

In the series of photographs and photograms titled *First Person, Plural*, I explore the material characteristics of substrates to engage various narrative strategies. I use portraits, landscapes, and alternatively processed photograms negotiate the duplicitous nature of familial relationships characterized by the long-term psychological struggles of a single family member. In this case, that person is my mother, a strong-minded, loving woman who has struggled with addiction for many years. As a result, when I was growing up, her actions were at odds with the conventional expectations of a traditional middle-class, Midwestern wife and mother, and as a result created a fractured foundation upon which to build my identity. The objects that populate *First Person, Plural* were created in response to my mother's cirrhosis diagnosis and admission to a rehabilitation program. An absolute relief and simultaneous heartbreak occurred in that instant, as years of unspoken rage gave way to reason and empathy. Memories of her sitting in the dark living room, talking nonsense to no one while my seven-year-old self tried to answer back dissolved to meet the needs of the present situation. Since that day, with help, we have sifted through our collective memories to examine her conflicting roles as addict/mother, addict/wife, and addict/woman.

Our struggle to understand each other's memories is evoked through these photographs and photograms. Though I present a single series, my work can be understood better as three related collections. The first includes portraits of my mother, my brother, my boyfriend and myself that mingle with landscapes and common household objects. The second includes photograms made with heirlooms and other precious objects as well as organic materials like tomato slices, onions, oranges, and common herbs—objects that function as conflicting metaphors for both disease and healing. Formal properties in the photograms include acutely articulated vegetable forms and odd, amorphous

blobs. Third, a select number of images are made from negatives that have been destructively altered with household cleaners and sanitizers, like bleach and dish soap. Each image is a document of duration and of presence. The traditional photographs function similarly in terms of time, though their recognizable subject matter more directly suggests absence and isolation. The portraits serve as a gravitational source pulling the disparate visual elements into a functioning narrative system, a system without a concrete beginning or end.

This narrative system is rooted in the dialectic of *story vs. discourse*¹—meaning the content of the narrative vs. the structure through which it is told. In the gallery setting the images are presented in clusters, each group of images function as a chapter within the greater *story*. In general terms, the *story* consists of reconstructed memories and metaphors for intangible aspects of my relationship with my mother—objects that are at once recognizable and strange within their context. This context—or the



Untitled (rooms)

sequence, size, and placement of the photographs—constitutes the *discourse* through which the narrative is presented. Aspects of truthful representation and the subjectivity of memory help to differentiate between these separate but connected components of narrative. For example, *Untitled (rooms)* depicts the real environment of my mother's

house, the thin wall that divides her room from the guest room where my brother and I stay while visiting, however the figures in the frame are artificially set in place. This scene presents both truth and fiction. On a broader level, the neighboring image, *Unspilt Milk* that depicts five glasses of milk in an indeterminate environment, is a



Unspilt Milk

¹ Hughes, Alex, and Andrea Noble. *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2003. Pg 3.

scene that conflicts with the surrounding images, in other words the visual characteristics of the milk glasses and otherwise empty tabletop do not fit with the intimate domestic aesthetic of *Untitled (rooms)* or the neighboring *Untitled (front door)*, positioned above. There is an intuitive logic in the relationship between the *Untitled* images because their subjects are similar, while the subject of *Unspilt Milk* breaks that expectation but contributes to the narrative flow as a subjectively interpretable object. The milk glasses, my mother's house, her front door, and the figures of my family members are essentially the content of the *story*. The *discourse* is always experienced in a chronological format whether the viewer enters the series in the middle, beginning or end. In fact, the non-linear quality of this *discourse* often takes precedence over the *story*. The presentation intentionally frustrates typical expectations for consuming a narrative and the viewer must draw from their own experience to fill in missing information, the result is a subjectively reconstructed family history.

Most narratives provide an access point to enter another world through a standard and recognizable format. Books have covers, bindings, pages, introductions and conclusions. I break this

There are things here not seen in this photograph.



