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Residual Affect

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

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Abstract

Residual Affect

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Using a personal experience of surviving a sexual assault as a starting point, Residual Affect is a multimedia series incorporating still photographs and video to visually portray the aftermath of psychological trauma on a daily basis; a trauma that has long-lasting psychological ramifications; turmoil that doesn’t end with the completion of the traumatic event itself. Hinting at the original traumatic event, the imagery depicts life from the moment after tumult, exploring themes of perception, disorientation and restriction to create a larger dialog about the enduring psychological effects of a perceived life-threatening event; effects that bleed through into everyday life.
About the Work

*Residual Affect* began almost six years ago as a response to an experience I endured while living abroad. On April 22nd, 2010 a young man of seventeen attempted to rape me in the woods along the outskirts of Jerusalem in Israel. Over the first three years following the assault, I suffered from numerous symptoms that affected me both psychologically as well as physiologically. My startle response was heightened and extremely sensitive, illusions of danger occupied the corners of my eyes vanishing the moment I looked, anger and aggression would erupt in the face of conflict, my limbs experienced random muscle spasms, and an abnormal level of heat constantly emanated from my body. The list goes on, but over the last three years, the symptoms have lessened, decreasing both in frequency and intensity, yet still continue to intrude upon my daily life. Upon entering graduate school, I realized that the time had come for me to address in my work how my life continues to be affected by the lasting manifestations of this event.

Informed by my own personal experience of surviving a sexual assault, *Residual Affect* is a multimedia series incorporating still photographic images and video to communicate ideas about the aftermath of trauma; a trauma that has long-lasting psychological ramifications; turmoil that doesn’t end with the completion of the traumatic event itself. The images and video within this series explore themes of perception, disorientation and restriction to create a larger dialog about the enduring psychological effects of a perceived life-threatening event; effects that bleed through into everyday life.

While the actual traumatic event is the catalyst for the shocked and stressed mental state of anyone who suffers a psychological trauma, it is the effects, how they manifest psychologically and behaviorally, and the continued impact on the lives of those who suffer that this work addresses. With that being said, over the course of a lifetime, most people will experience some sort of traumatic event, whether it be the death of a loved one, a serious accident/injury, a natural disaster, etc. Regardless of the actual event, everyone will endure moments in their lives that dramatically alter their sense of reality, their sense of security. Reality will be perceived through the lens of that experience, and that experience will become the new baseline against which each following experience will be measured. *Residual Affect* explores the physical and psychological landscapes of this altered reality.
According to the Sidran Traumatic Stress Institute psychological trauma is defined as the unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions that overwhelm an individual’s ability to integrate his/her emotional experience, or in which the individual perceives a threat to life, sanity, or physical well-being. Therefore, a traumatic event or scenario creates psychological trauma when the individual’s ability to cope is compromised and leaves that person with intense fear of death, persecution, bodily harm, or mental instability.

The intersection of photography and the modern category of trauma theory dates back to the early 1880s at the Salpetriere hospital in Paris, where Jean-Martin Charcot was creating a series of medical photographs in an attempt to capture visual evidence of a malady that was then labeled as Hysteria. Charcot employed flash to ‘arrest’ his subjects, which in turn induced a cataleptic state that endured until the light was extinguished. The act of being photographed along with the state the flash induced, the photographs “occur as sudden blasts of the past into the present.” It is through Charcot’s work that photography itself can be identified as being traumatic. Baer writes: “photographs compel viewers to think of lived experience, time, and history from a standpoint that is truly a standpoint: a place to think about occurrences that may fail, violently, to be fully experienced, and so integrated into larger patterns.” This splintered lack of integration ties photography and trauma together to create a vocabulary through which to communicate.

The photographs within Residual Affect are a series of psychological spaces that mirror the hyper focused states experienced by those who have endured psychological trauma. Due to the nature of photography in that the image is framed and then exposed, subject matter is chosen specifically to motivate the viewer to question what it is they are actually looking at. Spaces and objects are quarantined, taken out of context so that the viewer may experience what life is like on a daily basis for someone who suffers from an extremely skewed perception of reality. Light streams in from an unknown source, tangled tree branches conceal what is beyond them, a single thread lays on the ground next to a door that rests ajar. The answers potentially lay outside of the frame, out of view, inaccessible to the audience, creating unease and uncertainty.

