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# PHOTOGRAPHY

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## FACE VALUE

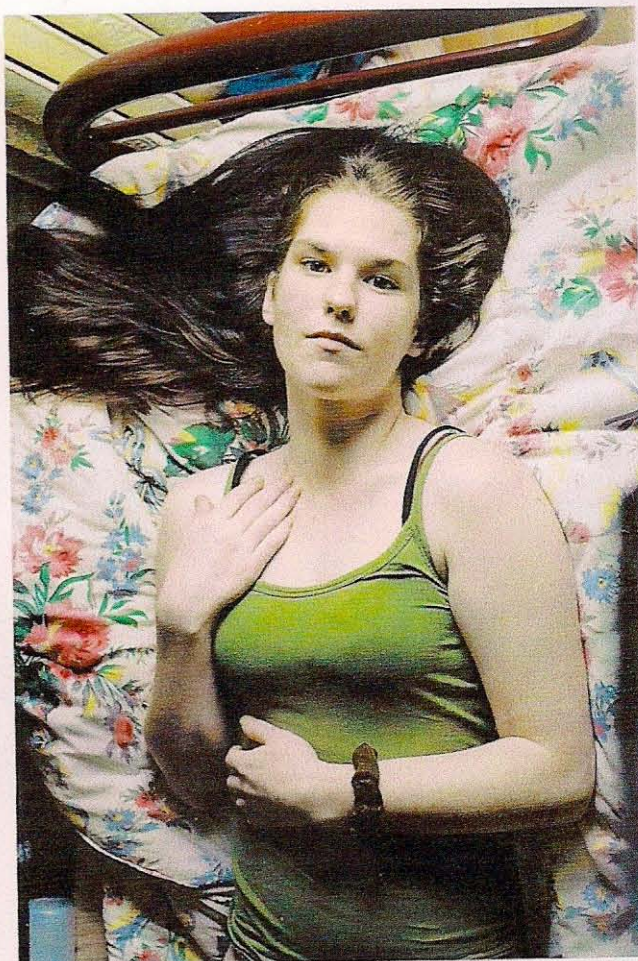
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many faces of modern  
portrait photography

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## TONY FOUHSE

"Tony, did you start this project to get attention to your work or did you do it to help me?" That is the starting point of Stephanie MacDonald's interview with Tony Fohse.

On his blog, Drool, Fohse is an editorial and commercial photographer, based in Ottawa; Stephanie is a woman who is addicted to heroin. Fohse is documenting Stephanie's addiction and recovery in a project called *Live Through This*.

"I had been working with crack addicts on a street corner in Ottawa for four years," Fohse says. "I wasn't trying to save them, reform them or colonise them, I was just photographing them. They were using me and I was using them - that's why the project was called *User*."

Then I met Stephanie and there was something so compelling about her. She could get in touch with her emotions and express them honestly and directly. So I asked her, 'Is there anything I can do to help?' And she said, 'Can you get me into rehab?' I said I could try, but asked if I could photograph her during the process, and she agreed. So, we collaborated in the sense that we were two people who wanted something from each other. We each had our own agenda. She wanted to get straight and I thought she was a compelling subject. In the end it became a project about our relationship."

Sometimes the photography became secondary, as Fohse found himself managing Stephanie's life, jumping through the bureaucratic hoops to get her sorted out with American medical identification in order that she could get treatment, talking with her or comforting her, or waiting when she didn't turn up for a meeting. When photography did happen, Fohse

did it his way, making portraits lit and posed and directing them himself.

"Not a day went by when I wondered if I was doing this just for my project or to help her get better," he says. "She said it was about two people doing something together. 'I'm a junkie and I take heroin. You're a photographer and you take pictures.' That's how Stephanie saw it."

Ethics were always involved. Sometimes she'd ask to borrow \$20 for heroin. And I'd give it to her because what's the alternative? You give her \$20 or she goes on the corner and sucks a man's penis. What would you do?

"I get attacked for my work because people think I'm exploiting people. They question my motives. But I question my motives as well. I ask myself, 'How can you portray these people, how can you photograph this 'other'?' People question me about why I do this. If I'm in a good mood I will try to explain and rationalise my motives but if I'm in a bad mood I turn into a pitbull and tell them to fuck off."

In the end, Stephanie got her identification, came off heroin and moved back to Nova Scotia to be reunited with her son, Cole, and the rest of her family. It's a happy (but still continuing) story that offers a sense of hope to the many people affected by addiction.

"I get emails every week from people saying, 'That's my brother or that's my daughter,'" says Fohse. "They like seeing the pictures. It gives them hope." *BJP*

[www.tonyfoto.com](http://www.tonyfoto.com)

1 Stephanie in Fohse's studio, January, 2011.

2 Stephanie underwent a brain operation in March this year to tackle an infection from an abscess.

3 Stephanie back home in Nova Scotia. All images © Tony Fohse.