My shirt was wet with perspiration, the beer tasted good but I was still thirsty. Some drunk was talking to another drunk about Nixon. I watched a roach walk slowly along the edge of the bar stool. On the juke box Glen Campbell was singing "Southern Nights". I had to go to the men's room. A derelict began to walk towards me to ask for money. It was time to leave.

Duane Michals
There are things here not seen in this photograph, 1977

mold and ask, 'what happens when the structural apparatus of storytelling is exposed, when language is left behind and instead active external participation is required to realize meaning?' This series begins to answer those questions and to embody the complex nature of our relationships with family and self.

To anticipate how a reader's interpretation of my narrative might proceed I look at the work of artists working in both visual and written narratives. Illustrators, authors, poets and photographers all shaped the foundation of this series, but I took great interest in the work of Duane Michals, Sophie Calle,

and Jason Fulford. Michals affects his simple black and white photographs with handwritten text in a way that is both subtle and blatantly direct. A photograph of the interior of a shabby neighborhood bar transforms into a private, contemplative moment as we look through the eyes and mind of the photographer. I appreciate the voyeuristic feeling of looking at a diary page expressed by the messy, unpolished handwriting. However, the text limits interpretation as well; it imposes a single version of the story and excludes others. In the interest of allowing multiple interpretations to form, I rely on established photographic frameworks instead, in other words; the medium's discourse.

The act of consuming any work of art is bound up in a medium-specific discourse involving all the work that has come before, all the theories developed in response, and the context in which we are now looking at the work. Victor Burgin states, that "The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are texts inscribed in terms of what we may call 'photographic discourse,' but this discourse, like any other, engages discourse beyond itself, the 'photographic text,' like any other, is the site of a complex 'intertextuality,' an overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical conjuncture²." With this in mind, a reading of any artwork or narrative becomes an exercise in anthropological observation and all aspects of the work must be considered from the style of the artist to the frame in which it is presented. In Michals's work the aesthetic of his writing is complimented by the gritty high contrast quality of the photograph. Unhindered by competing styles, I am able to more fully "believe" Michals's assertion that this moment existed within the reality of his life. I begin to imagine what he looked like sitting in this bar by himself with his camera and notebook, what might have motivated him to enter the bar, and where he went afterward.

This mental exercise of extending the narrative before and beyond the moment presented by the artists is what Emma Kafalenos refers to as a *fabula*³. At times, many *fabulas* may exist

² Burgin, Victor, ed. *Thinking Photography*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

³ Kafalenos, Emma. "Reading Visual Art, Making—and Forgetting—Fabulas." *Narrative* 9. 2 [2001]: 138-145.

simultaneously, as drastically different extensions of the narrative, and other times a single fabula may strongly suggest itself. Kafalenos explains, “We construct fabulas in response to information we have about the depicted moment, and indications in the representation that we read as ‘indexical’ cues to an emotional state or atmosphere.”⁴ Applied to my work, these theories support the dichotomy I present between highly emotional or suggestive and categorically ambiguous content. Take, for example, the diptych of a self-portrait and photogram of a liver-shaped chunk of soil and roots together titled *Untitled (self-portrait with earth)*. The tightly closed eyes, furrowed brow, and windswept hair of the self-portrait suggests, at the very least, resistance or perhaps even pain, while the nondescript form of the photogram is virtually indecipherable, yet together their formal properties allude to an action that has caused harm—the impact of a moving object is felt across the countenance of my face, sweeps my hair to the side, and manifests as an inverted stain or blow-out in the next frame. This connection is a fallacy, of course, completely constructed between the frames and exists only in the mind of the viewer, it is a fabula sought to explain cause and effect.

Roland Barthes’s theories of narrative and language also supply a framework for understanding how this non-linear narrative functions. In his collection of essays, *Image-Text-Music*, Barthes explains that in every geographic location, every era and every culture there exist popular narrative, stories told through language that define the values, beliefs, and social practices of a certain group or individual⁵. Barthes describes the basic structure of a narrative as a necessary point of departure. As readers we apply our knowledge of this basic structure to any engagement with narrative. However, when a narrative format diverges from this model our expectations also shift. We are forced to confront the usually invisible structure of the narrative. In this sense, you, the reader, become an active participant

⁴ Kafalenos, pg 142.

