


# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

## about photography

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### THE LIGHT THAT SHAPES ART: BEHIND THE BOLD COLORS OF JESSICA BACKHAUS' PLEIN SOLEIL

Welcome to this edition of [\[book spotlight\]](#). Today, we uncover the layers of '[Plein Soleil](#),' by [Jessica Backhaus](#) (published by [Kehrer Verlag](#)). We'd love to read  our comments below about these insights and ideas behind the artist's work.

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## **What if light itself could be the main character in a photograph?**

Jessica Backhaus pushes the boundaries of photography, using color, paper, and sunlight to create images that feel more like paintings than traditional photographs. Her latest series, *Plein Soleil*, is about letting light shape reality. For years, she worked in figurative and documentary photography, but something kept pulling her toward abstraction. Now, she has fully embraced it, creating work that strips photography down to its simplest and most powerful elements.

*But what does it take to photograph something that isn't really there?*

Backhaus doesn't rely on subjects or storytelling in the usual way—she bends and folds colored paper, waits for the right moment of sunlight, and captures what happens. The result is bold, vibrant compositions that feel alive, shaped by a process that is both precise and unpredictable. Her approach has earned her recognition as one of the most distinct voices in contemporary photography. *Plein Soleil* is about seeing light as an artistic force in itself.

**Not all photographs are meant to capture reality—some are meant to set it free.**



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## Plein Soleil

Jessica Backhaus' *Plein Soleil* is a bold exploration of abstraction, where light itself becomes the driving force of creation. Moving away from figurative photography, Backhaus strips the medium down to its essential elements—color, form, and shadow—using nothing but paper, sunlight, and a sharp artistic instinct. The result is a series of striking compositions that blur the line between photography, painting, and sculpture.

Inspired by her ongoing fascination with minimalism, *Plein Soleil* builds on the visual language she developed in earlier projects like *A Trilogy* and *Cut Outs*. Backhaus relocated to the South of France temporarily to fully immerse herself in an environment where light could be her true collaborator. The shifting shadows and delicate paper structures in her work transform moment by moment, making each photograph a fleeting record of balance, movement, and transformation.

A leading voice in contemporary photography, Backhaus has exhibited internationally and her work is held in prestigious collections worldwide. With *Plein Soleil*, she continues to challenge the boundaries of the photographic image, proving that sometimes, the simplest materials can produce the most powerful visual experiences. ([Kehrer Verlag](#), [Amazon](#))





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**Overview of the project:** *What inspired you to explore abstraction and create **Plein Soleil**, and how does this work reflect your artistic evolution?*

Abstraction has captivated me for the past eight years, and with every year that passes, my fascination only deepens. There's something profoundly liberating and mysterious about abstraction—it allows us to step beyond the limits of representation and into a realm where imagination is unbound. For me it creates a space to dream, to feel, and to explore my own unique perceptions of the world. And in abstraction, each viewer is invited to have their own interpretations and emotional responses. This makes the experience deeply personal and infinitely varied.



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A defining moment in this journey came with my series *A Trilogy*, a turning point where I realized I was ready to shift direction.





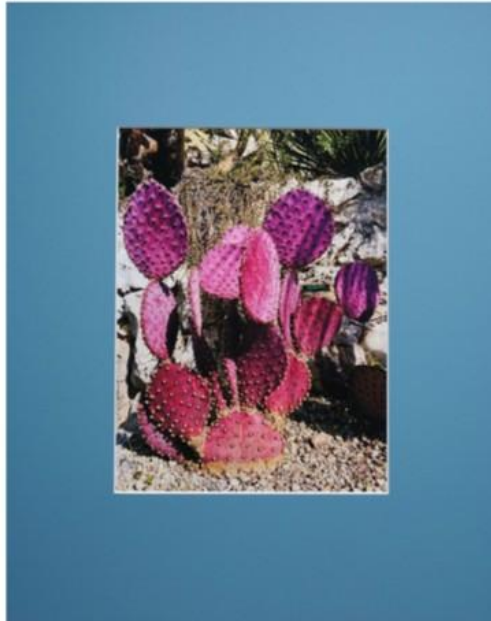
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Prior to that, my work was more figurative, often documentary in nature, rooted in capturing reality as it appeared to me. However, as I moved forward, I felt the pull of abstraction more intensely. *Plein Soleil* represents a continuation of this shift. It's a step further into abstraction, following the path I began with my project *Cut Outs*. *Cut Outs* was among other things an exploration of minimalism, focusing on the relationship between color and light, and the tension between shape and shadow.



