95% of the Story

An Honors Thesis (ART 480)

by

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Abstract

The universality of the human condition has always fascinated me. There are a series of biologically determined events that are common in life, like heartbreak, birthdays, or death, and the way we cope and react is the experience of being human. It is in the difficult valleys and overwhelmingly gleeful peaks that we feel most connected; that we all ask the same questions. Why? What? Where? It is these times and experiences that I capture in my photographs and accompany with text to create a feeling that is relatable. My photographs are self-portraits and are very much influenced by my family. The main portion of my project was my photography exhibition in the Atrium Gallery at Ball State University, December 2010.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family for the inspiration for my exhibition and for putting up with me through the stress, the breakthroughs, the breakdowns, and the all-nighters. Without my family and my upbringing, none of this would be possible. Specifically, I thank my mother for encouraging me to pursue the Honors College.

I would like to thank Jacinda Russell for not only advising me through this project, but through the last several semesters of college. Her advice and guidance has been more helpful than she knows.

I would like to thank Mark Sawrie, without whom I would have never become a photography major. His passion and dedication to keeping fine art alive motivates me to do the same.

Lastly, I would like to thank Duane Michals, Francesca Woodman, and Jeff Wall. Their contribution to the world of photography helped create the type of photographer I am today.
Author's Statement

Introduction

The universality of the human condition has always fascinated me. There are a series of biologically determined events that are common in life, like heartbreak, birthdays, or death, and the way we cope and react is the experience of being human. It is in the difficult valleys and overwhelmingly gleeful peaks that we feel most connected; that we all ask the same questions. Why? What? Where? It is these times and experiences that I capture in my photographs and accompany with text to create a feeling that is relatable.

Photography allows me to blur fantasy and reality, giving us the opportunity to examine a single moment that might otherwise pass unnoticed, like the time at your birthday party when all your friends are gathered and you should be happy to be celebrating with them, but all you can think about is how old you are, or the fact that they didn’t even spell your name right. Within my work, I tell a story that lies just under the surface of the photograph. It lies in the endless seconds that happened just before and those that are about to happen after the photograph is snapped. After we examine these moments, we might find answers to our deepest questions.

Influences

In my very first photography class at Ball State University, I was introduced to the photographer Duane Michals. After I saw the way he incorporated text with photography, my outlook on the combination was forever changed. The first photograph of his that I saw was called, *This Photograph is My Proof*. It is an image that has never
left me since the moment I saw it for the first time. The synergy between the image and the handwritten statement is extraordinary and I could relate to it. I remembered writing things on the backs of my photos. I remembered looking at photos and saving them so I could remember them forever; thinking that once I had the picture, it was real and that this memory would never leave me. The following image, in particular, is successful at revealing and sharing a moment in time, a memory, proof that this moment existed between these two people. After further study of Michals’ work, I began to incorporate text into my images. With my photographs, I capture single moments in time, little bits that make up my life, to create a narrative that is somewhat universal. Adding text takes the photo to another level. It is not that I think my images cannot stand on their own; it is that my use of text adds another dimension and narrative, just like the words Michals incorporated here:
A few semesters later, I learned about Jeff Wall in a talk given by another student in my art history class. He is a photographer with cinematographic style. Most of his photographs are complicated productions that take years to set up and include several people and props. This is where I feel a connection to him and get inspiration from him.

I grew up in a house full of stuff. Our basement is full floor to ceiling with boxes of clothes, toys, papers, and memories. I live surrounded by collections of dolls, figurines, purses, and shoes and I never realized the influence this upbringing had on me until I began looking at my body of work. When I began to examine the work I have done over the past few semesters, I noticed that several of my series centered on exaggeration and a multitude of objects. One of Jeff Wall’s photographs that has always stuck in the back of my mind is his photograph, *After ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*:
When I first saw this photograph, I knew nothing about the novel that it is based on. *Invisible Man* is about a man who falls into a forgotten room and decides to stay there, living hidden away. The novel specifically describes 1,369 illegally connected light bulbs. I admire Wall’s dedication to detail and time it took to set up this scene. I find ridiculous situations, such as 1,369 light bulbs, fascinating. I do not work on as large a scale as Wall, but I spend a great deal of time planning, collecting props, and setting up my photographs. Several of my images from my series are overwhelming and having to do with excess. For example, in my photograph *school taught me a valuable lesson. I'm still paying for it*, you will find me counting over forty dollars in coins. The table is covered in coins perfectly lined up in rows and stacked in unstable piles. The image references the ridiculous idea of paying for school loans in coins.

Another one of Jeff Wall’s photographs that influenced my work is *A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947*:
Wall has a way of setting up a strange scene that is somewhat claustrophobic. I am inspired by the fantasy of this photograph. Several of the images in my series have to do with childhood; therefore, I set up a lot of imagined and improbable scenes. For example, one of my photographs portrays me being flown by black balloons to a cemetery. This is an illustration of an idea I had when I was a child that once we died, we were carried to our final resting place by black balloons.

Process

Every artist has a different way of working. My creative process begins with a memory. I investigate the feelings I have about that memory and what emotion I experienced when the event occurred. Then, in a notebook, I sketch out a rough layout for what I want my photograph. After that I collect any items or props I will need and I think of accompanying text. The text is typically the most difficult part. It needs to be vague enough so the audience can bring their own experiences to the table and relate,
making up their own story, but specific enough that it is still my story. After I have
digitally captured the photograph, I spend time deciding what size each print should be.
Some photos scream to be large or small, while others are a conscious choice. For
example, my photograph titled *i don't understand the news. come home.* depicts one of
the biggest secrets I have, yet I decided to print it two inches wide. I like the
juxtaposition of something huge represented by something tiny. Once I have chosen a
size, I digitally print my image, write my text on the paper directly under the print, and
frame it.