⁵ Barthes, Roland. “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative.” *Image-Music-Texts*. Ed. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wong, 1977. Pg 80.

in the storytelling process; an unwitting but necessary collaborator and by proxy an extension of the author. This type of narrative is not pre-scribed, instead a new structure must emerge that is defined not only by the author but by direct reader engagement.

A photograph is imbued with a proverbial ‘bleeding heart,’ an indexical quality that implies a physical connection to its’ subject. Geoffrey Batchen tells us that, “as an index, the photograph is never itself but always, by its very nature, a tracing of something else.”⁶ It is easy to assume then that



Sophie Calle, from *Des Histoires Vraies*

photographs might serve as records of truth. The book of photographs and original writing, *Des Histoires Vraies*, by poet and artist Sophie Calle illustrates the tension and irony that exists between the real effect and the intended use of a photograph. Each image in *Des Histoires Vraies* is paired with a paragraph or a few lines of text that describe an

event from Calle’s life, creating a relationship that tells us to accept the images as diaristic documents. Some photographs depict objects found and arranged long after the event described, while some, like the photograph of a sheet embroidered with her initials by her deceased great aunt, depicts a real sentimental object. This example carries that ‘indexical power’ with it—in viewing a thing that truly existed and was important in the life of the artist we are one step closer to touching, feeling, or reliving Calle’s experience. However, this power is just a perception. In viewing this image we are gaining no additional insight into Calle’s life than when we are looking at photographs of recreated scenes. When the subject is photographed with the intension to memorialize a transfer of value occurs between the original thing and the image of that thing. The thing is affectively (and ironically) de-valued in the

⁶ Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997. Pg 9.

attempt to preserve its power and importance, and the record of existence—the photograph—becomes the venerated object. Recreated scenes and real mementos are equalized through this process. Taking the affect of Calle’s work one step further, I act upon certain photographs to disrupt the value-transfer loop that inevitably orbits the viewer, photograph, and referent around each other. In one of these images, a closely framed shot of my mother’s cirrhosis-ed abdomen, I soaked the negative in kombucha, a probiotic tea populated with live cultures. The corrosive liquid ate away at particular areas of the emulsion and collected as opaque residue in others. The positive image is barely recognizable as it’s original subject, yet hints of skin-like texture and the curve of her fingers are identifiable. The marks made by the kombucha shift emphasis to the surface of the image, pointing to the object-ness of the photograph rather than the subject depicted. It becomes impossible to transfer indexical value from my mother, as the subject of the image, to the photograph, and instead each can remain independent. For me, this distinction is part of a larger goal that is to reconstruct a ‘self’ and a set of familial relationships that are dependant on a fractured history. Clive Scott, in a chapter of his book *Spoken Image: Photography and Language*, looks at the work of women photographers who have enacted photographic series in order “to escape identification through self-multiplication, which itself becomes a route back to identity.”⁷ Similarly, every image in *First Personal, Plural*, from the half-destroyed image of my mother’s abdomen to the portraits of my brother and boyfriend, is a manifestation of my internalized sense of self. Like an infant in Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage⁸, I embody an independent and individual self through recognizing my reflection as me, however instead of an actual mirror the reflecting mechanism is other people. Therefore, in the act of producing multiple iterations of my own likeness, as well as myself reflected in others, I’m both distancing myself from a solid, single identity and embracing the multiplicity of self within a family unit.

⁷ Scott, Clive. *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language*. London: Reaktion, 1999. Pg 96.

⁸ Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Ed. Bruce Fink. Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1966.

