

FLUX

By

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I am in, and am flux by definition. Encarta World English dictionary defines flux as 1. constant change and instability, and 2. a substance that promotes the fusion of two substances or surfaces, as in soldering or welding. Flux defines my time at Purchase College and my senior photography project. My project is a culmination of the past four years and a reflection of my growth.

My senior photography project concept subconsciously began to develop my freshman year. I began as a dance major with a concentration in ballet. Determined to secure my future (impossible as that is) I firmly chose dance over visual arts to be my major, my future. After auditioning for the Conservatory of Dance, I entered in the fall of 2005. But the flux of uncertainty set in. Dance is the most difficult and unstable career path one can choose, which at the time I felt outweighed the rewards. I applied for the School of Art and Design, entering in the spring of 2007 and became a Visual Art major with a photography concentration. In two and a half years I have since reconsidered my decision. Once again entering into flux I now choose to pursue dance upon graduation.

Flux is a material to bind two substances together; I meld photography and dance together in my senior photography project. Two years ago I toyed with the idea of what I should present for my senior show. I wanted to display what most represents me as a person and reveal the things that lie closest to my heart. Never able to abandon dance or visual art, I combined both. My show is comprised of twenty-four portraits of dancers. Without my cognitive awareness this project started to develop as soon as I arrived at Purchase, but more recently I refined concept, photographed subject, edited images, and displayed finished work.

Early on in photography I was drawn to portraiture for its ability to wordlessly describe a person. For my project I decided to work with the type of images that first excited me as a

photographer. Since entering the school and realm of “fine art” photography I find both students and teachers most appreciate portraits of subjects with the “neutral” face. The neutral face is comprised of a person with a deadpan expression, thus, the majority of art students and teachers feel that this expression most accurately represents a person, one who could not possibly be acting. But to those who have ever taken a picture with an artistic intent must have at one point heard their subject asking, “this is an art picture so I’m not supposed to smile, am I?” I have often grappled with this topic as a photography student. What is so much more realistic about an expressionless person? A person with a passive expression is not any more genuine than a person with an active one; both are equally as aware of the camera. And so my show is also a satirical play with the idea of a neutral expression in my work.

My senior project is comprised of portraits of dancers right after they have finished a performance. They are asked to display the most possible neutral expression in their current state. After dancers have just finished a grueling performance their concentration to act is somewhat diminished; their vulnerability is revealed. I hypothesize the truest way to get a genuine expression is to capture a subject at one’s most vulnerable state. Most have the passive expression I instructed of them, but some are acting and some aren’t. What I want to know is if the viewer is able to tell the difference. But most importantly, in the genuine ones, I want to know if the viewer comprehends the indescribable infatuation of what I feel through the exhilarated neutral faces of these portraits.

To best illuminate the concept I experimented with the different variables of number of people, background, and proximity to the subject. By simplifying the images with variables and constants in liking to a scientific experiment I could focus on the purpose of my project; to toy

with the idea of expression and illuminate and share the feeling from dancing that language cannot describe.

The camera used to shoot my project with was a medium format 6X6 Hasselblad 500 c/m film camera with a Carl Zeiss 80mm fixed lens. The film used was 120 Kodak Portra 400 NC. I chose this film because I needed the ISO to be fast enough for the lighting situation yet not too grainy. My shooting locations were the Purchase College Dance Theatre Lab, the Purchase College Performing Arts Center, and the Manhattan Movement Studio. Specifically, I positioned myself directly outside of backstage to catch dancers as soon they exited the stage post-performing. Many performances shot were of dance senior BFA shows. Dance majors must choreograph a composition piece staged on other dancers, and perform a solo repertory piece set on them by a choreographer of their choosing. I felt the strongest images would be of these solos; a piece showcasing exclusively each senior and wrapping up their time at Purchase. These solos would bring out the best indescribable feelings that I was trying to obtain. Close to the beginning of my process I habitually captured three frames per dancer to achieve my goal.

I also decided to simplify to an almost scientific experiment with deliberate decisions on constants and variables. My first decision on background was to have consistence in all to unify the portraits. A basic backdrop devoid of information was needed to focus on the intention. Black suited my purpose because it places the subject in the greatest importance and also referencing the stage. All parts of the stage meant to mask and conceal are black, such as the apron and wings. I wanted to simplify my images but still keep my dancers in the context of performance.

Another decision considered was of number and proximity. When I first began shooting I took photos of both one person and multiple people per frame. Portraits of one person stood out

strikingly compared to multiple subjects per frame. I photographed the entire body, from the waist up and from the shoulders up. Upon reflection of my early contact sheets the images taken of singular subjects from the shoulders up were the most interesting. I didn't get caught up in the details of the costumes, the groupings of people, and the body language that feet, legs, hips, and hands convey. The closer images almost referenced dancers' headshots, but headshots that expose the individual as they are.

Another crucial element is lighting. In the early stages of the project the subjects were lit with flash. I encountered multiple problems with the flash, the primary one being that the recycle time for my battery was way too slow for me to capture what I wanted. I didn't have time for my subject to wait 30 seconds for my flash to power back up. I switched my lighting method to tungsten in socket reflectors that produced much better results. The tungsten lights also allude to Fresnel spotlights commonly used in stage lighting.

After the decision on my lighting I had my final set up. Two eye-level socket reflectors with 250 watt tungsten lights were positioned two feet apart with my subject three feet away to form a triangle. My subject stood about four feet away from the black backdrop that I taped to the wall. Another small detail I struggled with was the eye level degree of photographer to subject. Being shorter than most of my subjects was reflected my early contact sheets. Later on I took to standing on a chair to bring myself eye level to my subjects. This angle almost creates an appearance of looking down upon them with the combination of a wide aperture. I feel I need even more time to further perfect my technique, but the process of perfection of photography (or any art form) is a never ending.

Even as I continued to shoot up until a month before my show I considered how I wanted to showcase my work. Photo students exhibit in groups of three in the photography wing. I am an

unusual case graduating mid-year so I wanted to take my project to a different level. The gallery space 1019a is utilized because I want my viewers to observe my photographs in an unknown performance of their own. They cannot see the show accidentally by merely walking through the hallway; they must make the decision to enter into the space. The audience will walk around the square room in a calculated improvisation that they are unaware of; a choreography that I have created for them. Twenty-four portraits are displayed in square format in square frames, some portraits confronting the viewer and including them in the performance, while some portraits look away to make the viewer become aware of the introspective quality. I have many portraits so the viewer can assess the cohesive corps of the group but also note the individuality of each dancer.

The conclusion of my project only brings forth more questions. Did I achieve this emotion from dancers that I cannot describe? Have I satiated the photo critic with these “neutral” faces, the genuine intensity showing through the neutrality? Can the photo critic see past the “pretty” image to understand that I, too, have a convoluted artistic concept even if they are beautiful? Have I melded these two art forms and the flux of feeling? This project is a beginning; a question of what the future holds and a depiction of what is inherently me.