Bits & Pieces

An Honors Thesis (ART 480)

By

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Abstract

In a culture where instant gratification is expected and patience is all but non-existent, childhood is becoming more fleeting by the generation. As I approached my own coming of age and transition into the next stage of life, I found it appropriate to revisit some favored youthful memories. Those memories and experiences served as the focal point and inspiration for my senior honors thesis in conjunction with my senior photography thesis.

Over the course of approximately nine months (from August 2009 through April 2010), I explored variations on the theme of childhood memories through the use of digital photography. My objective was to create, install, and promote a photographic exhibition, which would be relatable to a wide variety of audiences. After extensive editing, I narrowed down to a cohesive body of sixteen images (fourteen 24"x36" and two 12"x36" pieces) that best displayed my original intent and concept. The works were exhibited in the Atrium Art Gallery on the Ball State University campus April 20-24, 2010. I then documented the individual works and, in an extended Artist Statement, explored my conceptual, technical, and academic decisions throughout the process of creating and presenting *Bits & Pieces*. 
I would like to thank my advisor, Mark Sawrie, for his helpful guidance not only on this project, but also on countless others.

I would also like to thank Jacinda Russell for her continued assistance and willingness to provide an added opinion.

Additionally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and support throughout the course of my senior thesis and my time at Ball State University.
Nothing about being an adult is any better than being a child. I came to this conclusion a few months ago when I began creating imagery that focuses on the idea of childhood. As a young adult facing the pressures of the “real world” that will be here all too soon, I have found myself drawn to the simplicity of youth and have developed an increasing interest in my own. Suitably, Bits & Pieces has become my way of dealing with this awkward transitional period between childhood and adulthood known as college.

When considering how Bits & Pieces developed from the original concept to the final product, I cannot help but revisit my influences along the way. Two artists have been particularly influential for this project, both stylistically and conceptually. Richard Avedon and Mary Ellen Mark are two American photographers whose careers have gained them international recognition.

Richard Avedon (1923-2004) was a pioneer of American fashion photography. Working for such prestigious magazines as Harper’s Bazaar, Life, and Vogue, he transformed the static, lifeless industry into one full of energy and emotion (BookRags). As a photographer, I present my audience with a medium by which they are bombarded on a daily basis. My challenge, which is unique to photographers as artists, is to provide my viewers with something fresh and worthy of time and contemplation. Richard Avedon was able to infuse a sense of novelty into a medium that had already begun its jading process, and he was able to do so with unprecedented success. In his well-known American West series, Avedon depicts the downtrodden of western America against stark white backgrounds. The portraits are intimate, un-glamorized, and without distracting extras, allowing the viewer a more intimate glimpse into the lives of those being photographed (Freeman). The manner in which he depicts his subjects with such a raw, detail-oriented honestly is a quality I have admired since I first became acquainted with Avedon’s work, and one that has been integrated into my own style.

Mary Ellen Mark (1940-) is another photographer whose career has greatly influenced my own. She began as a photographer on movie sets and then came into her own as a fine art photographer with a focus on social issues as her subjects (Frame). Like Avedon, she primarily photographs people and has developed an impressive skill for conveying an intimacy with and through her subjects. I was particularly moved by her series Streetwise, in which she depicts Street Kids in Seattle (Frame). The extreme lack of innocence and deep pity one feels for children grown before their time make the images difficult to forget. In many ways, Bits & Pieces is very different from Streetwise, but the underlying theme of childhood and the sense of loss are consistent, just captured differently. Mark once said, "I think you reveal yourself by what you choose to photograph, but I prefer photographs that tell more about the subject..." (Fulton). I very much agree with this statement.
by Mary Ellen Mark, because my subjects are the focal point of my images, yet simultaneously expose a good deal about myself as a photographer.

As I began photographing for Bit & Pieces, I was unsure of where the end result would take me. I have always been compositionally minded, and prefer the majority of my creative process to take place behind the lens. I was drawn to the idea of simpler, more innocent times, and photographing with the purity of minimal manipulation to support this concept. As my photographic style has evolved, so has my consistency toward this purity. In this style, the camera and even the photograph become a secondary support to the subject matter and concept. Bits & Pieces formulated in this manner, where my theme of childhood innocence mingled with loss became central, and the camera and photograph served as the means of conveyance.

