PACIFICA'S COASTAL LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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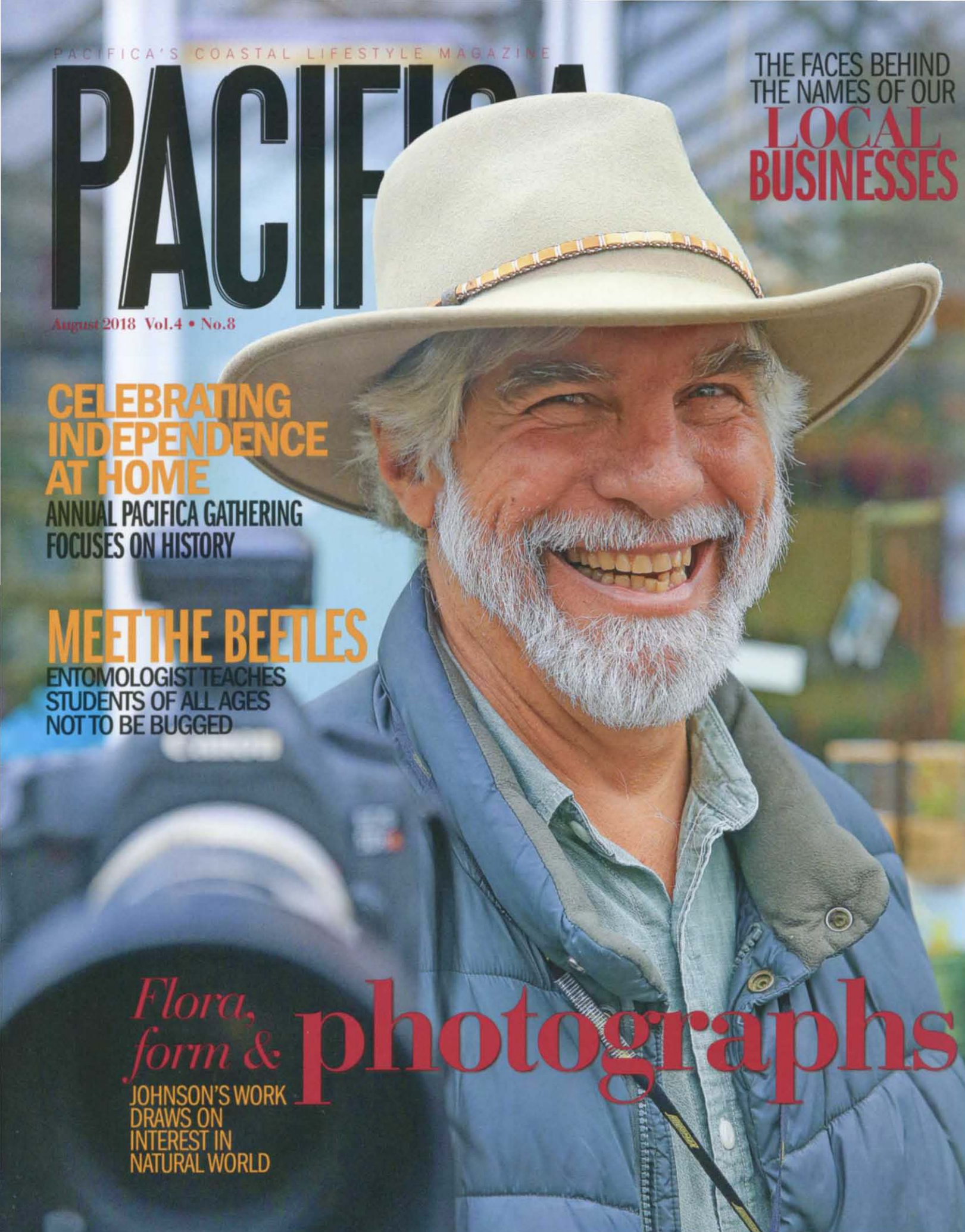
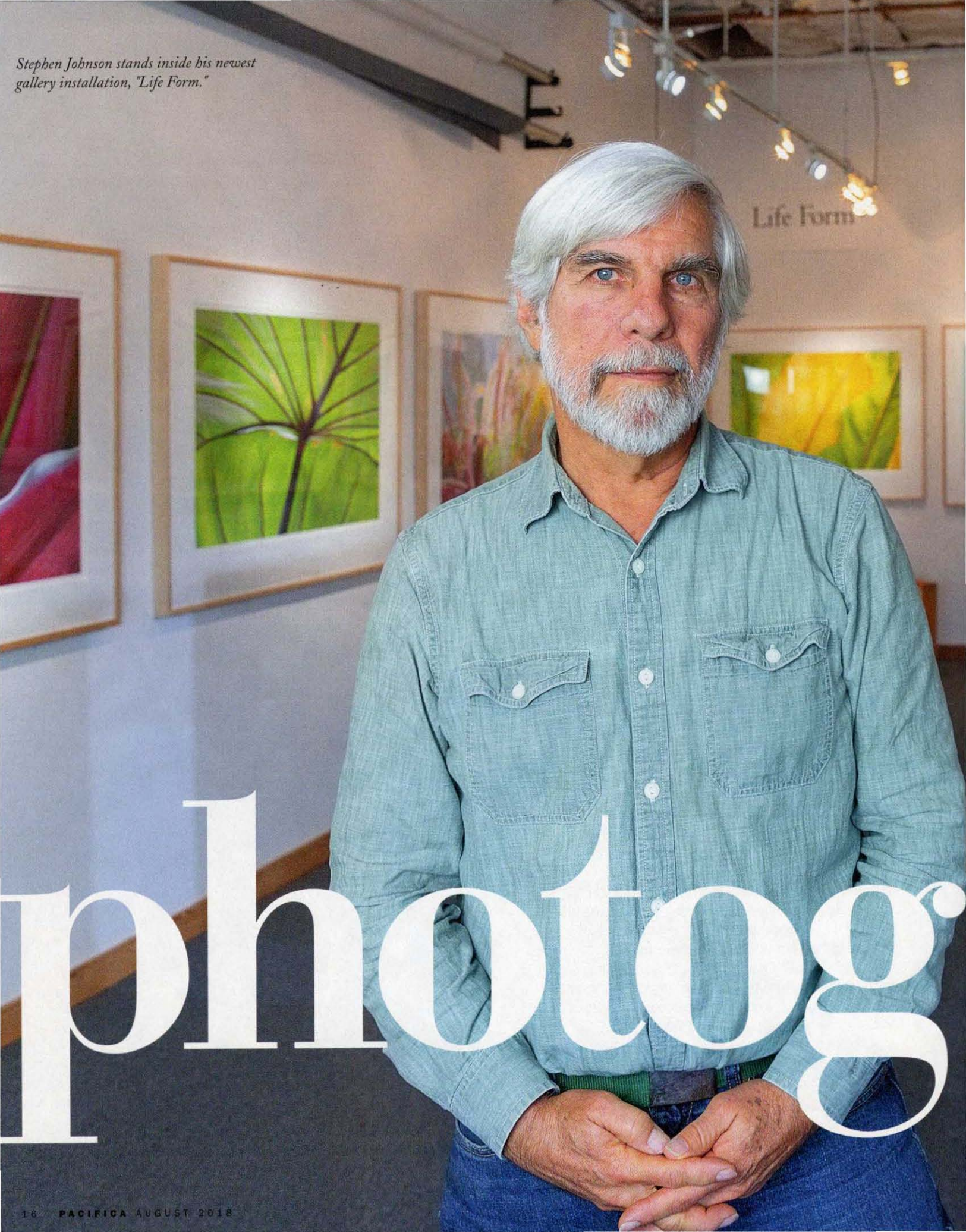


