Polaroid Access

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Polaroid Access

by

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Family and photography have been closely connected since the invention of the camera. Preserving a loved one’s image was so important that the first photographers often used family members as subjects well before commissioned portraits became commonplace.\(^1\) Prior to the normalization of long-distance communication, a photographic portrait was a cherished keepsake, especially when the subject was far away or deceased. Once photography became available to the general public (Kodak introduced its first snapshot camera in 1888),\(^2\) people quickly put it to work, capturing moments from their daily lives. Many of these images preserved life as it actually happened (a historical record in some sense); others were aspirational and represented the life of the photographer’s dreams. In the 19th century, people created stylized settings specifically for the camera,\(^3\) similar to the carefully-posed images and curated albums seen on social media today. In this way, our relationship to the snapshot has changed rather little. In the essay ‘Photography Changes Our Life Stories,’ Marvin Heiferman writes about our connection to the snapshot:

Snapshots can remind us of what is or once was. They can overwhelm memory and even logic. Snapshots… briefly excuse us from the present and allow us to talk back to time and mortality. Snapshots fascinate us because they are always incomplete; they demand our interaction. We search them for clues, trying to remember or confirm who we were, who and what we’ve cared about, where we’ve been, and what we’ve become… Old snapshots, too, get new lives and audiences as paper-based snapshots from the twentieth century are discarded,\(^4\)

\(^1\) Only months after the daguerreotype’s invention in 1839, Dr. John W. Draper made a portrait of his sister when experimenting with the process himself. Maureen Taylor, "Photography Changes Our Connection to Family History," in Photography Changes Everything, ed. Marvin Heiferman (New York: Aperture, 2012), 245.


become rare, and end up in museum collections, poignant evidence of our primal and constant need to be seen, recognized, and remembered.\textsuperscript{iv}

Heiferman aptly describes how snapshots manifest our desire to live on after we have gone \textit{because} of our mortality. The snapshot also provides the means of revisiting the past and metaphorically speaking to our respected and loved ones who are gone, yet remain captured in a glossy print. These images allow for reflection on our lives and the decisions we have made, and how we have evolved (or not) since the shutter was released.

Heiferman points out that nowadays snapshots are no longer special or private — in fact, people around the world take pictures every second of every day and share just as quickly with millions of others. I, on the other hand, became interested in working with my family’s film photographs precisely because they are a physical reminder of when they were made. The medium itself speaks to a very specific time when family photographs (mine and others’) were shared as physical prints and in albums rather than through the digital platforms of social media. The sharing of a photo album was an intimate and revealing occurrence rather than a casual public event – you didn’t share your family albums with strangers because you generally did not invite strangers into your home.

It may seem contradictory that I choose to make paintings — paintings that I hope to show in public — based on my family’s private archive of photographs. Yet I find that I make more interesting work using images of people I know and love rather than strangers. Starting from the highly personal has paradoxically enabled me to speak more broadly about learning to live with emotional scars and burdens. Thus painting these

images and sharing the resulting artwork has become both a public and private act, as if a door was ajar at a vulnerable, revealing moment.

_The Eye of the Storm_ (Illustration 1) was my jumping-off point with this project. I’ve always used my charcoal drawings to find my way when I wasn’t clear on my direction in the studio. Through this drawing, I began questioning what family photographs mean in general, and what my family’s collection of personal photographs means to me in particular. An especially intriguing aspect of working with these film images is that the majority of the photographs were taken either before my birth or when I was too young to remember the situation at hand.

_The Eye of the Storm_ is based on a photograph that my father took soon after my eldest brother’s birth. The composition is reminiscent of depictions of the Christ child and Mary, including the tilt of the mother’s head towards her new baby. The mother’s expression is soft and tender, yet the longer one looks into her eyes, the more intense her stare at the viewer becomes. The sleeping child’s head, nestled in abstract folds of cloth, makes him seem tiny and helpless in relation to the adult figure.

