



# THE TRUTH TELLER

Through intuition and the relentless pursuit of meaning within the noise, photographer Joyce Tenneson mines inner territory to reveal a universal identity

*By Daphne Nikolopoulos // Photography by Joyce Tenneson*



OPPOSITE: JOYCE  
TENNESON AT WORK

SONJA AND SUZANNE  
TO EMPHASIZE THE  
SIMPLICITY OF THE  
FRIENDSHIP, TENNESON  
TIGHTLY WOUND FABRIC  
AROUND EACH WOMAN  
"SO YOU COULD SEE THE  
NEGATIVE SPACE SUR-  
ROUNDING THEM."



The cover of *The Dovekeepers*, a historical novel by Alice Hoffman, depicts a woman with two white doves on her shoulder. There's something haunting about this image. The woman, dressed in a ragged gauze shroud and head cover, beams a certain strength, like the birds are her sisters and together they are invincible. She is luminous, self-possessed, and so representative of the book's strong female characters that one might assume she was photographed precisely for this purpose.

In fact, she was not. The photographer, part-time West Palm Beach resident Joyce Tenneson, met the woman, a Russian immigrant named Dasha, at an art opening in New York City and asked her if she'd consider posing for a portrait. Dasha agreed. During an introductory meeting—Tenneson insists on these to explore the depth of her subjects—Tenneson asked her if she ever had any recurring dreams. Dasha confessed to a

frightening one about two white doves coming out of her chest.

"I said, 'Let's try to reproduce that,'" Tenneson recalls. "The day she came to the studio, I had the doves. We tried different things that didn't work, but eventually the doves landed on her shoulders and I knew that was it. She was frightened because she had just moved from Russia and was looking for those sentinels, for spiritual protection."

The Dasha story is typical of Tenneson's creative process, which involves so much more than good lighting and a clever composition. She creates an atmosphere of trust with her subjects, which allows them to shed the face they present to the world and offer a glimpse at their inner selves. "I want to show something beyond the surface," she says. "I seek what's beneath the outer mask. That's why these works become timeless."

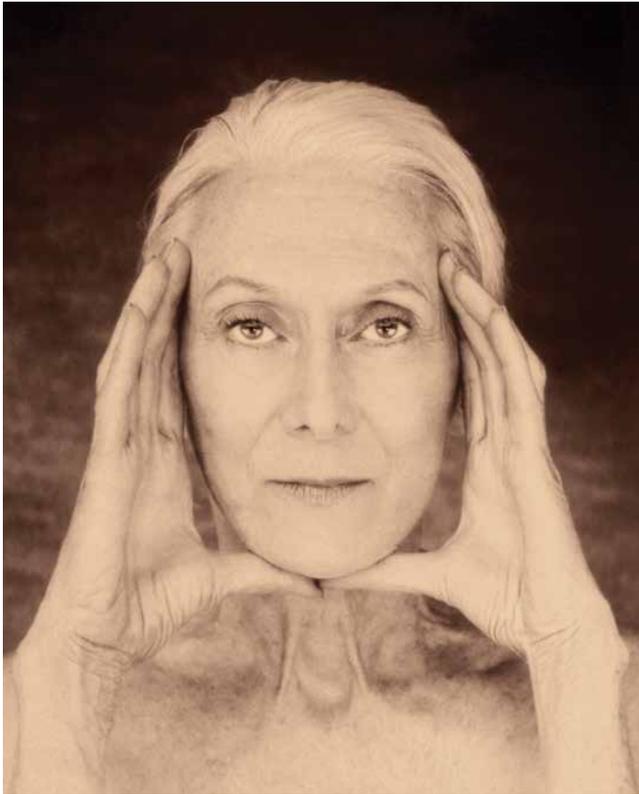
They certainly are that. Tenneson's work has been exhibited in



*“My camera is a witness. It holds a light up for my subjects and allows them to reveal their own essence.”*

**DASHA AND DOVES**  
THIS PHOTO WAS INSPIRED BY DASHA'S RECURRING DREAM OF TWO DOVES TRYING TO ESCAPE. THE DOVES ALIGHTING ON HER SHOULDER, SAYS TENNESON, WERE LIKE SENTINELS PROTECTING THE ANXIOUS YOUNG IMMIGRANT.