THE FACES BEHIND THE NAMES OF OUR
LOCAL BUSINESSES

CELEBRATING INDEPENDENCE AT HOME
ANNUAL PACIFICA GATHERING FOCUSES ON HISTORY

MEET THE BEETLES
ENTOMOLOGIST TEACHES STUDENTS OF ALL AGES NOT TO BE BUGGED

Flora, form & photographs
JOHNSON'S WORK DRAWS ON INTEREST IN NATURAL WORLD



Stephen Johnson stands inside his newest gallery installation, "Life Form."

photog

FLORA, FORM & graphs

JOHNSON'S WORK DRAWS ON INTEREST IN NATURAL WORLD

By Vanitha Sankaran
Photos by Kyle Ludowitz

The Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi once said, "Anything created by human beings is already in the great book of nature." He meant to bridge art and science with his creations, an ideal evident in photographer Stephen Johnson's own works, particularly in his exhibit, "Life Form." The series is a continuation of the type of work he has done throughout his career, and derives from a deep interest in the natural world.

Johnson's work has mostly involved large forms of the landscape, and he has a storied career both in photography and in exploring the tools needed for digital photographers to express their vision clearly. An author and a teacher, he has photographed and documented dramatic landscapes such as Mono Lake and California's Central Valley. His work has been featured in four books, as well as collections of the National Park Service, the Getty Museum, the Oakland Museum and the city of New York.

His interest in macro photography came from an experience in graduate school, when he had the opportunity to work with a scanning electron microscope as part of his Mono Lake project in the late 1970s.

