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MFA Thesis

Reliquien

Photography and Related Media

SUNY New Paltz
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In the past I’ve worked as a photographer accepting assignments and completing them to the clients specifications. This work is deeply personal. I’ve never been the type of photographer to make introspective/ personal work. Personal projects (work I make for myself not clients) have always been about someone else, someplace else, never this close to home. I tend to “embed” with subjects, living with them and documenting their daily experience. Now my lens turns inward documenting the absence of my mother and my father’s existence without her.

My father lives in a town I can not get lost in. A little piece of nowhere on the Connecticut, Massachusetts border. He inhabits my childhood home, surrounded by a collection of objects and photographs arrayed as shrines to his American Dream.

He categorizes and constructs these displays to the past, each jam packed with evidence of accomplishments; these reliquie occupy places of honor as well as dusty corners of the house’s interior landscape. They represent his memories, moments frozen, reflections of times and places that like him are
starting to fade. These groupings also encompass some of my mother's possessions, preserved and untouched. These are often shrouded in plastic to ward off dust, their features and significance obscured.

After my mother's passing, few threads are left to hold me to this place, save my 87 year old father, both seem alien to me now. Roads have familiar names, but their appearance, like my father's, are different. When Fox News, and arguments I thought were buried become too much for me I explore the town in my mother's 2002 Crown Victoria. It feels ridiculous, like I've made no progress in life. I've come full circle, I'm in the same small town, smoking a joint as an escape and listening to punk rock, I'm still angry with this world. This village could be anywhere in New England, it is generic in its quirkiness, chock full of its own alters to cultural ideas and heavy with an American artifice of place.

When my father passes, the threads will be cut, the memories of this place will be someone else's. My remembrances of him will be some of the last. When I am gone, only photos will remain as evidence to his existence. Images that hold tight in their embrace a reverence for those memories which they are the caretakers of. Photographs, much like memories degrade over time
but they still reach for a truth, and maybe a chance at immortality. Not a perfect objective truth, but a personal one both conflicted and contradictory, this is America after all.

I see hope in this bleak landscape, a kind of desperate, rough beauty and a pitiful grandeur. My photographs are an impression of what I observe here in America more focused in New England. A small glimpse of an American Dream. A dream that is slipping through our fingers as we wake to a new day. More than a common snapshot or selfie but a window into a time and a mindset, living our lives from moment to moment. ‘As we go about our lives we need to continually process information immediately and repeatedly to retain memories’. (Farr 98) My Father, by surrounding himself with these constructions, is bathing in the glories of the past, a comforting float in the tub of memory.

Nostalgia is another term for this phenomenon and it plays a part in this work. Much like the work of Larry Sultan in “Pictures from home”. If you make work about your father be prepared for the comparisons. Larry and I share a few common traits. "Nostalgia is a big part of who I am. Even though I moved away when I was 17, I am continuously drawn back there photographically. I’m photographing the landscape of my childhood and what has to stand for the staging ground American
Dream." (Sultan) This is one of the great strengths of photography. Two different photographers can work in the same vein and make different images. Both of us seek to remember our fathers.

Norse heroes are remembered through verse, cultural memory was passed down through time via song recited poetry because of the lack of a written language. 'A story is told alongside visual clues associated with that story thus incorporating practices in the process of cultural transmission' (Rowlands 149) After a time raised rune stones commemorated the lives of people who could afford one. Now the tradition has transformed into gravestones in a modern attempt at immortality. From pictograms on cave walls to laser etched portraits on granite slabs we have to remind ourselves of our past.

I’m interested in exploring those images that my father keeps and looking deeper at what he has collected in his time. For my father photographs are small things. An 8x10 print is huge, a 16x20 unthinkable. His are small images that are evidence of the past. But he has so many they are no longer precious. They fill poster sized frames on many walls of his house. They sit in stacks in envelopes. They teter dangerously
in piles. The lucky ones are kept in albums and the prizes are jammed into frames. These images are artifacts.

My father can’t understand why you would want to use a giant film camera instead of a little digital one. “90% of people won’t know the difference.” he once said to me. “I guess I will make images for the 10% then”, was my reply. We are the same but very different. He and I. To me these images are quite intimate, the time it takes to gain access to my father’s defense is immense. “You have to move a few mountains before you take the camera out of the bag”. (Light 56) The haggling, cajoling etc is a monumental effort and privileges can be revoked on a whim. He’s a moody prick, like father, like son I guess.