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But after completing that series, I found myself needing a break, a space to reset and reflect before returning to this way of working. During that interlude, I started another project called *The Nature of Things*, which is still ongoing and gave me the chance to recharge creatively and focus on other topics. I embrace the different worlds between figuration and abstraction.

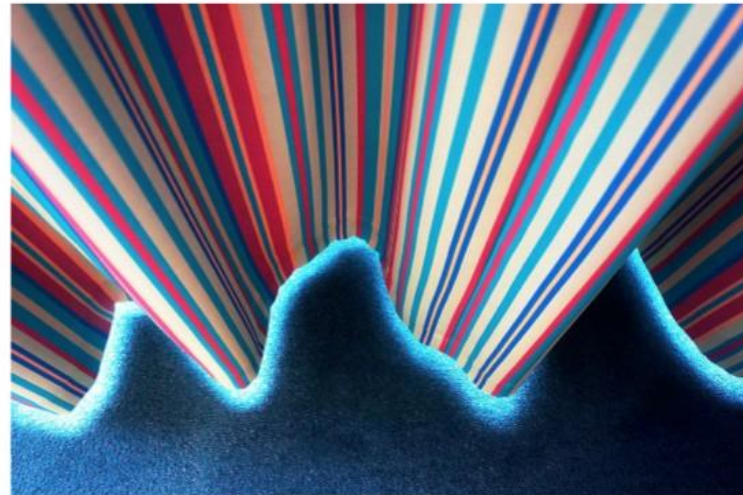
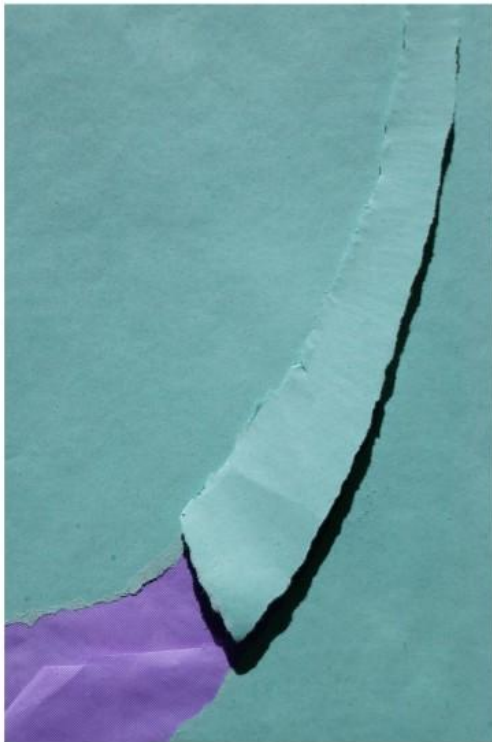


*Plein Soleil* was then born out of my longing for color, as well as my love for paper and light. I didn't anticipated this evolution. It simply happened completely unexpected.

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***What initially drew you toward abstraction after years of working more figuratively? Was there a particular moment or image that made you realize you wanted to push further into this direction?***

In a way I had already started to move toward abstraction within my project *six degrees of freedom*. Moving toward abstraction can be both liberating and challenging, especially when you're aiming to step away from traditional figurative expression.





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In the context of my project, the title itself *six degrees of freedom* already suggests a broad concept, potentially alluding to the freedom of movement or the different planes of perception. I wasn't only experimenting with abstraction in a formal sense but also in how it can be connected to ideas of freedom, limits, and maybe even the unknown or unexplored aspects of human experience. I continued this path then with my series *A Trilogy*.