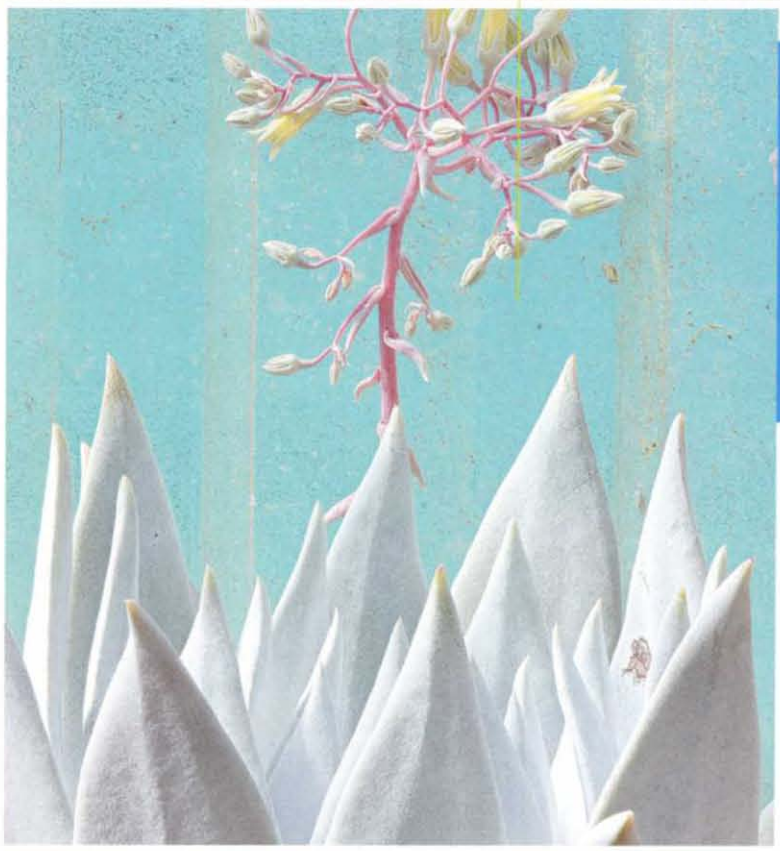
"That gave me the first taste of the extraordinary focus depth in a macro form," he recalls. "You can zoom into tens of thousands of power."

Over the years, as he explored larger format landscapes, he remained interested in the sensuality and beauty of flora, which lends itself to macro photography. The idea for the Life Form project was born when Johnson and his partner, Fiona McDonnell, were on their way to the funeral of their friend, Michael Black, who was killed in a car accident. The pair stopped at Shelldance Orchids in Pacifica and was entranced by the lushness of the nursery brimming with life. They went back many times as Johnson learned to perfect his macro, deep focus work. The "Life Form" exhibit is dedicated to Michael Black in memory of his spirit.

Over time, Shelldance owner Nancy Davis gave him a key to the nursery so he could come and go, photographing at will. He also started teaching three-day "Flora and Form" classes, both at the nursery and in his photo lab at the Pacifica Center for the Arts, to help people understand the format of this type of work. Close-up photography has always presented a challenge because of the shallow depth of field. "Digital photography has changed everything," Johnson explains, by allowing people to combine multiple photographs with different focus points into one expanded depth of field image.

Johnson's experience at Shelldance allowed him to experiment with focus stacking but as he says, "that was only the genesis." Over

At left, photographer Stephen Johnson works inside a private Pacifica nursery.



"... THERE IS INHERENT BEAUTY IN THOSE NATURAL PARTS OF THE FORM,"

STEPHEN JOHNSON, PHOTOGRAPHER

Stephen Johnson's work bursts with life. Clockwise from left are Johnson's photos of the staghorn fern, anthurium schlechtendalii kunth leaves and echeveria.

the years he has taken pictures of flora in places such as Arizona, Maine, Massachusetts, Washington D.C. and Texas. He recalls meeting someone at the opening of the "Life Form" showing in Sacramento last March who said to him that his work was very wabi sabi. She explained that the term refers to a long Japanese tradition that emerged out of the tea ceremony. "It's about embracing the more natural form," he muses, "with imperfection being more perfect, and impermanence being a greater reflection of what the real world is." The notion appeals to him, "that there is inherent beauty in those natural parts of the form. That decay, as we traditionally think about it, is as beautiful as bursting young life."

He is quick to note, however, that the exhibit is not a culmination of his life work so much as a complement to his big landscapes. "As far as I can see," he says, "it's the same level of worshipping the beauty of the natural world and finding incredible value in portraying that honestly."

The "Life Form" exhibition with its 22 large-format 40-inch prints opened to the public at the Stephen Johnson Photography Gallery at the Pacifica Center for the Arts in Pacifica, on July 21. Details can be found at http://stephenjohnson.photography/life-form. PACIFICA

CAPTURING PACIFICA IN PHOTOGRAPHS

For the last decade, photographer Stephen Johnson has offered calendars featuring photos of Pacifica. He relates the tale of a customer who came by his studio for the 2017 calendar, then later returned to see if any older calendars no longer in stock were still available. The request "re-sparked an old idea," Johnson says, that of re-assembling photos of Pacifica. He wasn't just interested in the last 10 years of calendars, but in his 33 years here, for an 11-by-17-inch wire-bound book titled, "Pacifica: A Photographic Portrait of Land and Sea."

"As always" he writes on his blog, "a simple idea became more complex than I would have liked, but that is the nature of almost everything in the arts."

The book is available, along with his other works and workshops he teaches on digital photography, at http://stephenjohnson.photography/workshops/.