2-1-2019

My Sight's Shadow

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My Sight’s Shadow

by

Lili Jamail

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts, Studio Art Hunter College
The City University of New York

2018

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Abstract

The story in the photographs I am showing is not about a person, but about the span of experience and emotion presented through time. I am looking into things that stand alone, and things that stand together — the idea of sharing space and experience with something or someone or being by yourself. One thing that draws me to photography as a medium is the way that photographs are able to tell a story or explain something without words. Photographs offer a unique perspective which, by their nature, alters reality. There is always some amount of truth that lies in an image, but it varies. It is a compelling aspect of a story -- a fantasy or a point of view, that interjects itself into the empty spaces between photographs on a wall. There are ways in which I might take a photograph in order to make that moment seem like something that it’s not. This statement is a combination of these ideas.
Introduction

In the beginning of Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, she explains how photography makes the world around us “manageable, understandable and opaque”, and soon after that she proclaims that photography is a tool to understand what reality must be like if a photograph looks the way that it does. She claims that it is a guide into fantasy and deduction. I am constantly thinking about this claim when I am photographing: inspecting spaces and seeing if there is anything there when I take a closer look. I am always curious to see what something looks like once it is turned into an opaque, final product of a photograph. In my large photographs, I am looking deeper into a small area of space. This creates a moment within a larger moment -- framed, decided information.

My mother taught me how to use my first film camera and showed me how to frame a decent photograph. I had already taken several photography courses by the time I entered The University of Texas at Austin in 2010. In my first college class, we learned how to look for things like Lee Friedlander would on the streets, and to use our cameras to record the everyday. What is marginal becomes central and what is ordinary becomes critical. The photograph in (Figure 1) is one of my favorites. Philip Lorca diCorcia photographs a man at a moment that is at once relatable and seemingly insignificant -- looking in a refrigerator at night. The light from the window and the two artificial lights from the kitchen add to the familiarity of this moment a strangeness – as if the character has found himself lost in self-reflection.
In diCorcia’s *A Storybook Life*, he fulfills a narrative by tying photographs together that weren’t taken at the same time or place while also creating whole worlds within single images -- usually actions that pass and are forgotten. diCorcia’s collection of photographs portray time in a unique sense in that he strings together so many moments of his subjects’ days. It is clear that the subjects don’t relate to each other; it’s the timeline and even the time of day pictured in the photographs that hold the relationships together. Looking at both Friedlander and diCorcia images taught me how to look into my reality and transform it into a story and even into a moment that I construct. My photograph (Figure 2) is one that I took under Friedlander’s influence. His photograph (Figure 3) is a clear example of how he takes something he sees and turns it into something else that only he sees.
My classmates and I at the University worked in a darkroom that Garry Winogrand helped build when he was a professor there in the 70’s. Like Winogrand, my first professor, Lawrence McFarland was a Guggenheim Fellow and would often tell us stories rather than lecture. Two things stood out to me about the stories he told about Winogrand. One is an idea that Lawrence and Winogrand shared – that a photograph can’t be judged based on a feeling someone has when taking the photograph. There has to be an element of objectivity when deciding if a photograph is good or not and that not all photographs are good. However, you should trust your judgement on what and when to shoot. The second was that he and Winogrand really differed on what they decided to include in a shot. Lawrence shot wide, and Winogrand squeezed in as much information in a small space as he possibly could. They were both very much documentary photographers, but there seemed to be more room for story telling in Winogrand’s photographs because of what and how he chose to frame a scene.
McFarland’s photographs were studies of land and space at specific times, like this photograph below.

![Figure 4](image)

In many of Winogrand’s photographs, the subjects are looking out further than the area pictured in the frame. This idea is something that I connected to right away.

![Figure 5](image)

Here Winogrand photographs three women looking at something on the left and a man next to them engaged in something outside the picture on the right.
The next photography class I took involved an assignment in which we had to copy an artist of our choosing. I chose Rineke Dijkstra because I wanted to move into color and focus on texture, atmosphere, and lighting. I specifically looked at this image of hers on the left and produced the one on the right. I always loved being in the darkroom, but now I couldn’t get away from the computer – scanning large format film and making large archival inkjet prints.