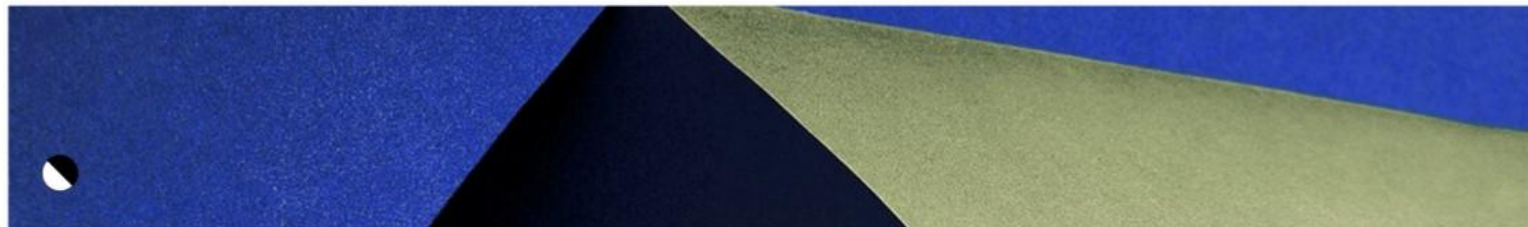
I also remember – about 17 years ago – I have spoken with Jean-Christophe Ammann, a curator in Germany. He said: “maybe you don't see it yet, but I have a feeling that years down the line, you will end up in abstraction.” At the time, I didn't really believe what he was saying. Unfortunately, he has since passed away but I think of him so often because he was right. He knew me better than I knew myself. And I wish I could show him all these works I've made since then.

**Artistic vision and approach:** *Your images transform simple materials like colored paper and sunlight into vibrant compositions. How do you approach the process of crafting these abstractions?*

My creative process is very intuitive and often guided by the materials themselves. One day, when the sun was shining brightly, I laid out my paper collection on a table where the sunlight poured in directly. I was struck by the way each paper had its own unique texture. I began to bend and fold specific colored sheets in various sizes, carefully selecting which ones to bring into a dialogue with one another.

As the sunlight hit the papers, the interplay of light and shadow created rich, deep contrasts. The way the shadows stretched and shifted fascinated me. I took my camera and began capturing these fleeting moments, documenting the ephemeral beauty of the paper combinations and their changing shadows. It's always a bit of a performance—each photograph is a record of something that won't last. I am shifting and turning the papers in subtle gestures, so each composition is a moment in time.

Music often accompanies me in this process. The rhythm, the melody, it seems to connect directly with the movements of the papers, and I become immersed in the experience. I follow the emotions that arise, letting the music and the process guide me. It's an organic, almost meditative way of working, where I'm both a participant and an observer.



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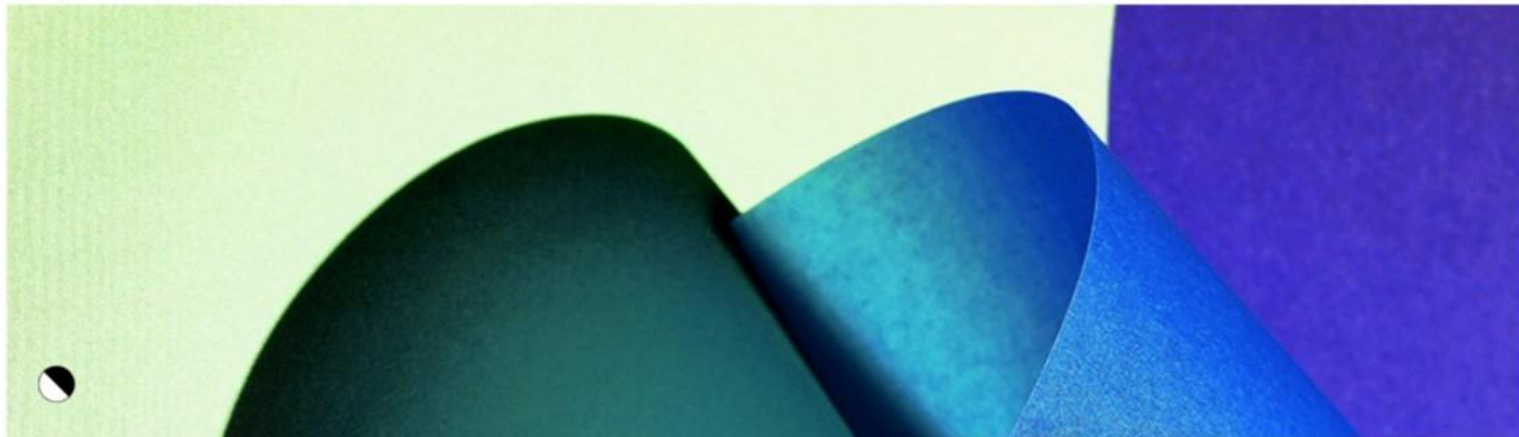
**Storytelling in photography: *Plein Soleil* emphasizes color, surface, and form rather than traditional subjects. How do you tell a story or evoke emotion through these abstract elements?**

