

## Portrait: Katie Niles, Photographer

by Lee Lynch

Katie Niles was a professional photographer back in Indianapolis when she first saw an ad for the Ovulars, photography workshops held at Rootworks in Southern Oregon. She took some time off from the wedding studio where she worked, got on a bus, and breathed in relief to escape "all my little brides."

It was only at the Ovulars, working with Tee Corinne, Ruth Mountaingrove, JEB and others, that she could get the input she needed about her lesbian photographs. Three summers and three bus trips later, she left behind her envy of the grooms who got to wear tuxedos and moved all her earthly belongings to the land that had stolen her heart and challenged her considerable talent. After,



that is, one last trip to the east coast to see Meg and Chris at Carnegie Hall — in a tux of her own.

Though she'd hoped to get a job doing darkroom work in Grants Pass, near Rootworks, the first opening that came along was in Ashland as a short order cook. There she is still, enjoying the town's culture, gay residents and her cooking job — for the freedom it gives her to photograph women who aren't at all the marrying kind. Often, she hasn't the money to buy film, but when she has, her

photographs, especially her portraits, are among the best in our lesbian culture. Her work can be found in *Blatant Image* 1, 2 and 3; *On Our Backs*; *Off Our Backs*; *Womankind* of Indianapolis, *Paid My Dues* of Chicago, and the *Crossing Press Calendars*.



Katie Niles

Niles is a preacher's daughter and her father's hobby was photography. She recalls that she and her sister would get instamatics for Christmas as kids. Later, when her father hadn't time to use his darkroom, he turned his daughters loose in it. Though he didn't teach them to use it, by 10 or 11 both girls had taught themselves the rudiments of photography. Niles' major influence right through high school was Imogen Cunningham. By the time she hit college, her skills were so advanced she couldn't bear to waste time sitting through prerequisite photography courses and settled for a teaching degree.

She graduated at that point, from documenting life on the family farm, taking

pictures of cats and sheep and scenery, to documenting life on campus. More specifically, to doing portraits of her women friends. She got so serious she brought her whole darkroom with her. Eventually, she began to concentrate on portraits of one particular woman. She remembers thinking they were "just real good friends," until, one day...

It was after college that Niles began to concentrate on portraits of lesbians. That first lover was a very closeted professional. As Niles found herself getting freer and freer in her lifestyle and her work, they separated. Then, she says, "I realized there's a whole bunch of women out there!" Her influences became JEB and Tee Corinne, especially Corinne's "Sinister Wisdom Poster" and her Holly Near album cover. Perhaps Niles' most famous photograph is of two black women, clothed, one on the other's lap, turned, almost kissing, touching intimately. It is a powerfully erotic image. (*Blatant Image* 1, p. 50.)

Though she can't take as many pictures in Southern Oregon as she did back in Indiana, Niles says her work out here is more consistently good. Living here has its problems, though. It was easier to get to lesbians in the city. Here, we are fewer in number and live farther apart. She doesn't own a car. Still, she sees enough of fellow photographers, she feels, to get much of what she once got from the Ovulars: the feedback, the encouragement, news of the lesbian photography market.

Her goals are as clear and down to earth as she is: to make enough money this year to buy more than one roll of film at a time, to afford other materials she needs. Niles is not discouraged, though. There's enough time left, she says, to accomplish her long term goal: "To be Imogen Cunningham at 92 and still going!"

\*Katie Niles can be reached at PO Box 495, Ashland, OR 97520.

\**Blatant Image* is available from 2000 King Mountain Trail, Wolf Creek, OR 97497.

\**On Our Backs* is available from PO Box 421916, San Francisco, CA 20009, and is looking for erotic lesbian graphics.

\**Off Our Backs* can be ordered at 1841 Columbia Rd., NW, Wash., DC 20009.

\**Sinister Wisdom Poster*, from Lincoln Legion of Lesbians, PO Box 30137, Lincoln, Neb. 68503.



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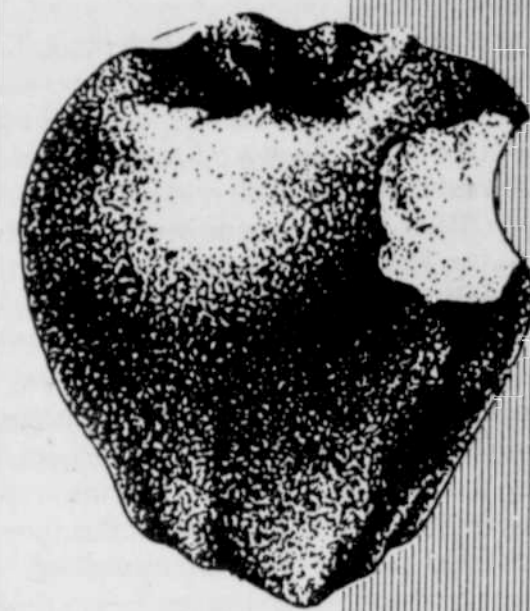
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