You are no doubt reading this because you are a photographer. So, let me repeat to you a question I was asked last year at a social gathering after I was introduced to another artist. My friend said, “Let me introduce Brooks Jensen. He’s a photographer.” The other artist then asked the most curious question: *What is your primary art form?* I was nonplussed for a moment. I’m so used to being asked what camera I use that I was totally unprepared for such a question. Not wanting to sound stupid, I paused to gather my thoughts before answering. Curiously enough, the first words that popped into my head were *images and ideas*. I must tell you, I was as surprised by my answer as I was by her question — surprised that I did not reflexively think *prints*.

For some 40 years, I’ve thought of myself as a print-maker. This identity is so ingrained in me that I rarely give it a second thought. Her question, however, was so intriguing, it motivated me to think more deeply about these unconscious definitions I’d been carrying around for decades. Are prints hung on the wall the best medium for *images and ideas*? If images and ideas are the true form of my artwork, then what then is the best medium for expressing them? What if I answer *publications* rather than prints? A print on the wall is a terrific vehicle for an image, but as Ted Orland advised me in a workshop review of my work in the 1980s — after listening to me wax on about the concept behind a weak image I was showing him — photography is a poor medium for philosophy. He was right. Words express complex ideas far better than images do. Images express a more visceral emotion than words. Each has its strength. Together, they are magic.

My head began to spin. Years of training protested — *Art goes in the gallery or the museum!* Yes, I thought — except when it lives in the concert hall, or the theater, or the stage, or in people’s homes, or when recorded for television, movies, or recorded music. So, maybe only a very limited type of art lives in the gallery or the museum. I’d toyed with this early in my photographic career, but had never let go of that sense of self-identity as a print maker.

I blame Stieglitz. He was the driving force who removed photographs from the bureau and display case and placed them in a frame on the gallery wall. With very few exceptions, the history of artistic photography in the 20th century is linked to the frame and the wall. When I plunged into photography, this method of production and presentation had been so codified as to be sacrosanct. Only oddballs proposed fine art photography outside the frame, and if it did appear, say, on a coffee can, it was considered mere advertising and gimmickry. Serious photographic art required mat board and glass as much as it required a signature and archival materials.

It was 22 years ago now when I first got off that train and started producing folios — small collections of prints intended for handheld viewing, rich in paper textures and tactile materials. Folios are still one of my favorite ways to produce and view photographs. Folios do,
However, have a structure that tends to separate any text from the images. Folios — at least the ones I’ve produced — have a text component that typically precedes the images, e.g., an artist statement, perhaps even a 4 or 8-page text signature of folded sheets. I have not found the folio format a comfortable match for images and long-form text on the same page. For that, I needed another format.

In the 1980s when I was studying artists’ books as a potential medium for photography, I was introduced to that wide world of beautiful handmade publications. Like the world of photography, there are hundreds of dedicated and creative artists whose primary medium is the handmade book — artist-made books of poetry, short stories, calligraphy, and even woodblock prints. Their world is one of beautiful paper and incredibly clever binding techniques, exquisite letterpress printing, exacting and meticulous production that creates the most wonderful artifacts in paper that you can imagine. It’s always been in the back of my mind that photography and this world of handmade artist books were comfortable cousins, if not siblings. I can only imagine where we would be today if Stieglitz had been great friends with William Morris — an unlikely possibility because Morris died in 1896, but I can still fantasize about it.

To be honest, I was frustrated in my attempts to join photography and handmade books because the materials of photography were simply not manageable in the binding process. Gelatin silver paper simply refuses to fold gracefully. Two-sided printing is impossible in the darkroom. Even the challenge of creating a perfectly flat photograph from the darkroom was overwhelming without the use of dry mount tissue and some form of beefy and inflexible substructure like mat board. Fortunately, my frustrations in bookbinding nudged me in the direction of folios as a better alternative — a presentation method I have no doubt I would never have invented had I been successful in binding original gelatin silver prints.

But of course, times have changed. Today’s printing techniques lend themselves beautifully to the handmade book. Two-sided inkjet papers are common and quite wonderful. Folding and binding are entirely possible and even easy. The practical age of the photographic handmade artist book has arrived. And, circling back to the beginning of this article, we now have an ideal format for the presentation of photography and text in a finely crafted art piece. What W. Eugene Smith and his generation could only accomplish in the crude quality of magazine printing, we can now accomplish in a finely crafted, original art-quality printed and bound artifact.

**Chapbooks**

In today’s world of handmade artist books, the term “chapbook” is common and universally understood. In our world of photography, it requires a bit of explanation. The term *chapbook* derives from the “chapmen” of early England. A *cēapman* in Old English (“cheap man”) was a tradesman, often a street vendor, who...
sold small, inexpensive, pamphlet-like publications — religious tracts, political commentary, or even educational essays.