In many of the landscape photographs the viewer is confronted by some sort of barrier or obstacle in the foreground of the image preventing them from fully accessing the space beyond. These
obstructions are employed to indicate there is always some sort of psychological issue or symptom present that needs to be worked through and it isn’t completely clear as to what lies on the other side. Who or what might be waiting in amongst the tangled mass of branches, what emotion is going to be triggered next by anything unexpected that elicits a startled response? The barriers continue throughout the entire series to show that issues persist over a sustained period of time and intrude upon daily life.

Vantage point and focus are used in many of the interior photographs as well as some of the landscape images to create a sense of disorientation and confusion. In both of the more abstract geometric images, one can’t be sure which way is up and which is down, the sense of being grounded or having some sense of where one’s feet reside is unknown. The image of the stairs disorients the viewer and takes them into a kind of textile landscape, the pattern of the carpet itself is a bit of an eye sore and practically obscures the structure of the stairs, leaving the viewer wondering what they are looking at. At first glance, the image of tangled, inter-woven grass causes confusion since the focus from the front to the back of the image doesn’t exist within one vertical plane, but rather begins in the foreground of the image and recedes into the background, following a more diagonal trajectory. Images are shot from varying perspectives in order to portray an altered and skewed view of the world. Isolated, cordoned-off spaces examine the desperate need to exert control over any given situation from the domestic interior to the public domain. Places that should feel familiar and comforting now appear foreign and potentially dangerous.

More close-up imagery, both of domestic interiority as well as exterior landscapes, is used to illustrate a sense of urgency, claustrophobia, and anxiety. The viewer is presented with images that seem as though they are a part of a larger space, yet only a portion is made visible, such as the image of the back of a woman’s blue coat where her hand is present within the frame, but at the same time a part of it is cut out. Pressed up close into the personal space of this unknown woman, the only things truly in focus are along the left and right edges of the image, on the left the stitching along the hem of her coat sleeve and the mostly obscured button on her pocket; on the right the vertical stitching of the coat. These were intentional decisions made to create a space of disquietude and restriction.
The still photographs create one way of experiencing a world of destabilized meaningfulness and shifted perception. The viewer is lead on journey through the domestic interior to the exterior world, then back to the interior, paralleling the experience of the affected internal psyche and the exterior physicality of the affected body.

The video, however, creates another entry point into a similar experience of the same world. Domestic scenes are paired with mismatched audio to discuss fragmentation of the self, a splitting of mind from body, and the intrusion of the past on the present. The video starts with a scene of a bathroom mirror in which the reflection of a shower curtain is visible. Over the course of the scene, the mirror begins to fog with steam and there are subtle yet noticeable movements of someone behind the curtain, but it’s not the shower that is heard, rather it is the sounds of wind, birds squawking, and wind chimes. The mirror continues to fog until only abstract shapes and colors can be seen in the mirror. Tension mounts as the scene fades into abstraction and is then broken by short jarring scenes of handheld video paired with audio of creaking stairs, dogs fighting, food crunching. Every so often the imagery cuts to scenes of a woman scraping her nails, indicating a recurrent fragmentary intrusion of an unpleasant memory. The video creates tension and unease as the viewer tries to make sense out of both the imagery and the audio, similar to someone who is trying to make sense out of and reorient themselves within a shattered world; trying to pay attention to what is going on around as well as inside of them.

While the still photographs allow the viewer to linger on a moment and contemplate the shift in perception over a period of time, the video shows a much more rapid shift, one that is experienced on a daily level. Through the use of disjointed audio paired with tightly framed, often shaky visuals, a skewed perception of reality is experienced both as a long lasting shift as well as a daily presence.

Within the contemporary art world, Leonie Hampton and Joshua Lutz both work within the realm of the home and family, tackling issues around trauma and mental illness. Hampton’s series of color photographs, *In The Shadow of Things*, illustrate her mother’s struggle with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. She documents the process of unpacking boxes that her mother, for a decade, had been unable to touch since moving into a new home after the collapse of her
marriage. Hampton also employs vernacular family imagery and transcripts of interviews with her mother to fully explain the extent of the disorder.

