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Somewhere In-between

This series of photographs falls somewhere in-between adolescence and adulthood. This series is about the time in-between moving every year and buying your first house. This series is about living with your parents and becoming a parent. I've been in this transitional stage for the past six years and running, living my adolescent life on the weekends and trudging toward adulthood during the week. I've spent my Friday nights at the movies, watching sports, or singing off-key karaoke. I've spent my Saturday afternoons driving around with my camera, sitting in an inner tube on the Muskegon River, out golfing, or watching TBS. I've spent my Saturday nights around a sticky table littered with cocktail napkins and empty bottles or practicing tossing a ping pong ball into a red Solo cup. Sunday mornings, after a breakfast consisting of mostly bacon and jumping through a hot shower, I'm back to the real world: a work week, higher education, and becoming a constructive member of society.

The mid-twenties encompasses a large and diverse group of individuals spanning over stereotypes such as Generation Y, boomerang kids, twixters, yuppies, hipsters, and many in between. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Ph.D., a Research Professor at Clark University developed the term "emerging adulthood," based on his research of people in their mid- twenties:

According to Dr. Arnett, in the past half century of what most people experience during the years from age 18 to 29 has changed dramatically in industrialized societies. Instead of entering marriage and parenthood in their very early twenties, most people now postpone these transitions until at least their late twenties and spend their late teens through their mid-twenties in self-focused exploration as they try out different possibilities in love and work. Essentially a new developmental stage has been created between adolescence and adulthood. [JeffreyArnett.com]

This particular life stage is becoming more relevant as it has grown to encompass a larger group of individuals and impacted the economics of contemporary society. The “Somewhere In-between” series has given me the opportunity to photographically investigate my reality and my place in this transition.

Rineke Dijkstra photographs young people on the cusp of adolescence, and at the edge of puberty on the beach. The age demographic that she has chosen combined with the un-posed body language of her subjects represents the awkward changes experienced at the end of childhood and the dawn of adolescence. This transition is a critical landmark in the human life cycle. The physical and bodily changes are a definitive quality in determining that the age of adolescence has arrived. Adulthood has no such marker. The transition for “emerging adults” is physically undefined. I have chosen to address this in my work by photographing individuals’ environments and personal belongings to provide clues or points of interest about each person’s transition to adulthood.

Journalist Robin Henig wrote in her article for *New York Times Magazine*, “Sociologists traditionally define the ‘transition to adulthood’ as marked by five milestones: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying and having a child.” [Henig 30] She continues to say that adolescents are shifting to adulthood at “an uneven, highly individual pace.” I have observed truth in this statement as each individual from the “Somewhere In-between” series is at a different point in their transition to adulthood. It is my hope that my photographs provide social indicators that reveal descriptive information about the subjects’ identities and represent the fact that each person is on their own path and not specifically on track with the five milestones mentioned by Henig. Each person has chosen to handle the challenges of their transition differently. Jon in “Jon working the register at White’s” is an example of a young person who has taken a job while deciding on the next steps in his education

and career. Ashley in “Ashley doing homework in the backyard” is an individual who is attending school part-time and renting a home during this time. “Steph with Myah and Jasper” and “Ashley in her new kitchen” represent young women who are further into their adulthood transition as they are settled into their first homes. Rebellion against the traditional milestones puts individuals in a position to move freely into the future without feeling pressured to conform to a particular approach to adulthood. However, expectations remaining from the establishment of these milestones still affect the psyche, social treatment, and decisions of “pre-adults.” This, to me, is a site of serious confusion as I have personally weighed my previous expectations of adulthood, the reality of my adulthood, and the way contemporary pop culture represents the ideals for my age group. I still have not determined where I see myself in five years.

Photography, itself, plays an important and meaningful role in the construction of “Somewhere In-between”. The camera creates a directorial and documentary tension through its ability to reproduce actual reality and mediated representation. Susan Sontag states in *On Photography*, “A new sense of the notion of information has been constructed around the photographic image. The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time.” [Sontag 22] Fragmenting space and time reinforces the mid-twenties state of mind. Situations seem temporary and seem like a thin slice of time in the “big picture” of life. “Amy on the porch at the F Street house” gives a sense of temporality. Amy is seated on an unfinished second-hand chair next to an upside-down crate acting as her table. “Mike on the basement stairs” shows a figure seated on a staircase, literally in the middle of “up” and “down.” The negative space created by the light behind him represents openness and freedom. Sontag continues, “Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*. The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque.” [Sontag 22, 23] The frozen scene in each image is an allegorical representation of this concept.

