7,223 Between

By
Sarah Frances Weiss

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

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Science

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester NY
May 2016
Signature Page

Christine Shank  Date
MFA Director
School of Photographic Arts and Science

Willie Osterman  Date
Chair of the Fine Art BFA Program
School of Photographic Arts and Science
Abstract

7,223 Between

B.F.A. Photography, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI, 2012
M.F.A. Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY 2016

This body of photographic artwork, 7,223 Between, explores the physical and emotional distance between my immediate family. This resulting dispersion created a shift in both my understanding, and experience, of family and home. The place that my family used to congregate around is now absent. These images traverse the surface of my relationships with family and speaks to a universal experience of longing for family and home. Transient interior spaces, landscapes and, disconnected portraits of my parents come together in this non-linear narrative to suggest at the journey to rediscover a sense of Home, while winding through nostalgic failures, desire for comfort and, the mental need to accept and escape.
MFA Thesis Exhibition
7,223 Between
William Harris Gallery
Images from the Publication 7,223 Between
Extended Artist Statement

The beckoning of home creates a force that people gravitate towards because it feels familiar. I grew up with an understanding of home characterized by personal feelings of security, closeness, and emotional attachment. 7,223 Between explores these shifts in my experience of what family is and captures the desire to find the security that Home once provided. The photographs encompass longing, nostalgic disappointments and, transition through compositional fluidity, and connect to the inner mental narrative of yearning for familiarity.

I grew up in the Midwest in a middle class area known for its strong family ties. Like many others my parents got divorced when I was young separating our household in two. The Midwest created a sense of the ideal Home that was impossible to replicate, leaving me feeling like an outsider. I was not alone in this experience; divorce is now common place and Home which was a families central meeting point is now divided leaving the experience of Home lacking a totality that was once there. As a society families are changing and, how we understand the family unit is not the same as it once was. The idea of Home is what sustained my own idealized notions of family, however that changed as I have transitioned into adulthood. Since leaving my childhood home, my family has moved many times, I have watched them slowly and individually drift to different corners of the country. Over the course of the last nine years, I have traveled to visit my mother in Washington, my father in Illinois, my sister in Florida, and my brother in California. With each visit, we attempt to pack a year’s worth of time together into a few short days. The photographs in the series 7,223 Between depict both the distance and intimacy I experience within my family and express a deep longing for a type of
connection we no longer share.

I am renegotiating my sense of *Home* and family because I have lost my understanding of its meaning. In many different languages the word home is interchangeable with the word family creating an association with family and identity. English differentiates the two words; they have separate meanings even though they are synonymous with each other.

We live in a time when families are no longer living in one location for generation after generation. In this series as I question the notion of *Home* I am also questioning familial ties and what feeling adrift does to this experience. The photographs in this series traverse the space of being connected and apart, creating a questioning of the desire to be with family and also, feeling detached when together. In order to suggest an experience of anticipation without resolution, these photographs highlight the physical and emotional distance I feel from my Family.

There is dissonance in how I understand the idea of *Home*. It has become a collection of isolated glimpses of the feelings I associate with family and home making me feel lost. An example of this can be seen in the photograph of the dinner table. This image has a makeshift quality that makes it feel unstable, mirroring the new and surreal qualities of my dispersed familial relationships. The towel being used as tablecloth is pulled only three quarters of the way across the table, making it feel like it will slip, pulling the contents with it as it falls, even though the objects and towel are secure. The duality of small and large objects disorients the contents of the table. The juxtaposition of the small forks and the knife make the latter seem like it is much too large. The wine
glasses alongside the plastic water bottle and the flannel napkins give the scene an oddity that makes it feel like it could not coexist together. In spite of this, they become more representing of a comforting home than many of the other photographs of domestic interiors in this series.

In looking at images of family we can begin to think about the idea of the familial look a term coined by Marianne Hirsch in Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post-memory. Hirsch defined the concept as a mutual recognition from the individuals involved in the exchange. Within Family Frames Hirsch wrote about Roland Barthes’ book Camera Lucida. Barthes was writing about the emotional experience of looking at the photograph titled, Winter Garden, which depicts his late Mother when she was a child. Barthes’ experience becomes powerful because of the familial exchange of looks from mother (within the photograph) to son (looking at the photograph.)