I guess the key to telling a story or evoking emotion lies in how you combine these elements to interact with each other. Again I believe that intuition plays an important part. You can think of the composition as a space where the color pulls the viewer in, the surface gives a tactile experience, and the form can guide their emotional journey through the piece. By layering these elements thoughtfully, one can create a dialogue within the artwork that speaks to the viewer beyond words.

There is also a quiet poetry in the way these elements unfold, in their ability to evoke beauty without excess. It is through this pursuit of simplicity that I seek to highlight the delicate, often fragile and powerful beauty of the world around us.

*Plein Soleil* is an homage to the sun and to color. In my artistic practice, the interplay of color and light stands as foundational elements, serving not merely as aesthetic choices but as the very language through which I communicate. Color, in its purest form, holds a narrative - each hue is alive with emotion and significance. And light, in its shifting qualities, transforms both the surface and the space, creating depth, contrast, and movement.

For me each project feels like a step further into a landscape where forms are less about the familiar and more about the essence of feeling, light, and space. It's an evolution, a way of pushing abstraction further and exploring how the simplest elements can evoke the most profound emotional responses. This ongoing exploration is not only a way of understanding the world around me but also a way of connecting to my own evolving artistic voice.



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**Challenges and perseverance: *Abstract photography demands a unique mindset and technical approach. What challenges did you encounter while creating *Plein Soleil*, and how did you overcome them?***

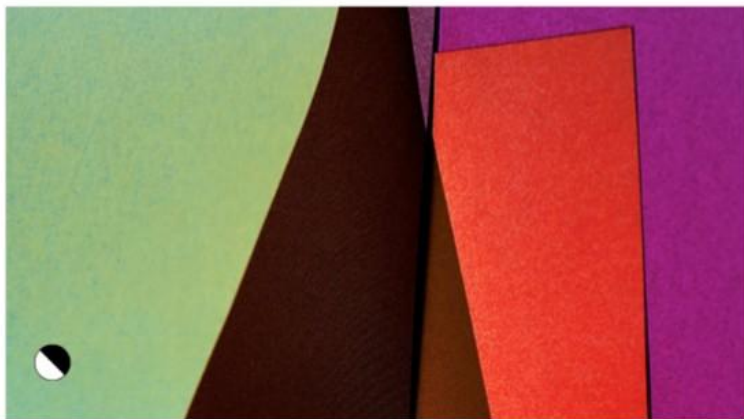
*Plein Soleil* emerged quite naturally and organically. It wasn't so much about facing specific obstacles. If I had to pinpoint one challenge, it would be the patience required to wait for the sun, quite literally. Living in Berlin, the winter months are often gray and lack the light I need to create. This led me to make the decision to temporarily relocate to the South of France, where the light is generous and the atmosphere fosters creativity. Being in that environment gave me the space and inspiration to fully bring the project to life. The sun, in a way, became a symbol of the creative energy I needed. And in the end look at the title I have chosen for this particular project: *Plein Soleil* - meaning precisely full sun.

