

Something Old // Something New

My bedroom at home stood as an altar to the girl who loved animal unicorns, bright purple, and *Teen Cosmopolitan*. Open the cream colored night-stand and you will find a dozen pairs of old swimming goggles, a Holy Bible from her second grade First Communion, a faded wallet-sized picture of the grandmother that she never got to meet in her life, and a few disposable cameras with film that had never been developed and whose memories have been forgotten.

The walls that were once covered fully top to bottom with colored photographs of laughing friends and band posters are now bare except for the lonely ceramic cross hanging right above the unmade twin sized bed. The two beautiful skylights stand as a reminder of her father who transformed the upstairs attic into a room fit for a princess when she was just a little girl entering kindergarten. The air is thick with remnants of past wants, fears, hopes and desires. A slight hint of cotton candy perfume still lingers as if it were permanently ingrained in the walls and floor of the room. The carpet is off white in many areas due to many unknown art projects accomplished in the past. Go down the stairs and you will find yourself faced with a plethora of white wooden shelves littered with swimming and track and field trophies, medals, plaques, and ribbons of years past accompanied by a thick, translucent layer of dust.

Home was like an altar and a memorial to the young girl that I once was. I still come home to find it in this unchanged state. I left for seven years for school, but it felt like time was suspended in motion, and nothing was changed or moved when I left Cleveland. Photography has always been concerned with the intimacies of life, with everyone having their own unique

story to tell. <sup>1</sup> My story explains how I am no longer a young adolescent girl, but an adult woman with new expectations, anxieties, and fears, along with a fresh perspective of what is to come. I completely agree and support Sally Mann, who, in *Immediate Family*, justifies the need to document her children's lives, by watching and photographing them growing up into adolescence:

We are a spinning story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story full of love, anger, death and beauty. But we tell it without fear and shame.  
(Qtd. Sally Mann<sup>2</sup>)

Mann believes that each image she documents containing her three children are an example of the past wants and future desires of each individual. Each image she chooses to share portrays a fleeting time or moment in each of their lives in which time stands as a testament to their emotions of anxiety, hope and excitement, as each child looms closer to adolescence. For myself, I find myself waving goodbye to my own childhood and adolescence, bracing myself for new transitions to take place in my life as well.

With the milestone of marriage especially weighing over my head the last year and a half, I have decided to photo document my anxieties, my hope and my fears as Mann suggested. I decided to specifically photograph the relationship between my fiancé, Michael and myself, his family, and my close-knit family including my two sets of grandparents. Throughout my photography thesis, concept is conveyed through a series of narrative self-portraits, still life images, and portraits of the aftermath of both the failed and successful relationships in my

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<sup>1</sup> Bussard, Katherine. *So the Story Goes: Photographs by Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, and Larry Sultan*. Art Institute of Chicago, 2006. Pg.12.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Mann. *Immediate Family*. Aperture. New York, 2005. Pg. 3.

family. Photography has continually provided a way for people to tell their own story, especially with their own personal experiences as their inspiration.<sup>3</sup>

One of my photographs, *A Betty Forever and Always* contains a portrait of my grandfather, Dan Plocha, with my grandmother—Betty Plocha, whom I never met due to an illness which resulted in her death before I was born. Dan Plocha was a genuinely amiable man who worshiped his wife, as he has built a tiny altar to her memory. Years upon years have gone by since her death and her elegant studio photograph is still hung up, carefully dusted and well maintained, complete with an honor metal carefully arranged around the ornate frame by my faithful, loving grandpa. He still worshiped her day after day, even if she could not be with him physically. To him, she was still there every day in spirit. To see how devoted my grandpa was to the memory of my grandmother has touched me deeply and helped me remain optimistic for my own future with my loved one. My grandpa honored his wedding vows, ‘til death do us part,’ to my grandmother, until he suddenly passed away this last September 15th—on her birthday.

For the past almost two years I have been analyzing and documenting the after effects of the failed and successful relationships among these loved ones. I started by photographing the fortunate marriage between my two sets of grandparents: my mother’s parents containing my grandpa Dan Plocha with the portrait of my grandmother, along with my father’s parents—Robert and Marian Turner. I also photographed the current relationship between my single mother and myself. My brother is especially important, because he is the one who endured this emotionally exhausting journey with me. Finally, I documented the relationship between my fiancé Michael and me as we step closer and closer towards our marriage.

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<sup>3</sup> Bussard, Katherine. *So the Story Goes: Photographs by Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, and Larry Sultan*. Pg. 12.

Another photograph, *For a Fleeting Moment*, is a portrait of my mother in a moment of quiet solitude. I took this portrait of her while she looked so serene, gentle, and lost in thought. I believe this image also shows the exhaustion she endures on a day-to-day basis. As I recall, she just got home from work when I asked if I could photograph her. Waiting patiently for me to set up, my mother used the brief pause to let her guard down and relax temporarily, as if she could not hold back any longer. Sometimes I do worry about my own future with Michael, but knowing that my mother has given me the essential tools to succeed in life, I am able to breathe easy at night. In the end, I am determined to beat the odds and statistics that say there is a high chance of not having a successful marriage.