Throughout her career Alice Neel depicted mothers and children in her soulful and uncanny paintings. I share her interest in this subject and her portraits have been particularly influential on my work. Mother-child relationships are not often the subject of contemporary art, especially in painting. However, families (and particularly mothers and children) remain a subject that has universal appeal. _Nancy and Olivia_ (Illustration 2) shows Neel’s daughter-in-law and first grandchild huddled together on a chair. Neel allowed her subjects to choose their own position. As they relaxed into their poses, Neel
and her models talked and she began painting. While it is unlikely that Nancy and Olivia could have held this particular pose for a great length of time (Nancy’s grip on Olivia looks quite firm, and Olivia looks like she is squirming), Neel was able to capture their distinct personalities in what looks like a photographic moment. In fact, Neel only painted from life and relied on memory to capture specific features and characteristic expressions that appeared for a fleeting moment before disappearing again. Nancy looks surprised and even frightened, suggesting that she, like most new mothers, finds raising a child a daunting task. She holds Olivia tightly, not only to keep her child upright, but also to keep herself calm in the child’s presence. Olivia gazes out curiously towards the viewer with some momentary interest (as infants do when faced with new stimuli), but will probably turn away soon. Her feet indicate that she is practicing standing by alternating which foot presses into her mother’s thighs for stability. Their gazes and interaction with each other reveal two psychologically complex individuals with distinct personalities and represent a more modern and authentic double portrait of a mother and child.

While the main focus of Neel’s paintings tends to be on the figures rather than their surroundings, the spaces she does paint are consistently depicted without perspective. Her spaces tip forward in illogical ways and yet are so reflective of how we

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see the world, and are so “right” for the painting, that their inconsistencies go unnoticed.ix

These tilting spaces are also found in paintings by Aliza Nisenbaum who cites Neel as a key influence as well. Nisenbaum is known for, among other things, painting immigrants to the United States in their homes.x In La Talaverita, Sunday Morning NY Times (Illustration 3), she paints two people on a covered sofa; both read a section of the newspaper. The wall behind them is covered with colorful geometric patterned designs that give the appearance of an extraordinary collection of quilt squares or tiles that bring a magnitude of energy and light to the painting. These squares are perfectly flat against the wall and create a shallower space due to their frontal nature. The people on the couch, however, are painted from a higher angle than the wall is painted from; this combination of different perspectives helps to create a dynamic space.

While both Neel and Nisenbaum paint their sitters from life, I use photographs as the source material for my work. I was very interested in the act of looking back and revisiting memory through family photographs, an act that becomes important to clearly describe in at least one of my paintings. Polaroid Access (Image 1) reproduces the proportion of a Polaroid photograph with its square central image and characteristic white border. The painting shows my two brothers and I looking out at a beautiful landscape with a slightly yellowed sky, a color consistent with a physical photograph’s deterioration. The white border is a crisp, sharp white in distinct contrast to the more yellowed white of my brother’s shirt. In addition to the abstract depiction of the Polaroid’s distinctive border, I have added a depiction of myself as an adult sitting on the

bottom edge of the painting and leaning on the left edge. This figure looks away from the viewer towards the central image of the children. In this way, the adult figure literally looks at a captured image of youth as one would look through a window rather than a small photograph or album. This figure is separated physically and psychologically from the memory space, but is connected to the children through the fact that they are all painted in the same manner. Occupying the space in front of the central Polaroid image, the figure serves as an intermediary between the viewer and the painting while also referring to the artist. This spatial relationship allows the viewer to identify with this figure and empathize with her nostalgia.

This painted figure on the sharp white border is reminiscent of Alex Katz’s cut-out paintings. While the cut-outs were not a direct reference in *Polaroid Access*, Katz has been a major influence due to his lifelong interest in painting light and the people he knows.\textsuperscript{xi} Put simply, Katz paints what he sees and tries to make viewers see what he saw.\textsuperscript{xii} His process requires him to paint many small studies before increasing his size and scale. He then paints his subject very quickly, mixing up large amounts of paint and moving it around the canvas with great confidence, speed, and fluidity that only come from lots of practice through his studies and years of painting. I admire Katz’s simplified, confident, abstracted, yet precise stylization and mark, and often find my paintings arrive at a more simplified state when they come partially or completely from memory rather than a photograph. Katz mostly uses his friends and family as models


rather than strangers because he is interested in “record[ing] the quiet truths of personal experience,” and those experiences outside the studio often involve his social circle. The “quiet truths” Katz reveals may be in a crowded, yet lonesome garden party, or how sunlight hits a canoe. I too feel the need to present universal truths drawn from my personal experience, whether with a whisper or a scream, through the use of light, color, and composition. In *Polaroid Access* and *Beached* (Image 2), these universal truths presented themselves as some kind of yearning for the past when one looks at family photographs.