I have always been interested in combining text and photography. The kind of
text I use is very important. I am vague enough for you to come up with your own
meaning, or one that you deem suitable for the narrative, but I have been distinct enough
to create a path I want you to follow. The text is written just under the photograph, and
then framed. This keeps the text interacting, connecting, and talking with the
photograph. It is also important to note that the text has been written with pencil. This
addresses the fact that the memories and thoughts we have about our childhood will
distort and change over the years. In the future, I won’t feel the same about these
photographs and I’ll want to change the text: erase that bit of memory, and replace it
with a new one. In ten years I plan on pulling each of these photographs out of storage
and looking back on them with new eyes. If my feelings have changed, so will the text.

**Exhibition**

When it came to titling my exhibition, I was inspired by comments my classmates
made during the semester. For our weekly critiques each student shows his or her work
on the overhead if it has yet to be printed or they hang it on the wall. Then, he or she explains what they have been working on that week and the class comments and asks questions. Throughout the semester of critiques with my class, a recurring theme began to appear. In the sixth or seventh week of critiques, my classmates and my professor pointed out the fact that I never seemed to share all of the details of my photographs. I then began to examine that comment further. I came to realize that I do not like to show an unfinished product: I am afraid to get judged and critiqued on a photograph that has not yet come to its conclusion. Therefore, when I hang my work unframed and not with all the other photographs that should be accompanying it, I feel like it is incomplete and I am not comfortable having incomplete work critiqued. The fact that my work is very personal also has to do with me not sharing more information. It is almost as if the photographs speak for themselves and I do not feel like adding any more personal detail. This lack of sharing information was at the forefront of my mind when I was trying to decide on a title for my exhibition. After much thought, I came up with 95% of the Story. This alludes to my hesitation to share more about my photographs and the details of their real life inspirations. Within each of the stories behind my photographs, I show the audience ninety-five percent of the story and leave the last five percent for them to make up on their own. I like giving my audience this responsibility, creativity, and freedom to make up their own mind about my photographs.

Because my photographs are self-portraits about events from my past and very much influenced by family, I have chosen to display them salon style, a way of hanging that is typically seen in homes. Within the gallery I wanted to take my audience out of typical gallery surroundings into a place a bit more homey and different. A typical
galley hanging consists of photos evenly spaced across a wall in a straight line. The salon style has varying frame sizes and the photos are arranged in a different grouping on the wall. My frame sizes range from one and a half inches wide to thirty-six inches wide. Each frame is secondhand, unique, and flawed. I painted them black to force them to look the same, hiding their flaws. The act of painting them to match mirrors the way I was taught to act in public: hide your flaws, conform, and be common.

Audience interaction has always been very important to me as an artist. Because photographs tend to be simple, 2D objects that people quickly glance past, it is of upmost importance to get my audience to stop and take time in front of my exhibition. To add to the homey atmosphere, I placed a side table, lamp, and chairs in front of my piece. Each of these objects is secondhand as well, and all are painted black except the lamp. The lamp was purposefully left untouched and unique to symbolize finding one’s identity within a world of copycats. Along with creating the look of a living space, these objects also gave my audience the option to sit down and take time to look at my work. I also supplied a small stepladder and several magnifying glasses to further audience interaction. This interaction is not something typically experienced in museums and I wanted to give my audience the opportunity to really study the work and have fun doing it.

An important part of an art exhibition is advertising. If no one knows about your show or comes to see it, you have not had an impact on anyone but yourself. Once all my photographs were finalized and my exhibition dates had been chosen, it was time to design a postcard that I could send to friends and family or hand to strangers. I designed it myself in Photoshop, and then went to www.vistaprint.com to have them printed.
Vistaprint is a digital printing company that takes your uploaded images and prints them on mugs, shirts, postcards, business cards, etc. Next, I was in charge of making the gallery placard to advertise outside of the gallery. I collected photographs and information from each of the six other people exhibiting work in the gallery and designed the poster to be simple, yet eye-catching.

**Significance**

First and foremost, my work is significant to me. Its significance exists because I exist. I take photographs of myself as a way to work through memories of childhood and issues in my past; therefore, it has great meaning to me. In a more broad view of my work, the significance lies in the ability for my audience to relate to my photographs. My series touches on the human condition and discusses ideas and events that are present in most people's lives: events like heartbreak, loss, depression, hope, birthdays, divorce, and pain. Broad topics are important when an artist wants to reach a large, varied audience. With the invention of blogs, twitter, Facebook, and the Internet, my generation is one that is fixated on sharing information about themselves in any way possible. There is an obsession with putting our personal lives out into the universe for everyone to see. I am no different. 95% of the Story is my voice in a world full of so many.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe a whole world lies behind a photograph. As a photographer, I am very selfish. My work is for me. I create and photograph the things that I know. It is a sort of therapy for me to work through events in my past. In this series and exhibition, my goal is to let my audience find their own world within mine. I
hope that through viewing bits and pieces of my life, my audience will walk away having a conversation about the issues I bring up in my photographs: issues of divorce, body image, loss, and rejection. Yes, the series represents my attempt to find my own identity, but during those times where some kind of truth is being revealed about me, my viewers can grasp onto something hidden in their subconscious. Something that could not be expressed in words, but only felt.
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Reception
Friday, December 16, 4-6 pm

Gallery hours
Tuesday-Thursday 11-4 pm
Friday 10 am-6 pm

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step out into the water. stop staring at the wave.
you never came back
like nails to my feet
I'm always afraid you'll forget me.
they didn't even spell my name right
it's not home anymore.
school taught me a valuable lesson. i'm still paying for it.