The sad reality is that many young Americans have given up on the idea of marriage entirely.<sup>4</sup> Many of them are very conscious of making sure that they do not make the same mistakes as the previous generations. In my case, I consider myself one of those young adults who fears that history will repeat itself. Children are very receptive and watchful of their parents' relationship as the years go on. They are the most influential male and female role models in their lives. Children are also capable of distinguishing them as individuals, and also witness the emotional and physical relationship between the two. In the end, when the relationship did not work out, resulting in divorce, the child thinks that everything failed. That is why when they hit adulthood in their twenties, these feelings resurface, as they try to believe in themselves and that they are capable of making things last forever.

Failure is unacceptable in their eyes, as they wish to do everything right that their parents did not. It is my own personal fear that the rug would be swept out from underneath my feet at any moment when I got too comfortable in my relationship, and everything would fall to pieces.

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<sup>4</sup> Tushnet, Eve. "Divorce dilemma: the biggest threat to marriage today is fear of its dissolution." *The American Conservative* 11.2 (2012): 26+. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 5 Feb. 2013.

We always tell people that lightning does not strike the same spot twice, but we know deep down that a reoccurrence will happen in the future. We all believe it strikes twice, so we reassure ourselves with false reassurances, and this is the fear of lightning striking twice.<sup>5</sup>

The feelings of a failed relationship are evident in the photograph *The Stand-in*. My mother is comfortably lying on her bed with my mother's dog sitting right in front of us. Her faithful companion dog acts as the stand in for my father who was once there. He sits proudly right in front of my mom, as if it were his job to protect us and assume the role of my father. My mother and I make jokes that Bailey is the new 'man of the house,' with my brother Ryan being away at school.

The use of color film and c-prints also help me achieve an aesthetic I believe makes the series unique. The work is shot with a medium format film camera and Kodak 120 Portra color film, and executed in color darkroom prints. For me, the film/ c-print process has also been very therapeutic. As a more traditional photographer, I am drawn to using the darkroom as opposed to digital output. Immersing myself in the color darkroom allows me to also have more control and a hand in the process that I believe is vital in the series as a whole. By using my Mamiya RZ, I am able to slow down my photographic process and give my full focus to documenting certain emotions and events that come into play in the narrative.

This is a very special time in my life and I feel the process and aesthetic of film enhances the work itself. I believe using this 'outdated' process 'making wet prints' connects with my own nostalgia for 'lost youth'. It encases a unique period in my life to which I will never be able to retreat. There is also the sad fact that color darkroom processing will cease to exist in the next 20+ years. Every year, more and more color darkrooms are shut down due to lack of up keep, a

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<sup>5</sup> Wallerstein, Judith. "Divorce Has a Lasting Negative Impact." *The Family*. Ed. Auriana Ojeda. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003.

broken down color processor, or simply disinterest in the old-fashioned. For me, this just entices me more to print as much as I can in the color darkroom. The beauty of being in a very fragile point in my life juxtaposed with printing in an almost extinct printing process that could be gone in a blink of an eye, makes me understand the overall feelings of instability that I currently endure.

Natural lighting and strong linear formal techniques are dominant features throughout the series. I have used the natural light to my advantage to invoke or incorporate a certain emotion or mood in each photography. The use of expressive body language is extremely important as well. The usage of formal organization helps me make the compositions sounder and more aesthetically pleasing. In each photograph, I continually look and strive for symmetry and balance. I believe using these technical aspects helps direct my viewer's gaze throughout each photograph, and also gives some insight to the overall tone of the narrative without being too literal.

Along with formal techniques, my photographs depict a direct honesty in the way that they document the emotions. I feel like an observer, looking for those little quiet moments where I feel my feelings of anxiety and hope are more apparent. I believe these emotions are most obvious in the self-portraits portraying intimate close-ups of my body. Each image either contains an extreme close-up or selective focus that directs the viewer's gaze all around the image. These images are signifiers and reminders of the vulnerable nature of the series itself. I view each photograph as a resting place as well as a visual break up, to pause and think about the feelings of vulnerability that I currently endure.

I am closely photographing my family's relationships from a more documentary style approach. In the image, *Something New*, my fiancé Michael and I are portrayed at his parents house, sitting in two identical chairs right before his family Easter gathering. Michael and I were

quietly having a conversation with each other right before this image was taken. Even though we are normally quite comfortable with each other, there is still the slight adjustment of being together when I finally come back home to Cleveland. The awkward nature of this image portrays the fear of adjusting to this new world of finally being together.