In *Beached*, I used flat, slow strokes to create a placid ocean and calm sky on the right side of the painting. These marks are also indicative of my experience painting them. Where the brushstrokes are long and smooth, I felt calm and breathed slowly and deeply. In contrast, the left side of the painting has energetic, expressive marks painted thinly and quickly with a large bristle brush. When I painted this part, I felt anxious and my breathing was shallow. The figures are painted differently from either part of the landscape. While all the figures are painted opaquely like the right side of the beach, the marks are more varied within each figure (for instance, there is a great difference between the quick, gestural marks that show how the child’s hair blows in the wind and the slow, smooth strokes that describe the highlights and shadows cast on his torso). The diverse marks within each figure speak to how an individual’s nature is intricate and complex.

I again inserted myself as an adult into *Beached*, this time in the center of the painting. With one foot on the bottom of the edge of the painting, I walk towards and

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look down at my expectant mother and eldest brother. My mother smiles at my father, the photographer, while my brother looks off somewhere else. This side of the painting is bathed in an intense warm light. In contrast, the left side contains various shades of thinly painted dull, cool green and an overcast light. The central figure’s body bisects the painting compositionally and carries the cool palette from the left side of the painting. The figure is thus much more connected to the left side through color, temperature, and light, and is psychologically separated from the other two figures even though they all share the same physical space. This separation is emphasized by the fact that the central figure does not overlap with the others’ bodies or any objects on “their” side of the painting.

The central figure yearns to be acknowledged by the figures on the right. Try as she might, she is unable to join them on their idyllic light-filled shore. It’s as if the central figure is visiting from a parallel plane, able to observe the other figures but not interact with them. This figure’s physical and psychological separation emphasizes how people pine for things they cannot have, whether or not they previously had those things.

Eric Fischl was a huge influence on *Beached*. Fischl uses his own photographs to create new compositions for his large paintings. He is known for painting an upper-middle-class white American suburbia based on his childhood experiences in a dysfunctional family. His deep knowledge of the history of figurative painting is evident throughout his oeuvre, particularly when he supplements his figures with an abstracted background that reflects their psychological states. For instance, *The

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Beginning and the End (Illustration 4) contains two full figures and two cropped figures on a beach, all of them (likely) naked. The cropped figures are resting on the sandy beach, while the other figures interact with each other from afar. The large standing female figure looks out towards the horizon where the smaller male figure appears compositionally between her legs in the distance. Most of the canvas is taken up by the dynamic orange sky rather than the motionless figures. The sky optically overwhelms the viewer, providing a visceral sense of anxiety. Fischl doesn’t reveal anything about the personal relationships between the figures, but the foreboding sky seems to disclose that this is the calm before the storm both in the figure’s inner state of mind and potentially in events to follow.

I recently rediscovered the enormous influence John Singer Sargent’s The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit (Illustration 5) has had on my depictions of the psychology of children. As a child, I visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston at least twice a year. While I do not remember the first time I saw this painting, I know that my mother loved it and took my brothers and I to see it many times. Sargent’s painting contains a lot of negative space and dramatic shifts of light that correspond to the different emotional and psychological states of the children.\textsuperscript{xv} The eldest child is not even turned towards the viewer, and while the next two eldest are facing the viewer, they do not look straight at us either. The youngest child, playing with a doll on the ground, is the only one who engages the viewer directly. She is also the most well-lit of all the children, unlike each of her siblings who is progressively more in shadow the older she

is. Sargent seems to suggest that a person’s psyche grows more complex (and perhaps literally darker) as that person ages. \textsuperscript{xvi}

Interestingly, Susan Sidlauskas points out that “…very young children cannot usually articulate the character of their interior lives through language; their bodies are the principal agents of their own visceral sense of insideness. The inner sense of self is coextensive with the bodily sense of self.” \textsuperscript{xvii} This is a large part of what separates children from adults – the ability to describe what one feels through language rather than through one’s bodily postures or physical actions. \textsuperscript{xviii} However, as I hope the discussion of the next painting demonstrates, when words fail adults (as they often do), they often revert to a childhood state of unknowingly using their bodies to describe their feelings.

As I became more interested in exploring my own psychological state as an adult rather than as a child, I decided to take my own photographs to use as source material. These images are my own incomplete snapshots that I transform through paint. Previously I was mostly unwilling to change anything in my family’s photographs. \textsuperscript{xix} Creating my own photographs has allowed me the freedom and flexibility to change elements in the source image when the painting requires it.

My parents’ divorce during my young adult years was a metaphorical death that completely shifted my family structure. Though I did not realize it at the time, my first drawings and paintings of these images (like \textit{The Eye of the Storm}) did not deviate from

\textsuperscript{xviii} I say largely because I have heard not only children say very insightful, poignant things about their feelings, but also adults barely able to string words together to make a cohesive sentence.
\textsuperscript{xix} In the drawing and in each of the paintings I have so far discussed, even when including myself as an adult, I kept the integrity of the original photograph intact; on a personal level it felt wrong to deviate from my family’s photographs greatly.
the source photograph because (I think) I was trying to preserve the memory of my beloved family unit and remain faithful to what that structure was. That the structure would ever break was incomprehensible; the initial paintings do not directly acknowledge even a crack.