***Beyond its practical function, do you see light as having an emotional or even symbolic presence in your work?***

Yes, light for me, as a counterpart to darkness, represents hope, positivity, and resilience in a world full of challenges. Darkness symbolizes uncertainty and struggle, but light gives us the ability to see beyond the shadows, to understand and navigate the world even when it seems overwhelming.

I believe for artists, this pursuit of light in any form is essential. We can use our creativity to shine through the darkest times, offering beauty, perspective, and hope.

Choosing light also means refusing to be paralyzed by despair, actively seeking positivity, and transforming difficulties into opportunities for growth. It's not about ignoring the darkness, but about engaging with it in ways that empower us to move forward.





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**Role of the photographer:** *Your work draws heavily from other art forms, such as painting and sculpture. How do these influences shape your identity as a photographer and an artist?*

I have always been surrounded by art, which has deeply shaped who I am today. From an early age, I developed a fascination with the creative process and the power of storytelling. I also often found myself in museums, exploring and absorbing the diverse range of art forms on display. It wasn't just about viewing art—it was about understanding the narratives behind each piece, the emotions they conveyed, and the techniques that brought them to life.

Some of the influences who nourish my inspiration are Etel Adnan, Helen Frankenthaler, Jean Arp, Raoul de Keyser, Mark Rothko and Sonia Delaunay. Plus, the particular Blue from Yves Klein will never cease to move me.

When I began my career, my focus initially gravitated toward photography. I was drawn to photographers from various genres like portraiture, still life or documentary. Photography seemed to offer an immediate, tangible connection to the world, one that resonated with my own desire to express and communicate visually.

As my artistic journey evolved, I naturally shifted towards abstraction. This transition felt organic, and I began to explore painting and sculpture more deeply. I found myself increasingly fascinated by the interplay of form, color, and texture—elements that speak to the deeper, often unspoken aspects of our human experience. I discovered new ways to express emotion, thought, and perception through abstract works.

Each phase of my creative path has been in some sort of way a response to the influences around me—whether it was the vibrant world of theatre, the stark beauty of photography, or the expansive freedom of abstraction. My personal journey is a continuous exploration, driven by an insatiable curiosity and a deep connection to the arts in all their forms.

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**Connection with the viewer: *Your images exude optimism and vibrancy. What emotions or thoughts do you hope to evoke in viewers experiencing Plein Soleil?***

I try to channel my emotions and thoughts about the complexity of the world we live in into my work. Luckily I cannot control how one feels while looking at my work, but in a way I would like to offer a space where people can reflect on their own feelings and experiences. Whether it's joy, nostalgia, or something more personal. The work is a sort of canvas for individual interpretation and opens a dialogue between the seen and the unseen.

Otherwise I am hoping that the people who view and engage with my work will find and see some lyrical elements. As poetry is important to me, not only in my artistic expression but also in my life in general.

Poetry, in its most distilled form, has the capacity to evoke emotions through economy of words—much like how an abstract and minimalist piece can communicate vast emotional landscapes with a single gesture or shape.



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**Technical and creative tips:** *Your mastery of light and color is evident in this series. What advice would you give photographers aiming to experiment with minimalism and abstraction in their work?*

I would suggest to engage in a deep commitment to intuition. In abstract and minimalist work, where every line and space matters, intuition becomes a key guide, helping one to navigate what to leave in and what to take out, allowing for space to breathe and for the viewer to fill in their own interpretation.

I believe that one should always trust their feelings, for creativity often flows from places beyond rational understanding. It's about seeing the world in new and unexpected ways, where a fleeting moment of light or an unassuming shade of color can hold infinite meaning.

The audacity of simplicity is also a principle I embrace - it's this idea of stripping away the superfluous to reveal the essence of something—an approach that's often incredibly impactful in abstraction and minimalism. For example, a single, well-chosen color or a subtle gradient of light can speak volumes without needing complex forms or intricate detail.

**Photography as an artistic medium:** *Critics often describe your work as transcending photography. How do you see the role of photography as a medium for exploring abstract and artistic concepts?*

I think the potential and the broad range of photography lends itself to explore abstraction and to venture into any kind of artistic expression.

