

An Italian From Memphis

MFA Photographic Thesis Artist Statement by
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She was sitting on the window seat in my mom's kitchen. She reached into her purse for her pink lipstick. I offered to watch her apply the lipstick and tell her if she went out of the lines; that was the moment that I knew that she was the subject matter for my next body of work, my graduate thesis. It was the way she dug in her purse. The way she opened the lipstick and proceeded to put it as she had a million times before. At that moment that I saw my grandma as a beautiful woman, not just my grandma. That was when I realized that I knew almost nothing about her. The need I had to focus on her was overwhelming. Her life began to seem more important now than ever before. She is an older woman that has been overlooked, I thought. She is someone who needed to be recognized. Being the head of our family that we all looked to for what, I did not know, but knew it was for something important. How had I neglected her in the past?

My intentions for the body of work, "An Italian From Memphis", are to document moments in Josephine Spagnuolo's life. She is a woman in her mid-eighties, alone as well as surrounded by loved ones. The images are larger than typical family photographs; they are composed, lit, and shot by a trained photographer. My goal was to get to know my grandma through the process of photography. But what this project has become is something much more than that. It has been a journey into her past, her present and ultimately her future. It has made me very aware of her mortality as well as my own. I have discovered things about her from when she was very young to who she is now. She taught me lessons about life and family since I was young, but I now understand what they really mean and why they are so important. I hope the images show a woman very much loved and perhaps remind the viewer of those they love and who love them. When photographer Tina Barney was asked, "How do you want the viewer to perceive the people in your pictures?" she responded:

It seems to me that there are viewers out there who actually care about the people in my pictures. They definitely can relate to them, and I love that idea. I love it when people call the subjects by their first names, like soap opera stars or movie stars, and that they realize how much I care about them- also, that they might see what is important to me, which is how these people get along with each other.¹

This is how I intend the viewer to feel about my photographs of Josephine. Tina Barney is a photographer whose subject matter is usually people very close to her, whether they are family or friends. She says that when she photographs something unfamiliar to her, the images seem foreign and removed. In this particular body of work I started out by photographing many different older people, most of whom were strangers. I, too, felt the images were removed. I realized that I didn't care for the images with the near strangers in them as much as I cared for the images of my grandma. I had to ask myself, why would my viewer care about them if I myself didn't? This is why the body of work became a documentary on Josephine Spagnuolo alone.

Josephine Spagnuolo is the head of my mom's side of the family. She is the mother of eight children, the grandmother of twenty children. She is a quiet soul who observes more than participates, listens more than speaks and gives more than takes. She is the rock of our clan, the wisdom in our energy, and the beauty in our eyes. We all have a very deep family resemblance that goes much further than our outer appearance.

The photographic body of work I created of Josephine Spagnuolo is a document of her life as she lives it now. She thrives on going to the casino to play slots machines, Tuesday Bingo with her oldest child Carol, playing penny poker at our many family gatherings, and watching, listening and laughing with us, her family. She gives us small glimpses into her life by discussing memories now and then. We huddle around her wondering if she will let us see the glimmer that

¹ Barney, Tina. *Friends and Relations*. Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p. 12.

used to be in her eyes, and she does on occasion. Josephine was a second-generation immigrant from Palermo, Sicily, who grew up in both Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee. She is the middle child of three. She is strong, quiet, contemplative, loving and the true matriarch of our family.

The matriarch of a family is the head of the clan, the final say, the wise one. The dictionary definition is “A woman who is the head of a family or tribe. An older woman who is powerful within a family or organization.” (Apple Dictionary) I want to show how we see her, vulnerable, yet independent, aged, but strong, sweet, although authoritative. The photograph titled *With Brittany* shows Josephine with a contemplative look and an air of pride with her youngest granddaughter standing above her with a similar expression. This photograph captures the wisdom behind Josephine’s eyes and Brittany represents everyone in our family and how proud we are to be her family. Another example is the photograph titled *Insulin*, where you see Josephine giving herself a shot in the stomach. This photograph communicates her vulnerability. She is capable of giving herself the shot despite her age yet you see there is someone else there to indicate she is not alone. As a family we do everything we possibly can to take care of Josephine just the way she has done her whole life for us. Josephine’s daughters make sure she takes her insulin throughout the day. This photograph raises questions about aging and mortality. We as a family are all dealing with the fact that some day she will no longer be with us. Death of the matriarch can change the dynamic of a family in many different ways. How will our family dynamic change? My photographs are intended to make us all think about these things.

Photographing the matriarch of my group is also a way of exploring my own identity. Artists in the contemporary art world have been exploring identity is the same way philosophers have since ancient times². The notion of Identity explores the questions of human existence.

² Robertson, Jean and Craig McDaniel. *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 103.