My process can be understood as an accumulation strategy, and again I look to another artist to understand my own process. In an interview with Aaron Schuman in *Aperture* Jason Fulford describes his most recent body of work, a collection of photographs, written observations, workshops and interventions under the title *The Mushroom Collection*. Fulford describes his approach to this project as a series of intuitive responses as opposed to conscious preemptory actions⁹. I approached the making of these images as a collector. Instead of setting out to construct a fictional image I carried the 4x5 field camera with me on visits to my family and always kept it nearby at home. I observed and responded to particular emotive moments, objects, or events. This process had a great effect on how I engaged with my surroundings and I found the pace of my day slowed, extra time was spent looking at a glass of milk or sitting at the kitchen table to record photographically and mentally observations that might later turn into something more elaborate. As my collection of photographs grew I turned to a process of assessment and editing. Many images are cut out as I identified subtle themes and narrowed the scope of the narrative. Sequence and proximity of the photographs affect their independent meanings and as a collection they take on greater possibilities. This editing process reflects the experience of a viewer in that choice—the choice of what order to view the photographs and which to internally emphasize over others becomes an important factor in consuming the work.



Jason Fulford
The Mushroom Collector, 2010

On another level, I explore aspects of the *human* in *non-human* objects and materials. My use of tomato slices, orange slices, tufts of soil, herbs, and collectable objects are an attempt to reconcile

⁹ Schuman, Aaron. "Jason Fulford: The Mushroom Collector." *Aperture Magazine* Summer 2012: 48-53. Pg 43.

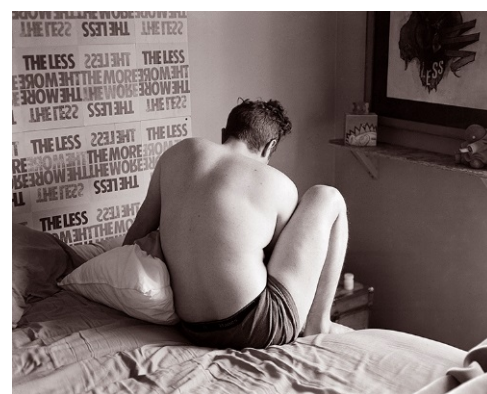
the inherent difficulty of articulating the intangible aspects of relationships—psychological states like attraction, desire, loyalty, gratitude, aggression, and vindictiveness—into representational forms. I found a palpable power in the marks made by exposing warm tone black and white photo paper through these items under natural sunlight. After exposure, I skip the traditional developer step and place the exposed paper directly into a fixative bath. When exposed to light, the water, acids, sulfur and other compounds of the fruits and vegetables react uniquely with the silver particles in the photo paper emulsion to create intense mauve, fuchsia, orange, and burnt umber tones—hues that suggest skin and internal organs.



Untitled (rotten tomato)

It is also important to acknowledge the influence of poetry in understanding the presentation or arrangement of these images. At the outset, I combined original writing with the photographs, sometimes as diptychs—one photograph, one line of text. The prose described memories and imagined situations or sentiments. My intention was to provide multiple sources of imagery, both visual and lyrical/textual.

Now, I have disposed with the literal text of the written word and am relying on the text of the photograph as well as the affect produced by varying the size of photographs, placing them at particular heights, and creating relationships between certain images in proximity to one another. For example, in one photograph a large tomato sits rotting in a garden bed, nearby an intimate image depicts a mostly nude male figure sitting on the edge of an unmade bed, his back is facing us and he's got one foot up on the bed with his knee



More or Less

pulled close to his shoulder. His body creates a capacious, fleshy orb much like the rotting tomato but alive and well. Both are nestled in beds, both are hovering between life and death, one is much closer to that fate than the other but the implication is transferred. Preceding these photographs are groupings that create staccato beats, pool attention at key elements and allow for the eye to continue on after a period of time. The traditional model of equally sized or proportioned photographs hanging at a common center line upon the wall is broken in favor of engaging viewer participation. I've created a narrative puzzle with no Truth beneath the pieces.

Here, beyond the subject of the narrative lies the true content of the work; choice and memory help determine how a viewer will interpret the story. I offer a series of storytelling apparatus lay bare in order to enhance these individual associations required to activate the narrative. Only by applying their unique body of knowledge and experience is the viewer able to complete the work. This work remains raw, unfinished in its current state and waits quietly for a passing soul to offer itself and its imagination up as the missing link.

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