Family reunion

Carly Miller

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Family Reunion
by
Carly Miller

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For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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My deepest appreciation to my mother, Sharon Rose, to whom I dedicate this thesis.
Family Reunion

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, Family Reunion examines notions of family heritage, collection, and intimacy through the use of photographic portraiture. I observe the ways in which large format photography contributes to a larger photographic endeavor involving time and travel to investigate family relationships and genealogy. The thesis also addresses how American culture acquires, records, stores, preserves, displays, and passes on family photographs. Familial objects either preserve or lose meaning as they are passed down through generations. Family Reunion emphasizes the collection of images we preserve to record and represent our familial history, while addressing both personal and cultural significance between the need for family intimacy, as well as distance from it.
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I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis concerns itself with the utilization of portraiture as a means of recording my ancestry. The resulting works visually investigate family relationships and genealogy in order to contribute to the larger historical record of my family’s identity. The collection of these efforts, titled *Family Reunion*, in a general sense relates to a social family gathering. This title is also intended to situate the thesis within the context of the image, through the subtly of contemporary and formal aesthetics and the conscious arrangement of photographs within the gallery space. The preconceived notion of “reunion” integrated my personal reunion with relatives, the conceptual reunion of photographs, and a physical family reunion.

*Family Reunion* is comprised of three bodies of work: *Thombs Family Portraits*, *Still Lifes*, and *Untitled Snapshots #1-5*. The *Thombs Family Portraits* reflect on notions of family heritage and intimacy using formal portraiture. Recorded with a 4x5 inch view camera, these photographs contribute to a larger photographic endeavor involving time and travel to depict every relative from my mother’s extended family. The large format approach points to the camera’s ability to mediate emotional involvement between subject, artist, and viewer. This anthology of portraits serves as a visual autobiography, while addressing both personal and cultural significance between the need for family intimacy, as well as distance from it. The series of *Still Lifes* and *Untitled Snapshots #1-5* both observe and consider family objects. They question how and why family photographs are preserved and function within domestic spaces to represent our familial history. As these objects are passed down through multiple generations, they begin to retain different meanings for different family members. By working with both formal photographs and family snapshots, I consider how these two
photographic forms connect through their ability to perpetuate self-knowledge and self-representation.

The portraits within *Family Reunion* would have maintained different aesthetic and contextual values had it not been for the following contemporary influences: Jessica Todd Harper’s focus on intimacy in *Interior Exposure*, historical and ancestral accounts illustrated in Stuart O’Sullivan’s *A Shared History*, the aesthetic balance of group portraiture in Thomas Struth’s *Family Life*, Tina Barney’s use of light and gesture in *Friends and Relations*, Aline Smithson’s contribution of writing and photography in *Photographing Family*, and Peter Galassi’s and the Museum of Modern Art’s entire exhibition, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*. These photographic works have profoundly impacted the framework and visual tone for the thesis. In addition, Geoffrey Batchen’s art historical texts on memory and identity, Marianne Hirsch’s critical discourse on familial representation and self-knowledge, and Mark Wigley’s writings rooted in contemporary and modernist practices have provided an immeasurable amount of inspiration. My focus on these texts throughout *Family Reunion*’s development administered a theoretical stance with regards to my photographic process, to archiving imagery, and to challenge my devotion to constructing that which is unfamiliar.
II. FORMAL PORTRAITS

My concentration on formal portraiture initiated when I realized that relationships could be built and strengthened through my photographic process. Spending the time to photograph portraits has allowed me to build, and eventually record the emerging relationships I had with my subjects. Although the framework for my thesis lies in the photographic medium, it more specifically pinpoints how portraiture is used to record and document our lives in a contemporary context.

This notion of portraiture as a legal document dates back to 1434 when Jan van Eyck painted *The Arnolfini Double Portrait*, one of the fifteenth century’s major masterpieces. This particular painting epitomizes the foundation of my thesis statement, which highlights the importance of images as visual documents. *The Arnolfini Double Portrait* served legally as a pictorial marriage certificate. Van Eyck painted the portrait of a wealthy couple in the process of exchanging marriage vows within a bridal chamber.

We (as the contemporary viewers) are allowed to witness the event immediately after the wedding takes place. We know that their marriage has taken place because the couple’s shoes have been removed—in symbolic gesture of the fact that they are standing on hallowed ground. Mrs. Arnolfini died, presumably during childbirth, one year before the painting was completed in 1434. The painting with double portrait then serves as visual record of their matrimony. The portrait of Mrs. Arnolfini was painted posthumously by the artist from memory in her physical absence.\(^1\) *The Arnolfini Double Portrait* served as the first visual proof that relationships could be documented. Its purpose as a record acknowledges the legitimacy of the relationship.

