

Beyond the Frame: The Evolution of Hyfoas

Interview with Dirk Liviau

For years, he stood in front of the classroom, sharing his passion and knowledge with others as a teacher. Today, fine-art photographer Dirk is conquering the international art scene himself. His journey is one of constant evolution, driven by an inexhaustible desire for creative renewal. Although he began his career as a highly successful competition photographer who garnered major international recognition, he chose to radically change course when the creative spark began to fade. Leaving the rigid rules and the pressure of competition juries behind, he embarked on a completely independent and uncompromising artistic path.

With his signature “hyfoas” (hybrid photographic assemblages), he balances on the intriguing boundary between photography and painting. By projecting his images onto raw, weathered materials — such as concrete, peeling paint, and plaster — and re-photographing them, he creates mysterious, layered dreamscapes. These optical textures challenge viewers to truly see rather than just look. Dirk's daring leap into the unknown did not go unnoticed: in 2025, his experimental evolution was crowned with the prestigious title of Chevalier Académicien by the Mondial Art Academia.



In this candid interview, the former teacher opens up about the necessity of breaking free from artistic constraints, the comforting power of abstraction during the pandemic, and why taking risks in art is the only true way to grow.

1) You started out as a competitive photographer and achieved major international recognition. What motivated you to leave those successes behind and steer toward a completely new artistic direction?

The stretch was gone—I had reached my limit. Participating in competitions is a very intensive endeavor and naturally brings along extra stress. Of course, it depends on where you set the bar: are you doing it for fun, or do you want to reach the podium? When you've been part of that world for a number of years, propelled by a beautifully built-up track record, the urge to score high is very strong. But after years of all those great results, the joy of photography was gone. I was tired of shooting exactly the kinds of photos that the jury would like and reward with a high score. I couldn't do my own thing anymore. I had reached a saturation point when it came to those competitions.

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Additionally, the envy and copying by fellow competitive photographers helped me make the decision to call it quits. I wanted to take the artistic route; I wanted to put more creativity

into my photos without having to obey rules and regulations. Still, I don't look back on this "competition period" with regret. It made me the all-round photographer that I am today.

What also motivated me to make the switch was the advice of photographer friends (Jacques Vandecasteele, Roger Coucke, Jo Ockier, Jan Masyn, Vincent Messelier...). They saw that the imposed themes of competitive photography were limiting my creativity. They were convinced there was more to my photography than what I had achieved up to that point. They knew parts of my portfolio that weren't yet public, and which had no place in the competition world I was operating in. They felt it was a shame that I wasn't giving my full attention to that creativity, and they had to convince me of that. Once that realization clicked with me as well, I quickly flipped the switch.

2) Your quote reads: "My images are made to be looked at; the longer one looks, the better." What details or layers do you intentionally add so that viewers only discover them over time?

If you observe visitors during exhibitions, you can split them into two groups: "those who look, and those who see." The "lookers" notice the creations and walk on past. Those who want to see what is exhibited will step closer and look much more closely. The longer they look, the more they absorb the creation.

They start asking themselves questions; they are curious. They want to go along with the artist's fantasy because they want to understand the scene. But you have to lure the visitors in first. To do that, I use "trompe l'oeil" (optical illusion). It makes people doubt. By projecting my photos onto concrete, bad varnish, peeling wall paint, plastered walls, and so on—and then photographing them again—my assemblages gain an optical texture. This makes people hesitate: "Is this a painting or not?"

3) The Dreamscapes series features textures like cracks, concrete, and weathered surfaces. What draws you to these elements, and what do they symbolize in your work?

I find that they add real value. Those extra layers give the feeling that the scene has lived. It has been through something. They have a story to tell. "What you see is what you get" does not apply here.



"Fiocchi" (vlokjes)

The textures I use also symbolize the transience of what is beautiful. On top of that, it pushes the boundaries of painting and leads visitors astray: "Are we looking at a painting now? Surely, this can't be a photo."

