

Developing Image: The Newton Family

The people in the audience looked at the pictures, and the people in the pictures looked back at them. They recognized each other. A Japanese poet has said that, when you look into a mirror, you do not see your reflection, your reflection, sees you.

Edward Steichen from *The Family of Man*

In the current position of the art world in the postmodern environment where influences, content, and direct appropriation can be mixed together to create a new form of visual interaction, through the use of television, internet and mass telecommunications. I came to realize the volume of influences that come into my family that I have minimal control over. The only way to successfully engage these elements along with the ever changing attitudes of the social surroundings and the increasing peer pressure of all social and professional circles to follow a life style other than that which would create a positive, nurturing household, is to be flexible and understanding. To discuss these sources of information and influences and come to a family understanding of how these forces will be engaged. I chose the focus of my thesis to be on my family, my wife Cara, and my two sons, Brandon age 14, and Eric, age 12. The goal of my work is to create an installation environment that shows how the family needs to demonstrate flexibility in its growth together, life changes as individuals and interpersonal relationships in order to be a positive and supportive environment, in which to live and develop as individuals. While engaging the overwhelming sources of information and influence that comes into interaction with each individual and as a family unit.

This concept evolved out of the day-to-day interactions with each other, as a family unit and our individual interactions with other individuals and groups and how those individuals and

groups influence our interaction as a family. The capturing of images of my family, evolved into the thinking of how we as individuals are influenced by those we interact with in our various social, educational and work environments. This then solidified the concept of bringing all viewers into an intimate interaction with my family in image form as a photographic installation, where they can witness their own brief impression and behold the constant change that they are in the process of creating. The imagery of daily life with and of my family would then also show the values, beliefs and social structure. Even though we are a practicing christian family, I did not want a blatant image of church or evangelizing, but to show how these beliefs are part of the everyday life with the clothing worn by my children and elements within the environments that are photographed. Scouting is an activity that is heavily embraced within my family. Again, the desire was not to sing the praises of scouting in a visual form, but to show how the interaction with others in the same environment is changing us as individuals and as a family unit as we interact with others of differing and parallel life values and beliefs. This then allows me show all members of the family interacting together and with others in various images, but also allows me room to create imagery that depicts their individuality as well. Which is just as important to the family unit as the group dynamics.

I chose to create a photographic installation. This allows the viewer to enter the work physically. This provides the viewer with an opportunity, for a brief time, to become part of, or have an effect on the imagery. In theory, viewers have an affect on the developing Newton family. By using life-size or close to life-size imagery of my family in daily life, the viewer can experience personal activities of my family, which hopefully will have an immediate personal connection with the viewer. This is based on the thinking that all of us come from some form of family environment and each viewer will come with their own memories, ethics and biases, and

for a brief moment, project their emotional and spiritual being into the day-to-day life of the Newton family.

The structure of the exhibition and the structure of the family parallel in the aspect of how the images have a degree of flexibility to them in their ability to sway, twist and bend, which is caused by the surrounding environment and volume of human traffic in the exhibition. Even with all of this activity, eventually, the images will come to rest in a still position and appear almost at peace in their relationship to each other. Our family life together parallels this exhibition activity. There are situations where a certain degree of bending and twisting is allowed or observed before order is established by parental intervention or the individual's desire to sit quietly in their own space away from the activity of the outside world. Both the exhibition and the family structure have physical and stress limitations while being accepting and flexible with the environment as well.

The images are produced on large sheets of transparent acetate that is flexible enough to be manipulated by the surrounding environment; doors opening and closing, people walking by, and wind streams created by the building's ductile system. This creates a photographic installation that is in a constant state of change and works as a metaphor for the constant change in the family. This physical movement of the images parallels those changes that are not as visible in the family unit; changes in attitude, developing maturity, changes in the interpersonal relationships and the change in life experiences.

With the images on large sheets of acetate material this provides both a reflective surface and a transparency for each photographic image. This allows the viewer to enter the installation and see their reflection in a photograph, which changes the composition of that particular image. Their reflection becomes part of that image and its composition. With the photographic substrate being acetate, the viewer is able to see through the image and witness how the other photographs

within the installation are changed by the interaction of other viewers standing or walking through the installation. This creates a constant state of change within the body of work; in essence, creating a constant state of change within the Newton family.

The two-dimensional aspect of the work is that each image is of a composition to engage the viewer as if it were the only image in the installation. Just as each image could stand on its own in the *Family of Man* exhibition. Each image is printed out twice. The first is printed normally, the second is mirrored on the computer then printed as a reverse of the first. The two are then put together with the ink to the inside and the bare acetate to the outside. This provides an image that has greater color saturation so it will not become overpowered by the surrounding sunlight or studio lights in the installation exhibit space.

