

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## A 'High Society' Conversation with Robyn Twomey

**David M Roth**

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Last year, on the eve of California's historic (and unsuccessful) attempt to legalize pot, photographer Robyn Twomey created a documentary series on medical marijuana. Her startlingly intimate portraits of patients are on view at [Patricia Sweetow Gallery](#) through April 2. She spoke about the project with SC editor and publisher David M. Roth.

### **How did this project begin?**

I was hired by *Fortune* in the fall of 2009 to photograph "Medical Marijuana's High Society," a piece that focused on a few of the more prominent dispensaries and owners. While I was at [Harborside Healthcare Center](#) in Oakland, I met 19-year-old Jordan who shared his story of leukemia and the benefits of cannabis. At the same time, the photo editor, Scott Thode, felt we needed some client perspective to round out the piece, and he encouraged me to do that even though it wasn't part of the original assignment. At the time, I was just starting to flirt with video, so I asked Jordan if I could do a short interview and portrait session at his house and he agreed. It was Jordan's story of struggle and survival that broke my heart and inspired me to find more stories. It wasn't the angle of the *Fortune* story, but I thought it could be a great personal series. I wanted to share what I was learning about people who depend on

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**How did you persuade people to work with you?**

At first, I tried to talk to patients directly, but most were hesitant and didn't want to be stereotyped or discriminated against because of the frail legality around cannabis. So, I talked to a couple dispensaries and Harborside was the most supportive. The clients trusted Harborside and the ones who signed on were people with an activist spirit, people tired of the cannabis backlash. They signed up, hoping their story would help educate and decriminalize cannabis. I was doing a lot of the shooting in 2010 — before the vote on Prop 19, the initiative that would have legalized marijuana, and that propelled a lot of energy and excitement for the project.

**What were your feelings about medicinal marijuana prior to the assignment?**

I had a few friends who got cards to get in on high quality product, but I didn't know anyone personally who was taking it for more than recreational use. So, I suppose in that regard, I didn't think about it. There was a dispensary on my block that was staked out and eventually raided and shut down by homeland security, and I always found it odd that homeland security funds were allocated to shutting down dispensaries. But it just wasn't personal enough for me to really even care about it.

When I began documenting people's stories, I went from feeling indifferent to feeling passionately connected to each of my subjects and the injustice they felt that something that is helping them is constantly being threatened by the legal system. That stigma can really have a negative effect on people, causing some to feel unnecessary shame. Ann, one of the subjects, told me a lot of older people who are suffering and taking heavy meds are afraid of cannabis because all the controversy surrounding it

**What were some of the reoccurring themes that emerged in your conversations?**

The most ubiquitous sentiment was the overall dissatisfaction with prescription drugs. People would complain about how ineffective prescription drugs are, or how overly sedated they make you feel. People were sometimes taking cannabis instead of prescription drugs, but were often taking cannabis to counteract specific side effects from prescription drugs. A lot of people also talked about cannabis relieving anxiety. Sleep and appetite were other common themes.

It was quite eye opening to hear how many prescription drugs are pushed on people, and how negatively they affect them. People using cannabis for medicine are prescribing the doses themselves and are tuning in to their bodies to figure out how much works for them. I can see why that is terrifying for the pharmaceutical business.

**You mix environmental portraits and close-ups. Most are extreme close-ups.****Why did you take that approach?**

I've always been a big fan of the formal head shot. I thought it would be a great opportunity to take such a formal approach and subvert the formality with a currently perceived taboo. It was also a great opportunity to use smoke as a spontaneous visual element. The formal head shot is the control and the smoke is the unpredictable element that transcends intention — the magic that cannot be directed. The smoke becomes a second character in the image, which can only be successfully translated in the close ups.

**Several of the subjects seem to be consciously avoiding exposure to the camera; their eyes and faces are almost entirely concealed by smoke.**

For the most part, my direction was to not look at the camera, because I wanted the viewer to witness people in a moment of their own, rather than a moment for me or the public. I asked them to try and forget that the camera was there, and to just focus on their breath. There is a psychological intensity in all of us that I'm constantly looking to document, and I'm sure that influenced my edit. One reviewer saw the look in their eyes as *needing* cannabis, as opposed to *wanting* it. And I think that is an interesting

angle to consider. If and when I asked the subject to look at the lens, I asked them to just let go and just be as honest as possible.

**Smoke is an irresistible and deliciously evocative visual motif which you've made the most of. I can't help think, when I look at these pictures, of Herman Leonard's famous portrait of Dexter Gordon.**

Before this series, I never wanted people to smoke in my images. I considered it so cliché. But since I was documenting, it didn't feel like I was glorifying or idealizing smoke. It was purposeful. I even asked people to create more smoke if possible, to magnify the hazy exhale so I could use it as a main element. I never asked people to smoke more than they wanted to. In some cases, people only wanted to take a couple tokes, so I was only able to capture about 3 or 4 frames.

The Dexter Gordon image from Herman Leonard, and other smoky nostalgic images from that era, surely informed my decision on a subconscious level to document cannabis patients. But I was just as informed by the work of August Sander, Julia Margaret Cameron, and my mom, who I watched smoke (cigarettes) everyday growing up.

**All of the people in your pictures are smoking weed because they are ill. Yet none of them look sick. Most of them seem overwhelming melancholy. This is not a trait we normally associate with getting high. What's going on here?**

Through my interviews, I learned that you don't have to necessarily *look* ill to be in a lot of pain, or to be dealing with a lot of issues. There are people dealing with everything from leukemia to anxiety in this series.

**The series is not without humor. The elderly woman lighting up at the piano holding a cat certainly plays against stereotypes, while the guy with the full body tattoo plays directly into the popular image of stoners. The two kind of balance each other out in that regard. Did you learn anything about medical pot that really surprised you?**

The entire project was a great learning process into the unnecessary stigma associated with cannabis, the different strands of cannabis and how they uniquely affect people, the really crazy world of pharmaceuticals and most of all the politics. Ann (the lady with the cat) summed it up well when she said, "There's something wrong in America with feeling good. I don't know what it is. Yes, it relieves my pain. And yes, it makes me euphoric."

**Last question: Did your subjects offer to get you high as part of the exchange and if so, how did you handle it?**

Most people take their medicine very seriously, and it's very expensive. Just a couple times people offered, but it wouldn't be something I could handle while working. After the very first shoot, my assistant and I were leaving Oakland and approached High Street. We had to pull over from laughing so hard at the street sign. That's when I realized that having the subject blow smoke toward the lens was giving us quite a contact high. It was a definite perk that made continuing the project that much more enjoyable.

Robyn Twomey: "Medicine" @ Patricia Sweetow Gallery through April 2, 2011.