This misdirection was coined as "hyfoas" by Romain Tichit, the CEO of Maison Contemporain in Paris, with whom I collaborated for a year. These letters stand for hybrid photographic assemblages.

4) You describe your process as merging photographed elements into surreal digital collages. How do you maintain the balance between technical precision and the emotional depth of the story?

As an artist, you have to intuitively feel when to stop adding elements. In literature, there is a genre called magical realism. It is that exact same feeling or atmosphere that I want to convey in my Dreamscapes. As an artist, you just have to sense where the boundary or balance lies between technical precision and emotional depth. You learn this by experimenting with many different compositions and being highly self-critical. And of course, I must not forget the critical feedback of my wife. She provides the first review. Through her, I have learned that women look at these tableaux differently.

5) During the COVID-19 period, you created the abstract series RITMO. What were you able to express through abstraction that was not possible with figurative photography?

Through the RITMO series, I challenged myself to create emotions and atmosphere purely through the striking use of color, movement, and rhythm—without relying on figures, environments, or physical objects to build tension in the creations. They are digital manipulations of previously taken photographs, created using photo-editing software. This was done entirely without Artificial Intelligence.

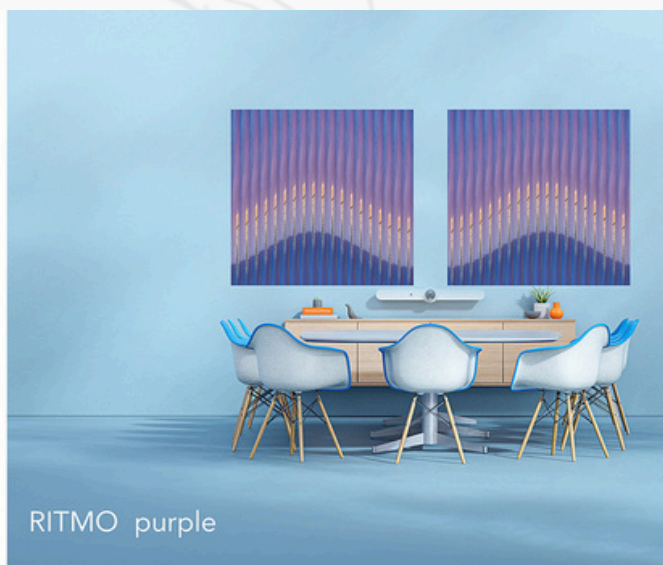
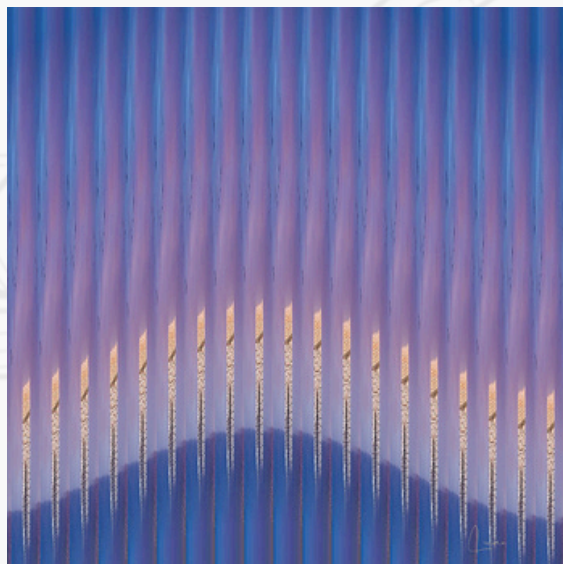


RITMO Gold & Silver

Working on the RITMO series pushed me completely out of my creative comfort zone. But since physical exhibitions couldn't be organized during COVID, I decided to invest my time in experimenting and making new images that had no connection to my earlier work. I was personally surprised by how emotionally people reacted when the series was first presented to the general public during an art fair at the Knokke casino. I vividly remember an elderly lady visiting the fair who told me, with tears in her eyes: "Sir, lately I have gone through too much in my life that is difficult at my age. I came here partly to distract myself, but also to find something that radiates 'hope.' Well, I think I have found it here." For me, that moment was the absolute highlight of that five-day exhibition.

