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**Debra Sugerman views her world in soft focus**

By Elda Eilva - Express-News  
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Debra Sugerman shot "Balustrade" at an estate in Sarasota, Fla. DEBRA SUGERMAN

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Debra Sugerman is not a technophile. "I can't get my phone to work half the time," the photographer says wryly.

That explains why roughly half of the images in "Transitions," an exhibit of her work currently on view at One9Zero6 Gallery for Fotoseptiembre USA, were taken with decidedly low-tech equipment: plastic-bodied Diana cameras from the 1960s known for producing softly blurred photographs.

The other half were made with an iPhone camera using apps including ToyCamera, OldCamera and Hipstamatic that create impressionistic images that look like the product of lower-tech gear.

"The short story is I started using an iPhone (camera) because it was always in my pocket," Sugerman says. "And I was traveling a lot, the past seven years, and it was infinitely easier to me to document what I thought I was seeing."

The dreaminess — at times lightly laced with nostalgia or melancholy — that characterizes the photographs underscores the show's underlying theme.

"The reason the show is called 'Transitions' is because I've been through this major transitory time," she says.

A San Antonio native who grew up in a Jewish family, Sugerman was living in New York and working on film crews when the Sept. 11 attacks occurred.

"It was the first time I was scared living in New York ever," she recalls.

She left New York and returned to Texas in November of that year. She moved to Austin to be close to her family. At the time she was working on her master's degree in visual arts from Vermont College of Fine Arts, a low-residency program. When she had completed her studies, Sugerman said, she "wanted to do something to give back." Her parents, supporters of Israel, had encouraged her to reconnect with the family's Jewish roots as a teen.

"I was driving across country and I sort of had this epiphany," she says.

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"I was like, 'I've got to create a peace camp that uses art to break down barriers between the enemy cultures of Israel and Palestine.' "

Sugerman co-founded Creativity for Peace, a camp for teenage Israeli and Palestinian girls near Santa Fe, in 2003. Three years into her work with the camp, Sugerman embarked on a cross-country trip with five campers to meet with President George W. Bush.

"The girls wanted to deliver a message to the president about the conflict from their perspective," she says. "We also wanted to do an art installation in Washington."

The girls did not succeed in either goal, but Sugerman documented their journey in her first film, "Dear Mr. President." Then early last year, she learned that one of the campers, Bessan Abuelaish, the daughter of a well-known Palestinian doctor and peace advocate, had been killed when Israeli rocket fire struck her home. Currently, Sugerman is working on her second documentary, "Broken," dealing with Abuelaish's death, but she has met with difficulties filming in Israel and Palestine.

"I don't know if it will ever be done, frankly," she says. "This one I'm really daunted with because everything changes so quickly there."

Recently, Sugerman moved back to San Antonio from Los Angeles, where she lived for about five years. "Transitions" is her first show after a six-year break in exhibiting.

The images taken with Diana cameras are all black and white. The prints are 3 feet by 3 feet or slightly larger.

"These are my first go with this kind of pigmenting at this scale, with black and white," Sugerman says. "So I had to sit in front of a computer with Chuck Maurer at Alternative Ink, and I am not a digital photographer. It is a torture session for me."

"Wind," an image of a clearing with a carpet of tall grass, was taken "somewhere in Florida" on a blustery day.

"I'm not trying to be mysterious, I just can't remember where I was," she says with a smile. "I wanted to capture the feeling I had there in that moment. I was just waiting for all these Hobbits to jump out, or whatever lives in grass like that."

"Balustrade," an image of a staircase that leads to water's edge, was taken on an estate in Sarasota.

The iPhone photograph prints, all 11 inches by 11 inches, look like little windows into the subconscious. There are color images, some with a blue-green cast. Each offers a peek at a seemingly random object — a round light fixture glowing like a miniature moon; light seeping in around the edges of a window shade; the watery reflection of Italian cypresses bent over a stair; a butterfly resting on the shiny hood of Sugerman's truck. Though not directly connected, each image speaks to the fleeting nature of time.

There are no people in the photographs, with the single exception of a figure, blurred to abstraction, walking past a window.

"I notice that I'm suddenly making pictures again without people in them," Sugerman says. "It kind of knocked my breath out a little bit when I started printing the show."

"But it's interesting to me that I didn't realize there weren't people in the pictures when I was taking them. And I didn't mean it," she adds, laughing. "I didn't do it on purpose. But I've never been very thematic anyway. It's about the moment — it's about the light; it's about my mood; it's about what's in my heart; it's about what's happening in the world that minute."

"*Transitions*" is at *One9Zero6 Gallery*, 1906 S. Flores St., through Oct. 2. (210) 227-5718; [www.1906gallery.com](http://www.1906gallery.com).

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