The idea of domestic comfort is another concept that flows throughout my work. For me, home was and still is a place that shaped me for better or worse. I take comfort in being able to come back to a place that I can call home. Many photographers began to photograph at home not because it was important, but because it was there, but for others home was full of rich, uncharted mysteries.<sup>6</sup> My mother worked really hard to make her home a welcoming, nurturing environment for her children. The vintage mint green wallpaper, oak furnishings, complete with old photographs of past relatives became a very comforting and private sight for me every time I got the chance to return home. I am relieved to be able to find refuge and stability through these sentimental objects, creating my own, personal, domestic comfort.

The c-prints are also quite large, so the viewer is able to get a realistic feeling for the domestic atmosphere and to be a witness to all of the items that serve as testimony to the narrative. These trinkets, old photographs, and domestic objects are signifiers and clues to the story of my family's relationship with their significant others. Between the photographs in high school of my fiancé Michael and me to the overabundance of grandchildren photographs in my grandparent's house, I feel that all of these domestic objects, patterns and designs that I chose to include in each image are for a purpose. The purpose is to give the viewer clues about these relationships so they can form their own conclusions.

Tina Barney is an example of a photographer who claims that everything in her images, from the people to the domestic objects, is included for just such an intentional purpose. I agree

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<sup>6</sup> Galassi, Peter. *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*. Museum of Modern Art, 1991. Pg. 14.

completely with her reasons for making prints larger to be able to see the whole environment along with stressing the importance of including the people and objects in her photographs.

I don't choose these people: they're my life. The settings are my life. The things that entice me are light, number one, and then the textures and the colors—the things that Vuillard was interested in—and the patterns. I think the idea of making the pictures big had to do with my love of detail, and feeling that every single object counts and is important. (Qtd. Tina Barney<sup>7</sup>).

An example from Barney's work that depicts the important hierarchy of people and objects is *Marina's Room*, done in 1987. In this image, Marina and her father appear to have a quiet moment with each other, completely unaware of Barney's presence. A subtle narrative is apparent, but as the title suggests, the picture is as much about the possessions found in the room, as it is about the people who inhabit it.<sup>8</sup> The viewer is able to immerse herself in a child-like environment of delicate, frilly dresses hanging in the closet and a shelf of multicolored stuffed animals. By viewing the overall environment, people and objects in the space, the viewer in return is able to gain some sort of information or aura about the relationship between Marina and her father just like in my image of my grandparents, Marian and Robert, portraying the relationship between them.

In *To Honor and Cherish*, my grandparent's successful relationship is also evident through observing their environment and its domestic objects. Marian and Robert's old studio portraits still stay framed on top of the coffee table for everyone to see. They are deep in conversation, feeling pretty comfortable on their favorite, old-fashioned couch, accompanied and surrounded by the overabundance of images of their children and grandchildren. Just like in Barney's image of *Marina's Room*, the photograph is still framed by all the little things found in

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<sup>7</sup> Lyon, Christopher. "A Talk with Tina Barney. Into the Cookie Jar, into the Icebox." *MoMA*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Winter, 1990), pp. 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> Tina Barney. Museum of Contemporary Photography Collection, 2005-2013. 12 March 2013.



the room, as well as my grandparents who occupy it. They have made this home together, as the photographs, trinkets and objects lay as a testament to their successful marriage.

It is through my own self-expression and revelations that I choose to share my personal narrative in the hopes of regaining a sense of stability and optimism for the future. Through examining my own personal relationships with my family and my fiancé, I am able to find a place where stability exists and thrives as the feelings of anxiety and disheartenment start to fade away. Through my personal narrative, I want to make my story into something that people can relate to and find refuge in knowing despite whatever the media and statistics may say; we are all capable of living a contented life.

In Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, he embraces the extremely relatable quality of photography for its matchless ability to stay with us.<sup>9</sup> He brings awareness how an artist's photograph acts as a jumping off point for others to bring their own personal insight and life experiences to the photograph as well. The photograph encourages viewers to engage themselves in the artist's work, resulting in new meanings and thus, a new narrative is born.<sup>10</sup> In the end, it doesn't affect me if viewers look at my work as a reflection of their own life experiences. I wish for my thesis to be an example, as well as a hand to reach out to those who have doubts about themselves finding true happiness in life.

Despite the odds, I know that I alone am responsible for my own decisions and choices in the future. I may not have a crystal ball to foresee the future between Michael and me, but I do know one thing for certain: despite what statistics may say or people will assume, I am capable of having a long and successful marriage. After completing this series, I am no longer interested in seeing if the 'grass is greener on the other side.' I am not worried if everything will crumble at

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<sup>9</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill and Wang, 1982. Pg. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Bussard, Katherine. *So the Story Goes: Photographs by Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, and Larry Sultan*. Pg. 17.

my feet ten years down the line. The important part is the here and now, the present, and to make that first leap of faith and commitment and we will be rewarded.

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