Access is the currency of documentary photographers. “Without the trust of your subjects you can’t make the work.” (Light 153) My father doesn't trust me. I’ve had easier times getting inner city gang members to trust me, at least we had a few things in common. With a commonality there is something to build on, with my father it’s the same old arguments. The only real thing we have in common is the love we have for my mother and a drinking problem. It would seem those
of us with cameras are not to be trusted nowadays both by my father and the culture here in America.

I've been assaulted at rallies and protests both by the police and the public. Someone said to me it has to do with the press patch and credentials I display while making photographs here in Trump’s America. I try to approach it all being non judgemental. Trying to harvest, nurture and use what Dorathea Lange referred to her as her “cloak of invisibility.” (Light 206) Observing and recording telling a story showing some narrative of a truth.

“I actually moved objects,” (Light 222) Don McCullin said in an interview. Well, if the master of it all and author of “sleeping with ghosts” can do it, why can’t I? While having lunch with an old friend, I said I had started to break some of the rules....he asked puzzled.... “There are rules?” Self imposed ones of objectivity I suppose. So I threw away my previous constraints and started just making the images that tell the story . A kind of truth. Photos lie, they tell a truth not necessarily the truth.

What photography does really well is say look, LOOK RIGHT HERE! The images that lack subtlety do what I call the point and grunt. A universal caveman form of guttural gesture. “Every photo
is a sign of someone’s investment in sending a message.” (Burgin 86) Sometimes the message is more subtle, more nuanced leaving something to the imagination. Letting the viewer impose their own personal meaning on an image. I aspire to make those images, sometimes I succeed. An image can give the viewer a thread to pull during a deeper investigation of its functionality. Hopefully they will wrap themselves in a blanket made of those threads. That's what I intend my photos to do for at least the 10% that is.

There is an interpersonal relationship in photographs. Both as objects and what it is they represent both literally and figuratively.‘When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.’(Berger 72) There is the space between the photographer and the viewer and that gap is where we as photographers struggle the most.

Viewers only have themselves as reference and read into other people's relationships and project their values onto others. We all do it, I can’t understand why someone would shoot up a church or shoplift for that matter. What makes all this so special is the fact that everyone can come away from viewing an image with some personal reflection, what it means to them. This work isn't being made for the whole world, there is no happy
ending. I don’t expect the whole wide world to get every nuance I see and attempt to portray. This work was made for 10%. My photos come from my experience and I would hope that the viewer would attempt to enter that experience.

We, as humans, find comfort in those pleasant experiences remembered. The rituals of holidays and rites of passage are often fond memories looked back upon with rose colored glasses. The past was better, America was great once. My father is a firm believer in that falsehood. The American cultural landscape was very different 80 years ago. He clings to the memories of experiences from his life on this earth using traditions and other mnemonic devices to ground himself in a reality. His personal reality along with his social and political views haven’t changed much since 1936.

The black and white still images and collection of ephemera cover almost every surface in his house, they help him to remember far off places he visited war upon and friends and family long lost to time. It’s like if he can collect enough of these memories they won’t slip away to be lost in the well of time. “We are the sum of the experiential self and the remembering self.”(Kahneman 42) As a photographer with an up close personal view I’m investing in sending a message. The
images I make are of his last few years of life, his possessions and that of the town he lives in and I grew up in. I make images that are more than snapshots for keepsakes. I hope they are more than just windows into his world but a commentary on how the world was and how it is remembered. The three of us, my father, myself and the town, have changed so much but the memories all seem to still be there.

I hope that some people will put themselves in the place of my father and see the desperate shout of look at me. I was here. I did things! We as humans make monuments to remember something. What is this desperate grasping for the past that we have? Are these memories made tangible by the physical manifestation of the constructed?

We aren't having a thesis exhibit. Which is too bad I already paid for all the framing supplies. This is not anyone's fault, no blame to be placed on someone's shoulders. No this is the fault of a virus and human short sightedness reaching back decades. We are doing this while the world ends, a futile gesture at the end of it all it seems. An act of defiance to the corporate overlords who are grinding us under their heels to extract every last usable molecule from the slurry of our beings. Those are to be sold off to embolden 3rd quarter profits. We are going out with a whimper not a bang.

Good luck getting anything from me. I’m a slippery one bent on giving better then I get, that’s right clowns you are just watching the feathers fly. If they do get me, and lets be real here my chances are slim to none of surviving this, they will get a well used corpse in the end. Some did their best, most did nothing, either way no one is getting out of here alive at the end. That’s what all this is about... the END... and it’s neigh as they say.
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Pictures From Home larrysultan.com/gallery/pictures-from-home/.