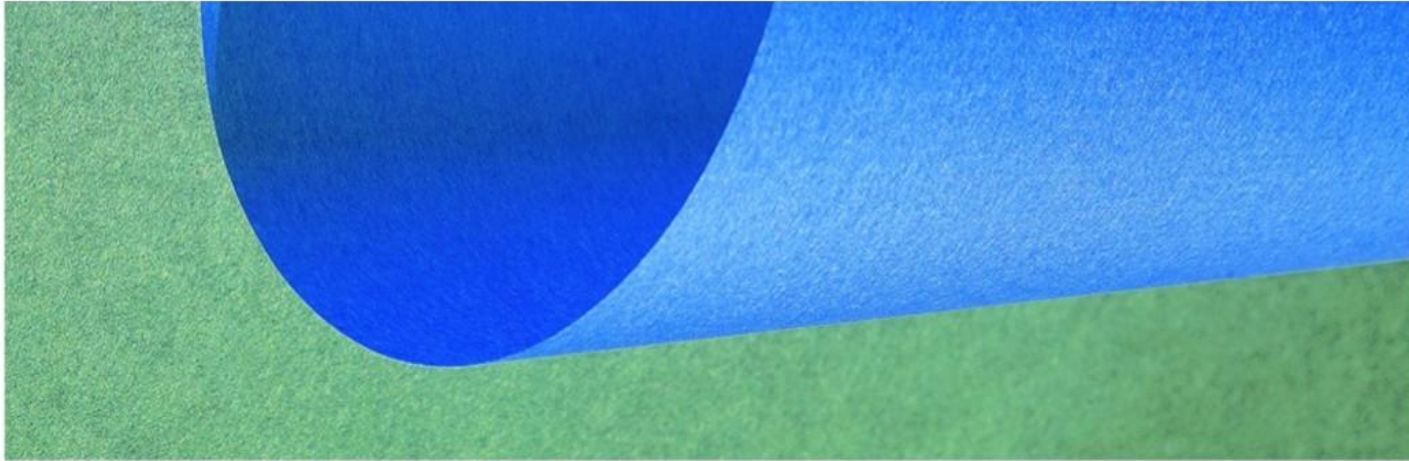
Reflecting on this question, I also see a bridge between photography and poetry that is supporting the exploration of these concepts. Photography and poetry both capture moments and emotions, but they do so in different, yet complementary, ways. Photography freezes a single moment in time, inviting the viewer to interpret the image, often invoking feelings or thoughts that are immediate and instinctive. Poetry, on the other hand, can capture the essence of a moment, a feeling, or an experience through language, often engaging the reader's imagination more deeply and encouraging them to reflect.

Both art forms are highly subjective, relying on the observer's or reader's personal interpretation. In photography, a photograph might hold a specific story or memory for the photographer, but the viewer may interpret it differently, creating a dialogue between the image and the viewer's internal world. Similarly, poetry often uses metaphor, rhythm, and imagery to evoke an emotional response, leaving space for personal interpretation.





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**Advice for emerging photographers: *For those aspiring to push the boundaries of traditional photography into abstraction, what lessons from *Plein Soleil* would you share to inspire their creative journeys?***

If there's a lesson to be learned in the creative process, it's that finding your own authentic artistic voice is crucial—and that journey is rarely a straight line. Developing a unique voice takes time, self-exploration, and experimentation. It requires patience, because, like any meaningful pursuit, it involves growth through trial and error. You might not find your approach or your true expression right away. In fact, the winding path of discovery can often lead to unexpected and profound breakthroughs.

The key is not to be afraid of failure. Failure, while uncomfortable, is an essential part of creating. It's through our mistakes, missteps, and moments of doubt that we learn what doesn't work and, in turn, what does. Every failure is an opportunity to refine, to reassess, and to move forward with new insights. Sometimes, it's in the experiments and the risks we take that we uncover something completely new and exciting. The important thing is to not let failure define you, but to let it fuel your perseverance.

In the end, creativity is a process - and like the French painter Matisse said: "***La créativité demande du courage.***" "Creativity demands courage."