![Figure 6](image1.png) ![Figure 7](image2.png)

During this time, I was also studying sculpture and had become familiar with the work of Robert Smithson and Donald Judd. My professor, Jack Stoney, lectured about how artists effectively take something from the outside world, or even from another room, and use it to direct ideas in a certain way. Informing Spiral Jetty, Smithson turned a geographical space into something else – a new world that takes on a new meaning. It becomes something to be looked at, thought about and experienced physically.
This had a direct effect on my photographs. I visited Marfa, Texas with my sculpture class and being there allowed me to dig deeper into art’s physical traits: thinking about materials and how they relate to meaning. I started to understand how closely related photography and sculpture are, especially in terms of placement and position. The ability to see multiple perspectives of the same thing when looking at Judd’s cubes made me think about how much freedom and authority I have when I am taking a photograph, and how I can make something look so different by positioning myself. I started to look at human bodies as pieces of land and vise-versa — how they are affected by the life happening around them.

In my last year of college my mother, who had never smoked a cigarette in her life, was diagnosed with lung cancer. Frustrated, I began wondering about how pieces of land and our bodies become broken for direct reasons, or for no reason at all. Coincidentally, I was learning how to use a large format camera, which became the perfect tool to explore what was happening around me, especially because of how it naturally added a faint layer of physical touch.
For my last spring break in college, I took a group of my friends to South Padre Island because my father had rented a condo for us next to a house he had rented for himself. Half of the group wanted to do the typical college spring break activities, while the other half wanted to use it as a relaxing vacation. There was so much arguing about what to do the whole time that no one had fun. We were stuck in the condo and I was annoying my friends by taking their pictures.

I was taking photographs to examine the intangible and elusive feelings and connections that I had with the people in my life. This interest still directs the work that I am making now, six years later. I focused on the uncomfortable closeness amongst my group of friends, who had also been my roommates throughout college. As we have grown up, we’ve only grown closer to one another, transcending friendship into a realm that feels more like a family. We annoy each other, cross boundaries, and disrespect
each other — it’s comfortable to the point of discomfort. I began to explore these ideas by thinking of the ways in which the subject could be portrayed — taking photographs that visually highlight the inability to escape

I was reading Sally Mann’s memoir Hold Still and tried to mimic how she would use her family along with her studio process to create her work. My process was intentionally quicker than hers, even when using my large format camera. I think this helped the photographs have a quick (in-between moments) feeling to them. Paul Recoeur refers to this as “within timeness”. This term relates to highlighting things like the time of day and the actions in between plot points. He defines a plot as “the crossing point of temporality (within timeness actions) and narrativity”; it moves things from time in reality to a story. A narrative is about something, but it’s never reality. It is a way to understand main events. I was trying to catch and retain the airy actions that pass quickly.

My work at that time was critiqued negatively as related to that of Ryan McGinley, a photographer I was not familiar with. When I started to look at his work I really loved his use of color and his overall content when dealing with bodies. He is known for photographing seductive youth and exploring the borderlines between fine art photography and fashion. I began to move in the direction of his work in terms of color and size. It can be trendy and cliched to combine fine art photography and commercial advertising, but for me, color photography adds a transparency and gives cultural and time references which add certain truths that I like to keep in my photographs. I use color photography to provide a certain amount of information, detail and texture from a moment. This is also why I use film and print large.
Tangible Material

Some themes important to me are: touch, pain, emotion, human connection, story - telling, faith, and death. I focus on a person’s body position within a certain domestic or natural environment and its psychological effects within a photographic composition. These photographs capture a moment to display a sense of an extension of time, within which we search for an origin and await an outcome. This may lend a sense of waiting in suspended time for a death or a sickness to play out until the end. In some of these photographs I am trying to find something more to believe in than the physical body – what is left after or during an explosion or a flash of a camera. I sometimes focus on natural environments in which the distance is blocked, which for me speaks to being stuck in places mentally and physically with no way out.