6) Movement, rhythm, and contrast are central to RITMO. Do you approach these works more as a photographer, a painter, or perhaps even a composer?

Since I use my own photographs as a starting point, I begin as a photographer. However, along the way, the digital creator takes over by blending digital photo-editing programs together. In that sense, you can compare it to a composer who has to make different instruments, each with their own unique qualities, harmonize together into a single, cohesive whole.

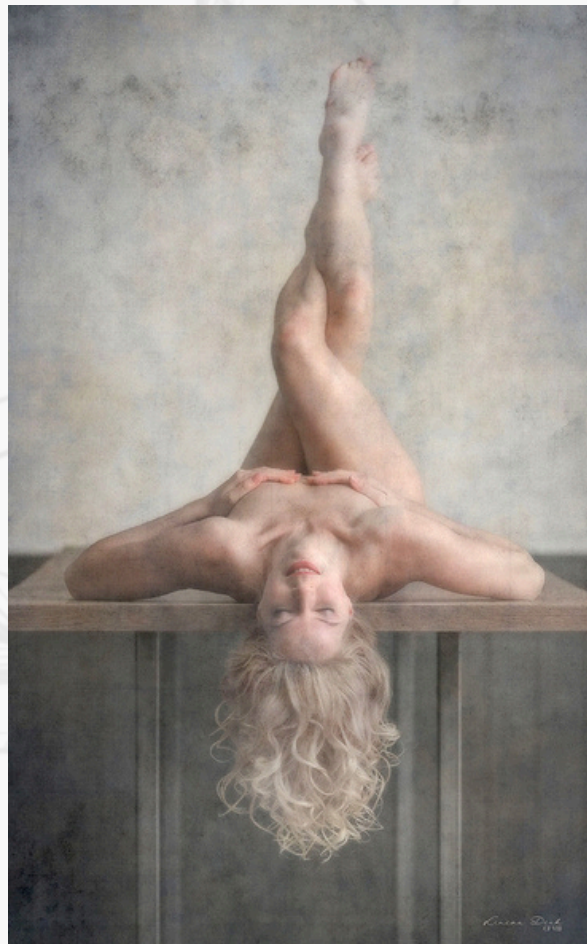


RITMO

7) In Corpus Femina, you explore vulnerability and strength. How does the human body help you translate universal emotions into a visual language?

I have always deeply admired Italian, Greek, and Egyptian frescoes. The female elegance in fragile terracotta colors and subtle pastel tones becomes vulnerable when projected onto weathered backgrounds and photographed again.

A tattoo artist once told me: "I started out sketching on paper, then I began painting on canvas, and I once did graffiti on brick and concrete. I can assure you: the most beautiful canvas is the human body. It is a feeling that is hard to put into words, but you cannot get any closer to your medium than that. That surface is alive. It's like dancing; I let my needles dance on the human body and immediately feel the reaction of my canvas."



Corpus Femina CF VIII

I experienced something very similar photographically while shooting the Corpus Femina series. The result of projecting the images onto drying, plastered walls came very close to how that tattoo artist described it. Even though the model was no longer physically present in the projection room, I could still sense a spiritual presence of sorts. The backgrounds were chosen so selectively that the stylized poses were showcased to their absolute best advantage.

8) You have exhibited internationally, all across Europe and beyond. Have different cultures reacted differently to your surreal and abstract works?

I am happy to say that the majority of visitors receive my creations very positively. With the Corpus Femina series, it is primarily women who express appreciation for the content and the atmosphere, whereas male visitors are mostly curious about the technical aspects. With the surreal Dreamscapes series, I often see visitors smiling.

Often, the selection of submitted works for exhibitions is in the hands of curators or organizers from the art world. They know best how the works will be received because they keep the target audience in mind and know their base inside out.



Corpus Femina CF XIII

9) In 2025, you were honored with the title of Chevalier Académicien by the Mondial Art Academia. Looking back at your transition from traditional competitive photography to your Dreamscapes and hyfoas (hybrid photographic assemblages), how does it feel to have this experimental evolution recognized by such a prestigious global institution?