**OPPOSITE: DASHA AND SCAPULAE**  
THE ELEPHANT SCAPULAE HELD UP BY THE CHILD REMINDED TENNESON OF WINGS. "I LOVE USING PROPS THAT ARE UNUSUAL," SHE SAYS.



museums and galleries worldwide, has graced the covers of magazines like *Time*, *Life*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, and has even been featured in an Absolut vodka ad. Among her 16 books, *Wise Women*, which celebrates the beauty of women of a certain age, was a best-seller and inspired a four-part series on the *Today* show. She has been widely honored, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Professional Photographers of America in 2012 and a Lucie Award for Achievement in Portraiture in 2018. And she has been named among the 10 most influential women in the history of photography by readers of *American Photo* magazine.

So what is it that makes her images, as American photography critic Vicki Goldberg once put it, “immediately recognizable”? Part of it is her almost supernatural ability to reach into the spirituality of her subjects by stripping them of worldly distractions like backdrops, props, or traditional

clothing. A blend of technique and intuition, her photos walk the line between the real and the abstract, summoning a universal experience that resonates with people of different cultures, genders, and ages.

As is true of many artists, the work is a product of Tenneson’s own life. Since childhood, when she grew up on the grounds of a teaching convent among highly intellectual and spiritual women, she had a fiercely independent and tenacious nature. “I always felt that, if I wanted something, I’d be willing to work for it,” she says. “I wanted to excel, not for the ego but because I wanted to push myself.”

Her career path, from working at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., to deepening her fine art photography in New York City, and teaching and working on a global stage, has been informed by one simple concept: seeking truth. In her seminal works, published in her books *Light Warriors* and *Transformations*, she portrayed women



SHERYL AND SETH TENNESON HAD PHOTOGRAPHED SHERYL WHEN SHE WAS PREGNANT WITH SETH, AND NATURALLY WANTED TO PHOTOGRAPH HER WITH THE CHILD. “IT ALL HAPPENED SO NATURALLY,” SHE SAYS, “AND HAD SUCH A MAGICAL FEELING.”

OPPOSITE: CHRISTINE LEE THIS IMAGE GRACED THE COVER OF TENNESON’S BOOK *WISE WOMEN*. “SHE BEHINDS ME OF A POSITIVE ARCHETYPE OF A BEAUTIFUL AGING WOMAN,” SHE SAYS.



who, like her, were on a journey of growth. "I was interested in women who were seekers, who [sought] to develop their own creative powers and move forward in life regardless of personal toll," she says.

For both photographer and subject, that approach takes fearlessness. Tenneson possesses it hands down, and it's reflected in masterpieces like *Dasha and Doves* and *Christine Lee*, on the cover of *Wise Women*. "Those images have spoken to people around the world," she says. "They're psychologically complex, because I probe what makes people tick. People have called me a truth teller. I don't want to just play nice. If I see something, I will say it, even if it rubs someone the wrong way." ◀

### IN PALM BEACH

Select works from Joyce Tenneson's 40-plus-year career, including several of her luminous portraits of women, are exhibited at Holden Luntz Gallery in Palm Beach. ([holdenluntz.com](http://holdenluntz.com))



*“Through a portrait, we can potentially see everything—the history and depth of a person’s life, as well as evidence of a universal presence.”*

**WOMAN WITH BRANCH**  
THIS IMAGE, FEATURED IN *LIGHT WARRIORS*, IS A PLAY ON LIGHT. IT WAS CREATED WITH A LASER TO BRING AN ELEMENT OF SPIRITUALITY INTO THE COMPOSITION.

**OPPOSITE: SELF-PORTRAIT**  
FOR THIS STRIKING SELF-PORTRAIT, SHOT IN 1998, TENNESON WEARS AN ANCIENT SHAMAN'S ROBE BORROWED FROM A PRIVATE ART COLLECTION. "I HAD AN IMMEDIATE, VISCERAL ATTRACTION TO IT," SHE SAYS.