Similarly, in his body of color photographic work, *Hesitating Beauty*, Lutz creates a narrative about his own childhood growing up with a mother who suffered from depression and schizophrenia. Lutz constructs his story through the use of family snapshots, created interviews, and re-visited letters; he combines these different elements with his own imagery. He successfully conveys to the viewer not what mental illness looks like, but what it feels like to grapple with a family member who is slowly vanishing into her own world. He plays with our conceptions of reality, combining fact and fiction to describe how his own childhood was built on those same elements.

Both Hampton and Lutz have influenced my work and the way in which I go about producing it. Through the utilization of their own photographs as well as family vernacular images they create a space where trauma can be considered and empathically felt. I discovered that my own images with the strongest possibility to convey the distress, confusion, and tension were those that were not performative, but rather depicted everyday life, experiences that are relatable. A key component that makes Lutz's work so successful is his use of image titles. Each title creates the opportunity for the viewer to reconsider the meaning behind the photograph it is paired with. Hampton and Lutz also rely heavily on sequencing to fully express their ideas. Both sequencing as well as the titling of images are now an integral part of *Residual Affect*. In addition to careful selection and ordering of images, I have also chosen to title my images in a manner that allows the viewer to shift their interpretation of the image they are looking at.

As an exhibition, the prints exist on the wall in a more salon type configuration. They are not hung in a horizontal line, but rather at varying heights and distances from one print to the next. The purpose for installing the work this way is to bring the themes and ideas that are within the work, those of a skewed perception, disorientation, and the unfamiliar within the familiar, and extend them to the wall. Since the images aren’t in one long horizontal line, the wall acts as a frame for all the photographs to reside within. Each single image relies on the images it is surrounded by, thus contributing to the feeling of confusion as well as a non-linear progression, which underscores the reiteration of affects experienced as a result of the original event. There isn’t a designated start or end point, the viewer is meant to see all the photographs at the same time.
Images overlap one another within the visual field. The photographs become more of a puzzle and it is up to the viewer to decipher the message.

The video on the other hand is a large projection directly on the gallery wall. It encompasses that section of the gallery and provides the viewer with a viewing space that is open and potentially lends itself to distraction depending on whether or not the gallery is full of people who could be walking back and forth in front of it. Therefore, while the viewer is trying to pay attention to both the visuals as well as the audio, there is ambient noise of other people within the gallery as well as those people interrupting the visual field within which the video is being watched.

In book form, some photographs are partially or completely obscured by others, further emphasizing the constant battle and shift of world perspective as well as inviting the viewer to become a part of the experience. Through lifting up and peeling back images to reveal what is hidden underneath, the viewer engages with the dialog and has a chance to gain a sense, albeit a tactile one, of what the world looks like from the standpoint of someone who lives with trauma. The book exists as a form all of its own as well as a component of the exhibition, thus allowing the viewer to have similar experiences of an altered perception through different media. The nature of a book follows a linear progression, a page spread is viewed one at a time and the turning of the page is a finite break between what was just viewed and what is viewed next. By employing more interactive components within the book, the viewer is taken out of that strictly linear narrative. Images overlay one another allowing consideration of multiple images within the same space, similar to how the images function on the wall. Looking specifically at the two images of the metal shard on the red tiled floor, in the book the images are placed next to one another, intended to make the viewer question the reality of the situation as well as to mimic the effects of doing a double-take of a passing view. In the exhibition, the two prints are hung on opposing walls, one is smaller than the other to emphasize the shift of looking once, then looking a second time and realizing that you didn’t actually see what you thought you did. Instead of translating the book to the wall, different methods of display are employed to achieve a similar effect.

As human beings, we enter the world as already being; we have no recollection of entering and no idea of what death awaits us, we only know that death is inevitable. We have an innate knowledge of the world within us by the time we have any conscious knowledge of actually
existing in the world. We have an understanding that there is an order to the world which we inhabit and how we function within it. When someone experiences an event in which the fragility of their mortality is brought to attention, the entire world as that person knows it is then called into question. Everything that was once known to be true of the world disintegrates. The way in which that world was perceived ceases to exist and that person has to reorient themselves to find meaning within a world that while once familiar, is no longer. From quietly violent images such as the calm water that is pierced by five metal poles to the lonely, haunted parking lot where hope seems in sight, yet just out of reach, traumatic events continue to leave their marks upon the present.

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