that were made from plas-

tic balls and a nailbrush turned into a bathtub. The mirrors do reflect the camera inside, but with the pinhole I can just put the camera in, then remove the tape that covers the aperture, make the exposure for 10 minutes, then close the aperture. The amount of light that gets into the camera is too small to matter."

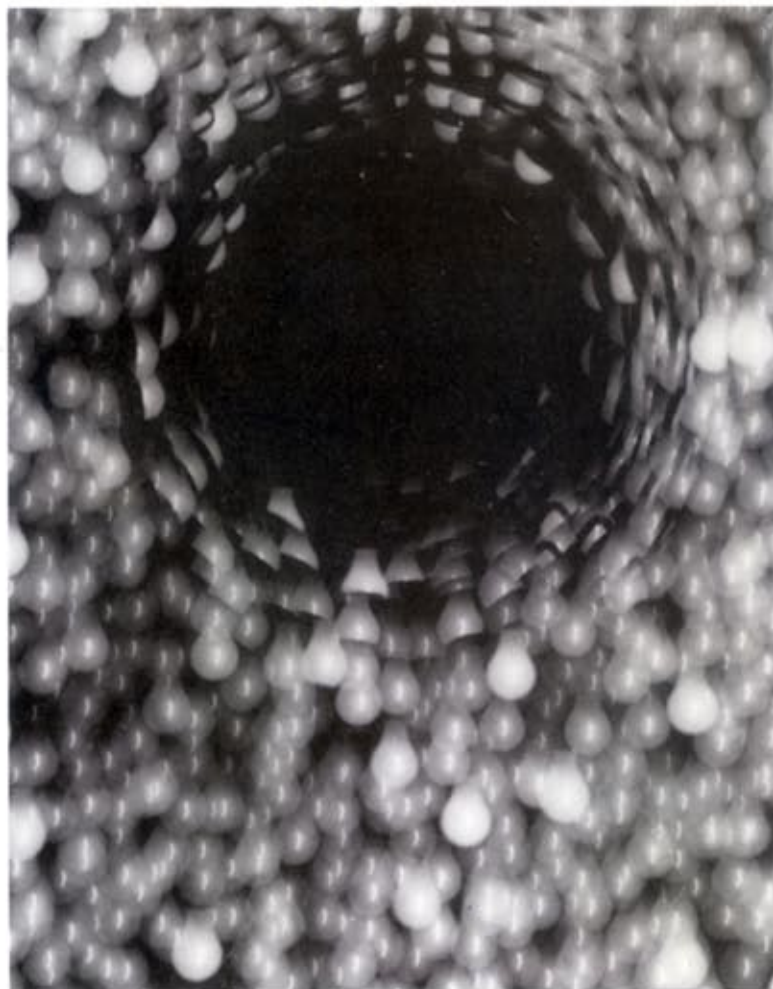
For de Forest, using a pinhole became a necessity. "I was always building these settings that I wanted to photograph. At first I used a lens camera, but I really wanted to crawl into my make-believe castles. I felt like an outsider. When I discovered the pinhole, the

scale allowed me to experience what it would be like to be in this candy room. It's like 'Alice in Wonderland.'"

Dianne Bos is among the most innovative pinhole photographers working today. To create her "Galaxies and Other Bright Matters" (the title of her 1999 exhibit in Toronto), Bos used a large format, multi-holed camera to create a galaxy of stars patterned after what one might see through the Hubble telescope. With a long-time interest in astronomy and a desire to connect her photography to outer space, using light bulbs or candles as her focus, she then built a large container to create her personal interpretation of the heavens.

In one instance, moonlight became her source. Setting up a multi-hole camera in a chair facing the moon, she exposed her film for up to 30 minutes, each hole recording the moon as it traveled across the sky, creating a group of paths that produced a breathtaking image. In another the "galaxy" appeared as flower forms. For those who wonder how far one must travel to uncover the origins of the universe, ask Bos — I suspect it may be just across the hall to the darkroom.

Although her images are lyrical and ingenious, Bos is meticulous and keeps a notebook when she travels to record her loca-



tion, the kind of day and the length of time for each exposure, providing her with information for future works.

"Some people say to me, why don't you use a light meter so you can calculate more easily — but that is like saying, why don't you use a real camera. Most people photograph in a hurry instead of absorbing what is before them. With pinhole cameras, it takes a long time to make a picture because there is no viewfinder. I have the opportunity to remember the wind and how it moved the trees and the people who walked

through, even though they don't show up in the picture. Pinhole cameras record the passage of time. If we really slowed down, this is how we would see."

Always conscious of the principles of light, and with the knowledge of how to manipulate light, Bos' design is essential to her results. She constructs her cameras with a diverse range of holes to recreate the actual galaxy, making smaller holes for fainter areas and larger holes to blur a portion of the picture. For clarity, each hole must be sandpapered so no burr remains.

"My newest prints are even more bizarre," she says. "I used a 100-watt bulb and a piece of galvanized tin with many holes to take a picture of a light bulb. I turned the bulb on for a fraction of an instant. With the holes pointed at one source of light, every view is different since each hole is seeing the bulb from a slightly different location. After determining how far away I wanted my film plane, I darkened the room and the bulb was suspended a foot in front of the holes. It's as if I riddled bullet holes in the walls and rays of sunlight burst in."

If pinhole sounds like serious stuff, it is. As Marion Roth says, "The only way we can be artists who can bend and create new materials and mix our own colors is by making pinhole pho-

Above: 100w Star Field with Dark Matter, 2000 by photographer Dianne Bos.

Opposite: Raspberry, sugarpalace series, 1995 by Bethany de Forest.



together, because everything else comes from a factory. We are completely engaged in an artistic experience. I lived in that dune shack with no running water or electricity, and Bethany and Dianne create their own means to record their visions. It's not like circling a few pictures on a contact sheet. We're working in real time, not a 1/500 of a second, which is meaningless to human experience.

"It's hard to believe that I based my career on a cookie tin," says Roth, "but people get very complex with pinhole photography because their imaginations take over and elaborate, crazy ideas spring forth." The three women agree that only another pinholer can understand this part of their life.

As they speak I look over at my table and notice a little yellow box that I had not seen before. Well, I'll be darned — I've just been pinholed! Δ

More of these artists' works may be seen on their websites:
Marion Roth is at www.pinhole.com/exhibits/Roth
Bethany de Forest is at www.pinhole.nl
Dianne Bos is at <http://www.jenniferrostoikgallery.com>

Roz Smith is a painter and a writer who lives in Newton, Massachusetts and summers in the art colony of Provincetown. She has been writing on photography for the past 15 years.