Time has been captured for a fraction of a second. The physicality of the photograph allowed me to comprehend what is normally a thing of uncontainable flux. Multiple images of the same person exemplify fragmentation and act as a metaphor for the passage of time. My need to compartmentalize a reality that is unclear, unstructured, and chaotic is satisfied through the conceptually dynamic medium of the photograph.

Photography has also traditionally been used to form social documents on issues relevant to past and present eras. August Sander and Dorothea Lange, while vastly different in their approaches, have contributed to an important understanding of the people of their time. From the 2002 publication of “August Sander: People of the 20th Century,” Susanne Lange describes August Sander’s work as “the product of precise observation. It is also, primarily, the subjective expression of an artistic concept encompassing pictures from different sometimes widely disparate periods and contexts.” [Lange 12, 13] In “Somewhere In-between”, the individuals’ appearances are subject to the “precise observation” present in Sander’s photographs. Similarly, the collective photographic body is slanted by personal stories and themes. Sander “aimed to reflect and portray the “universally human.” “As archetype – or “Ur-type” - of the “People of the 20th Century” he chose the figure of the country person – a figure he had been familiar with from his own childhood.” [Lange 13] I, much like Sander, have chosen to photograph “the figure of the country person” and figures that I have been familiar with since childhood. The people seen in “Somewhere In-between” are from rural towns in west Michigan. The subjects are mostly Caucasian, middle and working class Americans. Sander’s work is aimed at a wider scope of individuals, but our photography shares a common thread in the pursuit of the “universally human.” Similar to Sander’s work titled, “The Face of Our Time,” these portraits document the faces of my time. This group of people stands in for my own experiences and

feelings; yet, I hope that the individuals in these photographs and the images themselves unite a generation displaced by a standardized equation for adulthood.

Historian Linda Gordon wrote the introduction for “Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits.” She address the concept of “documentary” as it applies to history and photography saying, “There is no standard definition of documentary,” and she continues, “Neither photography nor history simply report facts. Historians and photographers choose what to include and exclude in the pictures they shape, frame their subjects so as to reveal, emphasize, relate, or separate different elements, and use interpretive techniques to do this.” [Gordon] This has opened the door for me to photograph and “document” in a less severe way and photograph my subjects with understanding, like Dorothea Lange. Gordon also mentions that Lange elevated her subjects by photographing them in a way that made them appear “handsome.” Gordon says, “Its effectiveness was doubled because the looks of her subjects draw viewers to her photography, allowed them to take pleasure in it even as it documented misery and injustice. Her photographs delivered both beauty and a call for empathy.” [Gordon] Clearly, the “Somewhere In-between” series represents a different time and social situation than people depicted in Dorothea Lange’s images of the Great Depression Era and hopefully “misery and injustice” are not apparent themes in my work. However, I believe that the concept of “handsome”-ness functions in the series to call positive attention to my generation and prevents feelings judgment or pity. My goal is not to call for social change, but to create a personal and interpretive body of photographs that elevate a sense of awareness and understanding.

The duality of the “Somewhere In-between” series “documents” and dramatizes domestic and workplace scenes. The environment and the personal belongings are all truthful to the subject’s reality. Visual indicators of a state of flux such as a mattress on the floor, a matching living room furniture set, a Wii video game gun, red party cups, beer cans, television sets, pop

cans, etc. create an dichotomy of worlds for “emerging adulthood.” However, the lighting, the poses, and the expressions are directed to create a metaphorical commonplace for these differing individuals. The poses depicted in this series, while natural, also mirror the idle nature of this stage and the everydayness of life.