Artists try to answer this question through all sorts of media and ideas of their own personal and group identity as well as the roles they play. For example, Michele Kleinhenz created a series titled *when she is real: Portraits of Women and Girls*. The images are of females at a variety of ages; each and every one expressing the subject's individual identity. Kleinhenz says in her artist statement from her UICA exhibition "Girls enter a place of self-consciousness that occupies a great amount of space for a great amount of time"³. What she is saying here is that females deal with their own personal identity from the time they realize they are an individual. I assume that while Kleinhenz feels this about her subjects, she also feels this about herself, being a woman. Photographing Josephine in contemplative moments, enjoying activities, and being with her children and grandchildren is intended to express what she feels about the life she has lived and the life she is currently living.

Throughout art history, identity has been a theme in trying to figure out "how the world views you, how you view yourself, [and] how you view others"⁴. These questions change across the globe through social, economic, and political changes. Instead of examining one's own identity, contemporary artists started to explore identity as communal or relational.³ What this means is that identity is not only about the individual, but also about how the individual fits into his or her own group; a social, political, or cultural group. Part of my identity is that I am part of a middle class, close-knit, large, Italian family. My own identity is coming through my images of Josephine. I am showing you the head of the family who has shaped my identity. The photograph *With Marc* shows how I feel about being surrounded by loved ones yet still feeling alone. I can't help but think that Josephine feels that way as well. I chose that image because I know it is

³ Kleinhenz, Michele, "when she is real: Portraits of Women and Girls". Exhibition at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, Grand Rapids, MI. Dec. 9, 2005 to Jan. 28, 2006.

⁴ I bid., p. 106.

³ I bid. p. 110.

something that we, as human beings, can all relate to. Loneliness is something that everyone feels from time to time or even more often than that.

Gender, race, ethnicity, political views, and sexual orientation are some of the issues that artists convey in their work. Along with this comes dealing with stereotypes and discrimination that exist in our society, as well as societies all over the world. When we start to understand how stereotypes of your religion, ethnicity, or gender can play into identity, we then may start to understand how the idea of identity being constructed can come into play. This idea expresses that we may not be born with a “unified, inevitable identity”⁵. Many artists worked their art in a way to show the central themes within certain groups, race or gender. The criticism of this idea was that their themes were too narrow or simple. This idea has been called essentialism, “is usually used negatively”, because of this simplistic narrowing of very large and diverse groups. The counter to essentialism is difference⁴. It means that although we may all belong to very large groups we all have very diverse and unique identities within these groups. For example, the religion she was born in to and the children she has raised have defined Josephine’s identity. And although we both have Italian heritage, are Roman Catholic, from the same family and are female, we have very different identities. We are unique individuals. Although according to essentialism, which could also be accurate, we have many similarities as well such as, a strong moral code and similar views on how a family should operate.

Part of Josephine’s identity that is different from mine is her age. Our culture seems to have an obsession with staying young. We don’t like to be reminded that life is fragile and eventually will end, and being around older people is that reminder. Our society emphasizes the word “old” as being negative, for example, “to call someone old is to insult, as in old hat or old

⁵ Robertson, Jean and Craig McDaniel. *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 110.

ideas. To call someone young is to compliment, as in young thinking or young acting”⁶. We, as a society value youth and de-value old age. This is apparent in media, advertising and the entertainment industry. We may see an ad for retirement living, prescription medication, or life insurance showing old people, but they tend to be very lively and active, ultimately conveying the idea of youth. Advertising geared towards females is covered with anti-aging creams and eating better to preserve youth. We treat people in old age as being incompetent and if anything accidental happens such as forgetting appointments, car accidents, etc. it is blamed on their age rather than the simple fact that they are human.

I would be lying if I said that the reason for making this documentary my MFA thesis wasn't to preserve her life, it is difficult to imagine a life without my Grandma Jo. Larry Sultan is a contemporary photographer that photographs his family and accompanies those photographs with photographs taken throughout their lives. His work has brought up questions of identity, the passing of time, and history. Curator Katherine Bussard states “The child photographing his parents reverses the social norm, complicating the sense of power, identity, and self-creation experienced on either side of the camera”.⁷ Borrowing the words of Larry Sultan:

What drives me to continue this work is difficult to name. It has more to do with love than with sociology, with being a subject in the drama rather than a witness... I realized that beyond the rolls of film and the few good pictures, the demands of my project and my confusion about its meaning, is the wish to take photography literally. To stop time. I want my parents to live forever.⁸

This idea sums up my own feelings about my body of work. I am showing a woman loved and who loves. I am showing the viewer that she is fragile given her age. Josephine lives with her daughter Pauline; she and her husband Bob take care of all of her needs. The photograph titled

⁶ Pipher, Mary. *Society Fears the Aging Process. An Aging Population*, San Diego Press, 2002, p. 2.

⁷ Bussard, Katherine A. *So the Story Goes*. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2006, p. 99.

⁸ Sultan, Larry. *Pictures from Home*. New York: Harry N. Adams, Inc., 1992.