In more modern times, the chapbook concept has been adopted by the art community as — typically — small, handmade books of poetry, calligraphy, or occasionally a short story. Artist chapbooks are as much about design and craftsmanship in bookmaking as they are about the intellectual content of the piece. Artist-made chapbooks are a celebration of paper and handcraft. Do a Google search and you will be amazed at the creativity of this amazing art form.

Well, fine art photography is also as much about craftsmanship as it is about the content of the image. Photography and the world of chapbooks have been walking a parallel path for over a century, but have barely glimpsed each other through the trees. Chapbooks are the perfect vehicle for images and text, combined in an artifact that preserves the beauty of an original photographic print with the design elements of layout and text. They can be a few pages in length to a dozen or more. They are part book, part original print, part layout and text, part handcraft.

**Sketches**

To explore this idea more fully with my own photography, I've started a new series I call *Sketches*. This *Sketches* series is part notebook, part sketchbook, part diary, part travel journal, part random thoughts, part photographic portfolio — a mixture of images and words. They are an eclectic series of observations that allow me to explore design and layout ideas with more freedom than wall art. They also allow me the freedom to look at the world in front of my lens and share what I see and think about this marvelous process of living.
Inspired by the classic book *Sketches by Boz* (an early pen name of Charles Dickens, one of my favorite authors), I learned that every story need not be a tale with beginning, middle, and end — nor a morality play with a “message.” Just looking and seeing the world for the fascinating thing that it is can be enough. Photography was built for just such a purpose. Combined with words, a photograph can be a sketch of life just as Dickens did with his words and the accompanying drawings by Cruikshank. Why not adapt Dickens’ great idea for our modern tools?

I think of this *Sketches* series as the photographic equivalent of short stories, or perhaps micro-essays. They are short projects, often just a handfull of images and short text that are intended as quick observations. Less than a book, more than a print, these *Sketches* are, well, sketches of life. I’d like to say they are profound, but I really hope they are simply fun and a way for us to share a few thoughts, experiences, and travels.

In reviewing my photographic archives, I realized that I have *thousands* of small observations, moments, encounters, and experiences that are scattered throughout my photographic archive, just waiting for an ideal medium. Some are moments of wonderful light, some are portraits of interesting people, some breathtaking landscapes that inspired thought, and some are simple small encounters that I hope are worth sharing. Eclectic in nature, varied in style and content, long and short, a few images or a dozen, lengthy text or just a sentence or two, I have been working toward this format for decades, unaware until recently that I was.

Physical chapbooks do have one serious limitation that all printed materials have — the audience will be limited to whatever I can create and distribute. Because I’d like this series to been seen by an even wider audience, I’m creating *Sketches* in two parallel media: virtual
and physical. This way, if a viewer wants to see and enjoy (but not own) a chapbook, they can just download a free PDF. They look great on an iPad or other tablet device. For those who want the experience of the physical presentation I do offer the printed artist-made chapbook through our LensWork online store. I love the way the physical chapbooks and the downloadable PDFs complement each other and create a more complete environment that fuels my creativity.

Another Set of Skills
Perhaps the last thing we photographers need is another set of new skills to learn. We thought that mastering the Zone System would prepare our way for smooth sailing for the rest of our photography careers. On the shoals of digital photography, however, we all realized we needed to learn another set of skills involving computers and pixels, memory cards and complex software. I suppose it should not surprise us that there is a series of skills and tools that are required in order to succeed in making our own chapbooks, too.

Fortunately, chapbooks can be as simple or as complex as your imagination. A simple, one-sided, French fold design can be created with an office printer. At the other end of the spectrum, you could create a book with multiple signatures, tipped-in platinum palladium prints, bound in calfskin with gold thread headbands. And in between are an infinite number of variations and possibilities. If you are fortunate enough to find a class or workshop being offered in handmade book arts, you could not go wrong by signing up. There are also a few terrific books I’ll recommend: Creative Bookbinding by Pauline Johnson is the one I learned with; Bookcraft: Techniques for Binding, Folding, and Decorating to Create Books and More by Heather Weston is a great place to start; Making Books by Hand: A Step-by-Step Guide by Mary McCarthy is liberally illustrated with photographs on how to make some simple accordion designs. There are more, I’m sure, but none will fully replace the hands-on experience you can receive with a good workshop teacher or classroom guidance.

Conclusion
What particularly excites me about this idea is its incredible richness. Design possibilities are only limited by our imagination. Paper options are unbelievably varied, sensual, and gorgeous. More than a few photographers have observed that the cost of framing a single print today is outrageous compared to the cost to produce the photograph — and in the world of chapbooks we finally have an alternative to present our images out of the frame that we can complete with relatively simple and inexpensive tools. As I began to design and produce handmade chapbooks with my photographs, I became recharged about the possibilities for presenting photography in a new way that could bring viewers closer to my work with an intimate and tactile experience not possible behind glass in a frame.