The eye contact in the photographs is aimed to create a connection with the viewer. The straight on, “blank” expressions represent feelings of uncertainty, confidence, confrontation, indifference, or contemplation. “What can we see in a portrait of an unknown sitter other than our own narratives, constructed around subjective notions of physical beauty and human expression?” [Gaston 16-17] The subjects gaze out of their world, into the viewer’s eyes, and into the future. Despite the blank gaze, individual expression is irrepressible. These expressions reveal an emotional moment with the camera and the photographer. In the photo, “Jenna with Mocha at Grandma Bev’s house”, the figure’s expression suggests tension. She looks as though she is trying to restrain her emotions and it seems that laughter or sadness lie just beyond the moment of the photograph. In the image, “Mike cleaning his handguns”, a serious and confident side of his personality is portrayed. He is methodical and laid-back and his expression and body language reiterate those inherent characteristics. Rineke Dijkstra explains, “People think that they present themselves one way, but cannot help showing something else as well. It is impossible to have everything under control.” [Gaston 17] As the foundation of the “Somewhere In-between” series is built upon the creative expression of the photographer, it is important to mention the collaboration put forth by the models. “Portraits exist at the interface between art and social life and the pressure to conform to social norms enters into the composition because both the artist and the subject are enmeshed in the value system of their society.” [Brilliant 11] The pressure to “perform” for the camera is sometimes visibly obvious in the portrait images. However, this pressure is characteristic of the nature of their limbo-state.

The link between Richard Brilliant's written ideas of portraiture and August Sander's visual study conducted through "archetype pictures" are connected by Susan Sontag's rationale. Richard Brilliant, Professor Emeritus of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, states, "Social roles, however enacted, are like masks or disguises, carefully assumed by individuals in order to locate themselves in a society conditioned to recognize and identify these forms of representation in practice and in art." [Brilliant 12] Susan Sontag says of Sander's work, "It was not so much that Sander chose individuals for their representative character as that he assumed, correctly, that the camera cannot help but reveal faces as social masks. Each person photographed was a sign of a certain trade, class, or profession. All his subjects are representative, equally representative, of a given social reality – their own." [Sontag 59] Even though I view this work as my artistic creation, I cannot avoid the documentary elements that provide visual information and detail to the individuals' identity.

The culmination of these ideas and beliefs are also rooted in a very personal meaning to this body of work. The "Somewhere In-between" series also captures the people and the environments in which I exist. The individuals depicted have been a critical part of my "emerging adulthood." Somewhere in-between all the Saturday nights, the moving days, the growing pains, the breakups, the celebrations, and the frustrations of being a young adult, I solidified an unbreakable bond with my friends and family. While this element of the work may be secondary, it relates conceptually to vernacular and snapshot photography. Hopefully, this relationship is not visual, but found in the act of preserving moments and people in photographic form. "Snapshot photographs, they suggest, embody, and at times even replace remembered familial histories. By the same turn, and shifting focus from the family to the visual object itself, we might also say that a family's history and identity constitute a significant part of the snapshot photograph's meaning and reason for being." [Zuromskis 425-426] I believe that the images

from “Somewhere In-between” contain enough technical and conceptual connotations to defy the loss of meaning if I were separated from the work. However, these photographs embody a history that belongs to me and to the subjects. The photographs mean as much to me personally as they do to the mission of the series.

The “Somewhere In-between” series has been created to help me communicate some of the psychological, emotional, and life changing aspects of reaching my mid- twenties. The creation of these realities helps me illustrate a metaphor for “emerging adulthood.” This life stage weighs in at equal significance to adolescence and it’s important for society to recognize the vulnerabilities and the critical time for individuals facing adulthood. It is a time of extreme highs and lows. In a 2009 Gap commercial, photographer, Anna Gaskell’s tagline reads: “Born to Embrace Uncertainty.” In the commercial Gaskell says,

“I embrace the mistakes. I think that the mistakes and the sort of the screw-ups actually become, like, the best part about my work and my life. I don’t regret anything and I almost feel like the times when I’ve just let myself go through it or, you know, I have this plan about how I’m going to set up an image and take a picture and then something goes completely wrong, and I get something that’s, you know, unbelievable. Because I just went with it anyway. You have to jump. You have to embrace the uncertainty.”

Gaskell’s approach to photography also describes “emerging adulthood” and the chances that many young people are taking. You just have to go through it. You have to accept not always knowing or understanding the outcomes. You have to embrace this time for what it is. Just as the creation of this series has allowed me to work through the multiple challenges I face, and helped me enrich my self-awareness in a time of uncertainty, it is my hope that others will benefit from exploring this significant stage in life.

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Computer monitor displaying a game interface with various icons and numbers.

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2638







A man in a military uniform is seated at a wooden table, meticulously cleaning a handgun. He is wearing a green t-shirt with a yellow sergeant's rank insignia on the chest. The room is wood-paneled and cluttered with various items, including a calendar, keys, and a roll of paper towels on the table. Two cans of Coca-Cola are also visible on the table. The background shows a doorway leading to another room with framed pictures on the wall.

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Coca-Cola

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