Many of my chosen subjects are environments that were, and are still, meaningful to me. The pieces are poignant and personal, but not to the point of exclusion, while maintaining a universal charm. I chose to include places that I have known since early childhood (i.e., the house I grew up in: Just Unscrew The Top...We Did, and my favorite playground: I Bet It Didn’t Always Seem This Perfect), as well as places that possess a more general appeal: a back yard, a playhouse, etc. These environments are interspersed with more intimate situations, like a child’s fortress (When Did We Stop Building These?) or a solitary plaything (I Wonder If You Ever Knew How Much I Loved That Thing).

The title of this body of work, Bits & Pieces, is a tribute to the way I perceive my own past experiences, and memories in general. Very rarely (if ever) do we recall each aspect of a specific situation; rather, our memories form collectively, piece by piece, while some details stand out more than others. Those details, moreover, are what have inspired me to dig deeper and look beyond the surface of my own familiarities. The individual titles for each photograph are slightly more cryptic and are intended to serve as an additional layer of depth for each piece. For example, Two Sides To Every Story...Sometimes Three Or Four is a photograph of the neighborhood where my two sisters and brother currently live, and references the chaos of growing up in a house full of siblings where every person has a different account of events. Some titles are more obvious than others, but each possesses a significant meaning that may serve as a conversation starter, or simply an added level of contemplation.

The photographs in this series are primarily observational because so much of being a child is about observation and soaking up one’s surroundings like a little information sponge. As previously mentioned, I prefer to use as little manipulation as possible, allowing the photographed subjects to speak for themselves. However, I could not be so lucky as to stumble upon every subject and composition I wished to include in this series, so rearrangement and development was necessary for certain images. For example, in the pieces entitled I Knew It Was Coming But I Was Still Scared and I Wonder If You Ever Knew How Much I Loved That Thing, the objects are placed, but I positioned them in such a way as I imagined I would have as a child.
*She Always Told Me To Finish What I Started* was also captured in this method, where I positioned the items with a child’s point of view in mind. Even while arranging the staged images, however, I made a conscious effort to stay true to my original intent and memories.

The photographs in the series were taken using a Nikon D200 Digital SLR camera and printed on Epson Premium Semi-gloss Photo Paper at 240 dpi and a size of 24”x36” (except for two images that are 12”x36”). The majority of the photographs in *Bits & Pieces* were taken from a low angle simply because as children, we see the world from a lower perspective. The large size of the final printed and framed photographs accents this quality while making the viewer feel smaller when standing in front of them. The substantial size commands attention, though allows additional consideration to detail. The final number of sixteen pieces was not set in stone from the beginning, but came about during the final editing process as the number of strongest pieces which best fulfilled my concept.

Ultimately, these photographs reflect my idealistic view of childhood innocence and the tragedy of its loss. As adults, we become aware of ourselves and our ability to change things, which we often do, but not always for the better. We spend more time remembering than experiencing, and I find solace in the recognition of the underappreciated, overlooked details that are often lost by the time their importance is realized.

Molly M. Campbell
Works Cited


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Many of my chosen subjects are environments that were, and are still, meaningful to me. The pieces are poignant and personal, but not to the point of exclusion, while maintaining a universal charm. The subject matter is subdued, for I find that true beauty lies in the subtleties and is often underrated. I have included places that I have known since early childhood (i.e., the house I grew up in, houses of relatives), as well as places that possess a more general appeal: a back yard, a playhouse, etc. These environments are interspersed with more intimate situations, like a birthday celebration (Don't Forget To Save Me A Piece) or a solitary plaything (I Wonder If You Ever Knew How Much I Loved That Thing).

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The photographs in this series are primarily observational because so much of being a child is about observation and soaking up one's surroundings like a little information sponge. The images also reflect my idealistic view of childhood innocence and the tragedy of its loss. As adults, we become aware of ourselves and our ability to change things, which we often do, but not always for the better. We spend more time remembering than experiencing, and my aim is to focus on the little intricacies that often get overlooked and are lost by the time their importance is realized.

Molly Campbell
I Knew It Was Coming...But I Was Still Scared  2009

You Can Never Have Enough Family Photos  2009
When Did We Stop Building These? 2010

I Wonder If You Ever Knew How Much I Loved That Thing 2010
Occasionally, That's The Only Way I See It

I Bet It Didn't Always Seem This Perfect
It's Always A Good Time At Aunt Sandy's 2009
Sometimes You Gotta Stand Your Ground  2009

She Always Told Me To Finish What I Started  2010
Don't Forget To Save Me A Piece  2010

Learning To Let Go...Well, Mostly  2009
I Licked The Fuzz Off Of His Nose (His Name Was Mr. Rogers)  2010

Some Things (People) Never Change  2009