The three-dimensional aspect of the installation space is that the work hangs in a set up in such a way is to provide a sense that anybody can enter the family at any point within the installation. Even though there is signage of the title of the work. And individual is provided with the opportunity to enter where it best suits them. The desire is to provide an arrangement where there is not an identifiable front or back, a beginning or end to the installation. This provides the viewer with the opportunity to enter the installation at different points at different times to have a different interaction with the imagery and metaphorically, a different relationship with my family.

I chose to use a more photojournalistic approach to this body of work. This form of photography would be a set out of the controlled studio environment that I am very used to. I have been and still practice commercial photography and the studio is an area of complete control. Lighting, space, equipment, subject matter are all elements that can be completely manipulated by the photographer in the studio setting. By pushing myself outside my comfort zone by embracing a photojournalistic style for this body of work, I realized quickly that I had to

be willing to surrender a certain amount of control of the environment to keep the image authentic. I used A.D. Coleman's definition of photojournalism from his book, *Depth of Field*, 1998. Coleman describes photojournalism as a picture essay. An image that can be supportive of a written story or the image itself can communicate a specific narrative. I did not want to pose my family as Sally Mann did with the images she created of her children in *Immediate Family*, or as Eileen Cowin did with her work in *Family Docuramas*, where the models used were in a controlled studio setting. I thought the honesty of the event being captured would create a greater sense of validity with the viewer if there were a genuine sense that this image is a sliver of life taking place and not a staged event.

The inspiration for my concept came from three sources. First the 1953 photographic exhibition *Family of Man*, put together by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Second, the photographic installation by Carrie Mae Weems called the *Hampton Project*, installed in New York in 2000. Third, by a little know Italian photographer named Michelangelo Pistocetto from the 1940's and 50's. The *Family of Man* project was created out of images of people created by photographers from all over the world and assembled by Edward Steichen in an installation that displayed the photography in such a way the all the images were part of a greater design. Each image carried it own validity– its own formal and aesthetic characteristics that gave it uniqueness and style. Yet each image was affected by the surrounding images because of how Steichen chose to overlap, group, hang and scale the images in relationship to each other. The viewer could engage one image or step back and engage multiple images from differing photographers and view how all images affected each other. *The Hampton Project* by Carrie Mae Weems was assembled in 2000. This was an installation where photographic images were digitally printed on large pieces of canvas and muslin suspended from a ceiling. Viewers could stand on either side of the material and have an interaction with an image that was

different from each side. On one side there was a projected light source and on the projected side the viewer's shadow would be cast onto the material, changing the composition of the image with the shadow of the viewer. From the opposing side of the projection, the viewer could witness the change in composition created by another viewer in the installation and see how the light source changed the image depending on the material. The material was light enough to be affected by the surrounding environment of moving people and breezes created by fans moving the air around the installation, putting all the still images in a constant state of movement. The body of work by Michelangelo Pistocetto was influential in his process of how he glued mirror forms of various shapes and sizes directly to his black and white photographs of interior and exterior building environments. The reflection of each viewer completed the composition and the composition would be different for each viewer.

How I approached the photographic style was influenced by Tina Barney in her body of work called *Friends and Relations* from 1991 and Nicholas Nixon's work of *Family Pictures* from 1991. Both photographers use view cameras and stage the scene to be photographed. Barney's work is in color and Nixon's is in black and white. Even though their approach is different to how they stage the work and who is in it. Barney's is of her family and relatives and Nixon's is of family situations that are not related to him or his family. The sensitivity that each exercise when capturing the image provided the kind of content I wanted my images to have as well. I wanted the images of my family to carry that same kind of attention to details and the unique intimacy of the moment.

Even though Barney and Nixon used large format cameras to capture imagery that could then be produced on a large scale. I captured my images using a Fuji S3 Pro 135mm single-lens reflex digital camera. The newer technology allows for an image to be captured digitally with the pixel resolution that allows for large format scaling with a smaller camera format. The 135mm

provides a flexibility to enter environments that the large format camera cannot and the 135mm format is also less intimidating in the environment I am photographing in to the individuals that are being photographed. The smaller camera is easier to move about in the environment, whereas, a large format camera has extensive set-up time.

The body of work called *Communal America* by Stine Kurland, 1978 played a role in helping determine what is family in a visual and social context. His imagery is black and white photography of groups of people that have chosen to live together as a family unit in various areas of the country, away from regular organized communities. His work helped me develop the concept of how all can be welcome in these mini communities that wish to share in the same ideologies. My goal was not to create a mini community, but to create an installation where all would feel welcome to enter the space and have an intimate interaction with my family as a group and as individuals.