Pills shows a shallow depth of field to emphasize the aging you can see in her hands and in the blurred distance, the pills that she needs to maintain her health. Pauline makes sure these pills are set out for Josephine daily so as not to forget to take them. This photograph again, raises questions about aging and mortality. The exploration a photographer goes through of their own self is always portrayed in the images. Not to mention the preservation we all do to keep Grandma healthy. I want to make sure that we will never forget who Josephine is, how she is at this time, and all that she has done for us and taught us. Although she has accepted her fate, I think it's important for her to know before her time ends how we feel about her. In doing so I am also preserving that carefree side of this older woman from the south.

In a review of Sultan's work Charlotte Moser said:

The mother whose animated face beams from a period pinup pose seems both tough and childlike, caught between an old feminine identity and the responsibilities of adulthood.⁹

This reaction to Sultan's photographs of his mother, reminds me of my own reaction to my photograph *Strike a Pose*. Moser is saying that the Sultan's mother has an air of a pinup. My grandma, being from the same generation and from the south, has a delicate ease about her, yet is a woman who has grown strong through her decades of child rearing. In this image, she shows us the flirtatious youth in her heart. She tells us that she is still beautiful. And documenting her life now, is my way, as a photographer, to capture that.

Working in the documentary mode of photography to capture these images, some may say that I am assuming authority over my subject matter. According to Graham Clarke, author of *The Photograph*:

Document' means 'evidence', and may be traced to 'documentum', a medieval term for an official paper: in other words, evidence not to be

⁹ Moser, Charlotte. "Larry Sultan: Pictures from Home at the San Jose Museum of Art". *Artweek* Jan. 1993: 24.

questioned, a truthful account backed by the authority of the law. And documentary photography, as a genre, has invariably rested within this frame of authority and significance.¹⁰

I would have to argue for the case that all documentary photography is not totally truthful. We as photographers are capturing a single moment in time with no explanation of the moments that led up to the image and the moments that followed. Documentary photographs are taking what is in the image out of context. Now that isn't to say that the photographer's intention was to be untruthful. I know that with my images I am telling the truth of who Josephine is as best I know it. But that is only my truth. And perhaps that is the problem with the statement that documentary photography has authority over the events captured. When talking about the manipulation Larry Sultan used in his images *Picture's from Home*, Critic Vicki Goldberg, says:

This suggests not that photography lies but that it is not absolute. Whatever truth it harbors is in the eye of the beholder, or perhaps in the photographer's program, or in the editor's wishes. Witness the family album, which may not document a life so much as make one up. Or the subject may try to influence the historical record.¹¹

Countering this and my own argument; Jacob Riis was a documentary photographer that used his technique to show the poverty that existed in the Bowery in Manhattan in the late 19th Century to the early 20th Century. Along with Riis was Lewis Hine, showing the country the poor working conditions and the extremely young workers in the factories. Both of these photographers were showing a truth they saw during the time they were shooting. Their images helped create social change. Documentary photography is still used that way to this day. This is only a particular way to use the documentary style.

In my situation, I am trying to sway my viewer to see into the photographs towards my intention. But I am not using the imagery to make any sort of social statement. Going against the

¹⁰ Clarke, Graham. *The Photograph*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 145.

¹¹ Goldberg, Vicki. "The Snapshot, History's Modest Helper". *The New York Times* 16 June 1996.

norm, and showing off the older generation, I documented one of the oldest women I know. I caught her in moments of everyday activities and events to show her personality and her importance. Tina Barney and Larry Sultan, previously mentioned, used this documentary style to show the people they care about as well. Although there are many similarities between these two photographers and my own work the difference is easy; they are unique because no one has photographed the people in the images before. And no one would be able to as well as we did. Knowing these subjects intimately, we are able to be at ease with the subject. A stranger may not. This is how we get people to care about our images, by caring about the people in them ourselves. In the case of Riis and Hine, we care about their images as well, just in a different manner. The people in their images represent the population as a whole; we can see that the relationship between photographer and subject is impersonal, yet the motivation is to better the conditions of society, which makes us unable to relate to the image. Former curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, John Szarkowski said:

A new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it.... What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.¹²

This is what I am doing with my imagery. I am showing the viewer my personal appreciation of this particular life. I believe my subject is worth looking at. How I get the viewer to care about my images versus Riis' images may be very different, but both use the documentary approach of un-staged, clear realities to do so.

An Italian from Memphis is a body of documentary photography on Josephine Spagnuolo. She is of a generation that will eventually be gone. She has a subtlety to her wisdom

¹² Rosler, Martha. "In Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)" reprinted in *The Photography Reader*. Liz Wells, Editor. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 270.

and her beauty. The photographs indicate the things that have shaped her identity today. She is a southern belle at heart with the strength of a woman having raised a large family. She enjoys her time with leisure activities and being around her loved ones. From that first moment of her digging for her lipstick two years ago, the closeness gained from this project comes through in each image with the air of adoration in each way she is portrayed. Her age is apparent in each image, along with her fragility. Her past, her youth is also portrayed; through her smiles we see that she is still the same woman she has always been, playful and wise. In the words of Photographer Julia Margaret Cameron “I longed to arrest all beauty that came before me, and at length the longing has been satisfied.”¹³

¹³ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1973, p. 183.

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