    My interest in conveying psychological states through bodily expression and the figure’s environment partly stems from exploring how a loss of childhood changes one’s identity. My family’s intact structure was a big part of my childhood and identity, and when it changed, I faced a sudden loss of family, childhood, and self coupled with the forced construction of a new identity that I wasn’t ready or willing to assume. Painting film-based family photographs was a way for me to access the family structure I recognized and remembered but no longer existed.

    As the project evolved and I began putting my adult self into my paintings (whether alongside a family photograph or through taking my own photographs), it marked my move towards finding a way in my art to acknowledge what had happened, and accept that my family’s photographs no longer depicted reality. My new paintings use surreal imagery to describe the initial shock of the loss and the practice of living with an alien structure and new identity that resulted from it. My reaction to the loss and the loss itself were both inconceivable, so surrealism became a good vehicle for my new paintings because it depicts the unbelievable and the irrational. Additionally, collage was a useful tool because collage uses formal juxtapositions to aid in visual descriptions of irrational scenes. These juxtapositions (which I talk about in my last two paintings) help establish the relationship between the figure and its environment, which in turn describes the figure’s psyche.
In *Happy Winter* (Image 3), I paint myself in a snowy field on the night of a full moon. There is a wall and bare-limbed forest off in the distance. While the snow reflects the moonlight, the overall painting is still rather dark. Although lit in some places, the figure is naked and dark in value. Her head does not break this horizon, trapping her in the composition. Tinges of pink and red against the figure’s purple cheeks suggest tears. Her seated posture is gently slumped forward in exhaustion, and her gaze looks off into nowhere, unaware of anything around her. Even though the figure is naked, she seems unaffected by her environment.

As Susan Sidlaukas writes, a child’s “inner sense of self is coextensive with the *bodily* sense of self,” and I would argue that an adult’s interiority is often similarly reflected in their body. Even though the figure in *Happy Winter* is an adult, her exhausted, immobile slump makes her appear diminished and passive. This posture describes her psychological and emotional state far more precisely than words do. She reverts to a child’s method of using her body to express herself because her words fail her, which adults sometimes need to do both in an artwork and in life. Her numb emotional state is similarly reflected in the frozen landscape. While I do not reveal why the figure is distressed, the viewer is able to empathize with her not only because she is the only figure in the scene, but also because her posture and the environment’s absence of effect on her describe a stage of universal human suffering: when someone’s emotions completely overwhelm them, they are unable to feel anything.

*The Little White Bed That Ran Away* (Image 4) is based on a photograph taken in my childhood home after it was emptied and put on the market. The painting’s title is taken from a favorite bedtime story. The painting is rather dark, with an overall cool
palette reminiscent of horror movies. The female figure is parallel to the floor, limbs extended. She reaches out, unbalanced, towards the viewer for help with a shocked and scared expression on her face. Below her suspended body is the faint, ghostly suggestion of a bed that was once there, but has somehow spontaneously disappeared, leaving her hanging in midair about to crash down. While other elements in the room subtly remain in place (like the outlet), the comfort and support that the bed provided is gone. Through the surreal nature of the image and the figure’s horrified expression, the viewer is able to discern the bed’s departure as metaphorical rather than literal. The humor of the situation juxtaposed with the figure’s agony piques viewers’ curiosity, and stimulates the imagination to try to understand the figure’s predicament.

The shift in source material from iconic family snapshots to my own photographic creations reflect my desire to, as Heiferman said, “remember or confirm who [I am], who and what [I’ve] cared about, where [I’ve] been, and what [I’ve] become” as I move away from childhood further into adulthood. My early drawings and paintings helped me analyze my past, while my new work describes my struggle to cope with old wounds as I move towards a more independent identity.

The scenes in my recent paintings did not actually happen which is perhaps why they so eloquently describe my impotent psychological state. When I started this project, I knew I was interested in my family and our photographed memories, but discovered I was more interested in exploring my new identity forged in part by wounds that never completely heal. These collaged snapshots respectively reveal and lessen my emotional scars and burdens while still challenging me to understand them and thus myself better.
As I strive to more fully understand this new self, I am grateful that when words fail, painting helps me describe the indescribable.
**Bibliography**


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