My own experience of the familial look becomes evident within the portraits of my own parents. Many of the portraits in this series are photographed from a noticeable distance away to suggest an emotional detachment. By photographing from behind or to the side, my subjects are dis-engaged from the camera’s point of view, further emphasizing feelings of isolation and distance. This effect creates a sideways look, or a look of glancing over the shoulder which instills an emotional unravelling within the portraits, allowing them to become an entry point for the viewer into the main ideas in this series. Hirsch wrote that “Photographs are fragments of stories, never stories in themselves.” She continued to say that “To me, then, this [family] picture is the product of a process of familiarity which it illustrates- the exchange of looks that structure a
complicated form of self-portraiture which reveals the self as necessarily relational and familial, as well as fragmented and dispersed.1 The meaning is that one could say that the photographs I am taking of my parents are also self-portraits. My relationship with the portraits of my parents is of a different kind than in the *Winter Garden* photograph Roland Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida*. Unlike Barthes I am not viewing a photograph of a deceased parent nor am I looking at a photograph taken from long ago. When I look at my photographs that I’ve taken of my parents I feel a loss of connection, because of a disappearance of the familiar. Photography can only describe a fragment of a families’ relationship, however, it becomes more indicative of the one who is taking the pictures than those in them. The photographs expose the failure to find the same feeling of home in these new places. The barriers in the images also echo my own hesitation in the unfamiliar places and the tentative connections between family members.

My mother has moved several times. After the most recent move last summer, she brought out the same dishes she used when I was a child as a way to find comfort in her new surroundings. For me the cabinet with those exact dishes is a memory trigger, being that it is one of the few elements in her home that connects directly back to my childhood. The photograph of my Mom’s reflection captures my Mother through the glass of china cabinet. The dishes, act as a reference to the domestic, and provide a connection to the comfortable feelings I have towards her. In focusing on her reflection, not herself, I create a physical barrier between us. The reflection condenses the physical

---

space of the photograph creating a claustrophobic experience within the frame. The composition creates a dichotomy between the physical space within the image and the emotional distance that I feel.

The photographs echo the reexamination of home through the lens of feeling in-between. The essence of between is of interest to me because I am in a transitional moment in my life. I am between knowing *Home* as I did when I was a child, but still before understanding *Home* as an adult. Photographs are moments when the past is brought together with the present allowing the viewer to experience the fragmented narrative. In 2002 Tim Dant & Graeme Gilloch describe the comparative experience of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes and their views on photography and personal history. “What photographs do is to bring the past into the present, confronting us with the passage of time and the stillness of that which has gone.”² Photographs can then be understood as stopping time, forcing the viewer to confront it by viewing the past, even without realizing it.

The photographs of the isolated interiors act as a between space within the sequence. The guest beds act as a stand in for that warm place but they are empty, the rooms are missing the lived-in comfort one feels at home in, making the images feel hollow. They are not bedrooms but rooms of transition, a place to stay but not a place to live. The *Guest Beds* are exploring that experience of being in between and represent a continual movement that takes place during this impermanent time in one’s life. Through the use of soft natural light, the objects have a radiance that produce a quietness within

---
the images. This exposes the outsider perspective of not feeling at *Home* in the houses my family now live.

The forest photographs are utilized to create suspension within the sequence. The differential quality of the forest images, become counter points to the expressive domestic interiors and portraits. These images that seemingly do not fit are an exploration of the locations surrounding the portraits and are moments of escape from the story itself. In *7,223 Between* I am using the landscape to represent the inner world of my mind.

Within my thesis publication titled *7,223 Between* the sequence I am describing expresses the constant searching nature of longing for *Home*. The portraits create a slow understanding of my own withdrawal from the relationships I have with my parents. The images of the domestic interiors create clues that tie these seemingly disconnected people together. The photographs of ethereal light create a world that interrupt the reality, as if to allow a moment of exhalation to escape and then continuing on to the emotion of the story being told. Together these images create a fragmentary expression of thought and the inner experience of emotion. The photographs in *7,223 Between* traverse the experience of my relationship with my parents, represent a questioning and understanding of how to negotiate and understand the idea of *Home* and the longing and inner escape associated with this experience.
Bibliography