With these visual influences, I developed a body of work that uses digital color photography output onto clear acetate with photographic images of my family. The majority of the images are of my children, which I believe, amplify that constant state of change with the ages that they are currently at. With images being captured over the course of two-years, one can see the physical change in my children from middle school to high school and how these social, educational and community engagement changes their attitudes that are expressed facially and by body language in each image. The images of my wife and myself are fewer in number however, this creates a sense of stability with all that my children are involved in and is influencing their change in maturity and emotional development.

Final image selection was done through careful study of the formal elements of each image and their possible interaction with each other. Is the composition one that would draw the viewer in? Does the color provide a visual dialogue with the viewer in their personal relationship

with the image? Does each image provide enough information without telling the whole story? Do the images create themes or narratives in their relationship to each other and their relationship to the viewer? Through answering these questions, images are selected with the greatest potential of working individually and as a group to provide an aesthetic environment for the viewer to step into.

I believe this body of work contributes to the greater world of photography by bringing together the photographed image of the family and the sculptural aspects of an installation. These images will interact with each other and they can be viewed from both sides of the acetate material. The work must be shown in a gallery setting or a large lobby area where natural lighting and controlled lighting can be part of the changing environment and metaphorically, part of the changing family. The images cannot be shown as separate images in that without all the images working together the greater concept of the family environment in a constant state of change would cease to exist. The use of the installation provides another aspect of change as to that the greater design or layout of the images will need to alter in relationship to the geometry of the space to be exhibited in, creating another aspect of change.

The viewer-centered aspect for art work is outlined by Marcia Muelder Eaton in her text *Basic Issues in Aesthetics*. She states that, “the viewer brings to the visual engagement with art work a set of memories, current emotions, and special attitudes. These more emotional aspects are tempered by the viewer's sense of understanding formal qualities of the work and special sensitivities or perceptiveness that is projected onto the work.”¹ This quote by Muelder provided the foundation of how my concept was to develop into the final installation. Individuals of all ages will engage this work with their own unique memories, experiences and current biases.

¹ Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Basic Issues in Aesthetics* (Waveland Press, 1999) 254

Even the culture the viewer currently lives and works in will have an influence on how they project themselves into the work.

This projecting of one's own mental and emotional state onto the images brings us to the commonality of the family photo album, even if the details are different and the styles and time frames are not related to the viewer. There can be a common interaction between viewer, photographer and the album. Marianne Hirsch in *Family Frames, Photography Narrative and Postmemory* states that "Even though the viewer may enter this visual engagement without any history with the story of the image, the viewer will mentally construct a narrative to fit themselves into the visual story. Or they will have parallel memories of their own to project onto the image and create a new narrative, creating a new reframed family memory."² This statement by Hirsch suggests the behavior I wanted to take place with the photographic installation of my family. Realizing that not all individuals are going to "fit" themselves into the work in a consistent fashion, therefore, only amplifying the constant change taking place within the body of work.

Hirsch then states in her book, *The Familial Gaze*, "that the lines between autobiographical and biographical memory is blurred when relating to family imagery, even when the photograph is viewed by the photographer and by the subject. Different interpretations take place with the image being viewed".³ So as viewers enter the "Developing Image: The Newton Family", faulty facts and memory will be intertwined with the images of the Newton family. This differing interpretation has taken place within the Newton family. Since I am the husband, father and image-maker, my position is one of on again-off again authority in taking the photography. There have been times where the last thing anyone wanted was to have a camera enter the situation or conversation that was taking place. What was interesting is what

² Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames, Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (University Press of New England, 1997) 54x

³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze* (University Press of New England, 2000) 68

each person saw as the main detail in each image. I showed them the images selected for presentation. Each person in the family had their own interpretation of the activity that was captured. Even though what I photographed may look to be a happy or positive environment. My sons, especially my sons, many times saw a negative that they interpreted as taking place within the image. My wife was mostly concerned that nothing physically personal was out for public display. The image with her in a swimsuit and over-shirt was about as physically revealing as she wanted to get. And I respect that.

The use of the family as subject matter creates a sense of safety and anxiety depending on the background of the viewer. If the viewer has had a negative family history, the emotions projected onto the images will be of broken promises, lies and mistrust, even if the imagery was not meant to create such emotions. In opposition, if the viewer has had a positive family history, memories of family activities and interaction will then be projected onto the work. So the same body of work can receive two very different interpretations and interactions based on the quality of family history that an individual may have in their life.

I believe the concept of the use of the family unit in an exhibition installation to represent current social need for flexibility, tolerance and understanding within the family unit, was successful. The interaction of material, color, proportion, spatial relationship and exhibit space provided an environment where the viewer successfully became part of the entire body of work. Constantly changing the greater design of the space while having an effect on each individual image within the installation. This metaphorically, puts my family into a constant state of change by both human and environmental forces. Where both have a brief impact on each image and the installation as a whole, it is the viewer who will leave with a lasting new narrative to take to their next moment in life.

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