It is beyond words. It is the ultimate appreciation of my creative work, my learning process, my struggles, my setbacks, my drive for perfection, my perseverance, my experiments... I hope this will open doors to new opportunities. Since I am not a product of an art academy, this kind of appreciation and recognition serves as a "laissez-passer" (boarding pass) to the next level. At least, that is what I hope.



10) You are currently returning to black-and-white photography with minimal light. What challenges and freedoms does this stripped-back approach offer you?

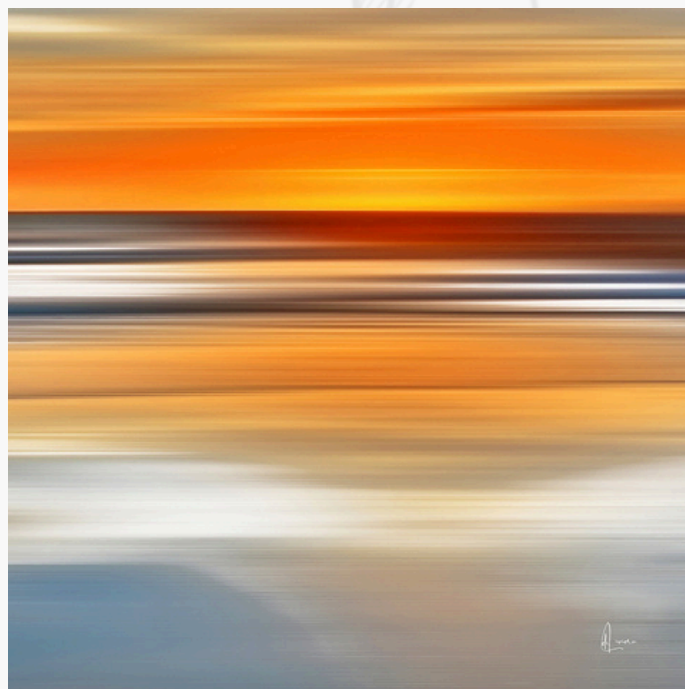
That "black and white" series is temporarily on hold. Following the positive reactions to the new series, STILLNESS IN MOTION, I am currently trying to optimize and even expand on that work. But rest assured, the desire to take the monochrome route is very strong.

In black-and-white photos, you recognize the photographer's craftsmanship even more than in color prints. You get closer to the essence. But that is purely personal.

11) Looking ahead, what creative risks do you still want to take, and how do you continue challenging yourself after decades in photography?

I have always had a fondness for black-and-white photography, the pure craft. That is certainly still a project that needs to be realized. The greatest challenge for me as a photographer will lie in the evolution of Artificial Intelligence. My starting point will always be an original photograph of my own. At the moment, I do not use AI, but who is to say that AI cannot become an addition to optimize creations?

Still, I do not think the word “risks” should carry a heavy connotation here. I do what I genuinely want to do. That sets the main tone. Giving in to your own passion is not a risk. I see it more as growth. Of course, if you look at the financial side, it does involve a considerable investment. Bringing your creations out into the world does not feel like a risk either, provided that you stand behind those creations one hundred percent. It reflects courage and self-confidence — and I certainly do not mean that arrogantly.



Stillness in Motion
"Reflections at sunset"

In photography, almost everything has already been photographed. The creative aspect lies in photographing the same thing differently: in another way, from another point of view, from another conviction, from another mindset... And within that “different” way of photographing lies the challenge. That can be a risk, but it is precisely those risks that make your creations stand out.

In addition, I also hope that I can continue to rely on the professionalism of print lab PRINTVILLE from Destelbergen. They are very important, both for selecting the most suitable substrates as well as for the color grading and printing of my creations. Moreover, they ensure that the final result turns out exactly as I envision it. We have been a 'great team' for over 10 years now, and I hope we may and can continue to work together for many years to come.

Dirk Liviau

<https://diliviau-art.webnode.be>