In the large photographs that I am presenting in my thesis show, I am investigating an aspect of history and narrative within each frame. I am examining what physical time looks like, and how the qualities of things can show that appearance of time. This is where photography gets exciting. My photographs show truths about people and places, but the facts in front of the viewer (the image) can be different from the story people associate with those aspects, combined with my camera's point of view make it my own story. One difference between art and science is that artists try to get at the intangible and invisible aspects of human experience through perceptions of nature, whereas scientists and historians depend on facts. Art is true to life in the first person, but is it true to anyone else? Are photographs real facts? There is a thin line between experiment and experience. A good example is Cezanne, who wanted to paint the world
as he saw it. His paintings are not what reality looks like - they are about us seeing what he saw and where something was in relationship to him. They have a lot to do with his senses. In Rosalind Krauss’s *The Photographic conditions of Surrealism*, she refers to photography as being truer to life because perception is the closest thing we have to experience and real life. She claims that photography though, is the most surreal form of art because cameras provide a way to respond to reality, by looking through a lens and reframing it. The reality of the moment and the world around that moment a photograph was taken takes on a different meaning when it is exhibited.

Wolfgang Tillmans is an artist who sets a stage and builds a world within a space when he exhibits. In his installations he creates a tone by resizing images and by using them in almost a sculptural way. His photographs have a certain kind of weight to them when shown in a room – sometimes because of their size and sometimes due to their content. I look at his exhibitions to learn about that kind of weight. Some of his smaller photographs carry more weight than the larger ones because the smallness of works can create a preciousness, which helps define the overall emotional and visual tone of the space.

The following photograph is one that I took of my mother in 2014, printed 4” x 5”, about an eighth the size of the photographs that I displayed next to it. I wanted it to have a similar size and feel as the necklace that she is wearing. This is an examination of the exterior area of my mom’s body that was sick and cancerous. Here, I am focusing on a tiny dot from her radiation that she underwent in her attempts to reduce the cancer. I am connecting it to a sign of her faith. Her physical veins are sticking out because of a
breath that she is taking and holding because I asked her not to move. This was an attempt to prepare for losing her in a way that I had control over.
The Overall Picture

The wide range of content and loose narrative in my work has elicited ongoing critique throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. I am constantly thinking about the faults of photography - how, on a philosophical level, there is much more to a moment in which a photograph is taken than can be pictured. These broad issues fuel my wide range of subjects. I am searching for images that can add to my photographic story, making my portfolio a continuous real life blog. I often place my photographs next to each other and rearrange them to offer different interpretations and possible narratives.
I like to photograph landscapes and people. I am looking for alternate possible meanings of the actual landscape, room, or situation in front of me. For a kind of visible, physical tension that can stretch across the page in a compositional sense. Alternately I sometimes search for something very central, alone, and still.

In Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Inquiry Into Our The Origins of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, he points out that the feeling someone has when something is uncertain is greater and more impactful than a feeling associated with clarity and beauty. I am interested in images that suggest the obscure and that depict vast spaces. Greatness of dimension can provoke a powerful sense of the sublime. I am also interested in images that evoke paradox, unresolved issues, and overall uncertainty; the sublime.
I see my photographic practice as a never-ending process; forever adding and editing. I have recently started curating and have found a love for it. When curating I need to be a solution-based professional when putting on shows as opposed to the wanderer I allow myself to be when I photograph. I began curating with a group called Life Lessons; friends of mine that for years had loved talking about ideas for art shows and events. Early last year we acquired a space on the fifth floor of an abandoned convent with twelve empty bedrooms. We assigned artists each a room of their own in which to display one work next to a twin bed. I love the social aspect that curating with Life Lessons affords - totally different than working alone in the studio. It provides a platform to create from a collection of possibilities that we have built over time; from studio visits with artists and dinner conversations that we have with each other. There is a similarity between how Life Lessons handles projects and the kind of photographer I am in the sense that even though there is an end to an exhibition I, the main purpose of it is to build a base for what is to follow.


Image List; Work in Thesis Show

(all works are Untitled, Ink Jet Prints)

40” x 50” [Chair], 2017

38” x 48.5” [Cross], 2016

41” x 32.25” [Historia], 2018
34.5” x 27.5” [Sculptures], 2017

20.5” x 26” [Kyle], 2018

14.75” x 9.75 [Mirror], 2018

25.6” x 19.5” [Beach Bodies], 2018
10” x 13” [Bonsai], 2018

29” x 37” [Nicole], 2016

20” x 25.5” [Ellee and Lisa] 2017
29.5” x 37” [Madrid Tree], 2018

40” x 32” [Nash Shirt], 2018