\(^1\) Peter Gabak, interview by author, Rochester Institute of Technology, January 2009.
Jan van Eyck’s role, in addition to being an artist, becomes that of a witness. The painting reveals both the artist’s reflection in the background mirror along with his signature above it, which reads, “Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434,” (Jan van Eyck was here in the year 1434). This reflection and inscription validates that the painting “purports to show exactly what he saw and has the function of a pictorial marriage certificate.” The double portrait is about the fact that this relationship existed. Not just the relationship between the married couple, but also the relationship between the couple and the artist. Jan van Eyck positions himself within the painting, thus bridging the gap between the subject, artist, and viewer. It is as if without the artist himself, this relationship did not exist.

Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Double Portrait* ultimately influenced the framework for *Family Reunion*, as I further explore the history of photographs as visual documents. My decision to focus specifically on portraiture developed during my investigation into the history of photographic portraiture and its function as proof of relationships. *The Arnolfini Double Portrait* specifically links itself to photography and has a feeling of a modern vision through its formal qualities, including its use of light, color, and perspective.

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Fig. 2.1 Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434, oil on panel 33x22½ in.
For over one hundred and fifty years now, families have depended on the camera to capture their portrait as a means of providing visual records of their familial history. As the invention of photography in 1839 made portraiture more easily accessible to the upper middle-class family, more people were able to afford the sitting cost for a photographic portrait compared to the costly commission of a painted one.

During the Victorian era, when mortality rates were extremely high, middle-class families took advantage of this quicker and more affordable photographic process in order to record portraits of family members postmortem. These postmortem photographs serve to idealize the social institution of the family unit. Some mid-nineteenth century daguerreotypes, like *Dead Child in Father’s Arms, c. 1855*, reveal deceased infants being photographed with their family before burial. This allowed common families to memorialize loved ones even if they were unable to have a photograph made while that member was still alive. These daguerreotypes were life-affirming and documented both the family’s centrality in addition to the life of the deceased.

Another means of photographically documenting the family unit can be seen through family images like *Photograph of unidentified group of mourners, c.1920-1940s*. Group portraits of the entire family surrounding one deceased member were created for the family’s visual records. This pictorial evidence of the deceased with their living ancestors reveals a complete family dynamic. Jay Ruby, author of *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*, touches on this idea. He writes:

“Some images of the family were clearly motivated by a desire to record the deceased with their kin—a last family image…When the absence of a member of the family makes the photograph incomplete, a solution must be found…“creating” a family unit where one does not exist…”

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4 Ibid.
Fig. 2.2 Unknown Photographer, *Dead Child in Father’s Arms*, c. 1855, daguerreotype, quarter plate

Fig. 2.3 Caufield and Shook, *Photograph of unidentified group of mourners*, c.1920-1940s, gelatin silver print
The carte de visite industry in the late 1850s gave photography its role of using photographs as identification in addition to recording social types for posterity.\(^5\) The introduction of these small \(2\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}\) inch card photographs “was nearly coincident with the beginning of the Civil War” in the early 1860s, as “every boy called into the army wanted mementoes to leave the folks at home…”\(^6\) In addition to having reminders of one other, families could verify the existence of deceased soldiers or members if one needed to be identified. Over time, the necessity and admiration of these card photographs rapidly increased, as they “recorded by far the most interesting history of their time.”\(^7\) These circumstances gave rise to the popularization of albums, as one needed to find a place to store and display their collection of formal portraits.

Conventional formal photographic portraits can be grounded through nineteenth century portrait studios, where taking one’s portrait was an event. Traveling to a studio to have one’s professional photograph taken formalized the event itself and added social status to one’s history. Whether formally attired or dressed in costume, subjects were generally posed against a plain or ornately painted fixed background. Often, these portraits depicted a person looking directly at the camera in order to engage the subject with its viewers. Commissioned by upper-middle class society, the formal portrait symbolized a document, both of physical existence and social standing.

Although my collection of portraits depicts a middle-class family, they speak to a contemporary idea of the fragmented family and work to reunite them. *Family Reunion* epitomizes the idea of documenting one’s family existence through the use of photographic

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\(^7\) Taft, 150.
portraiture. The concept for this project developed shortly after I moved to Rochester, New York for graduate school. I received a phone call from my mother’s youngest sister, Anne Marie, welcoming me to visit their house in Glens Falls, New York for Thanksgiving. Initially, I felt hesitation at the thought of visiting my Aunt, considering that I had not seen her and her family in close to ten years. I envisioned short, awkward conversations with my cousins whom I considered strangers rather than family. However, what was envisioned as a potentially awkward visit became instead the catalyst for Family Reunion. Realizing that my Aunt Anne and other relatives were all within driving distance, I decided to take advantage of my geographical location by visiting, spending time with, and photographing every person in my mother’s family while completing my MFA.

This interest to document my relationship with my mother’s relatives, the Thombs family, initiated from my lack of emotional ties with her family as a child. Growing up, I only knew my mother’s relatives through photographs in albums. My mother was one of six siblings, and the only person in her family who permanently relocated to Florida after moving out of upstate New York. As she began to build her own family with my father, relationships that once existed with her parents and siblings became distant and fragmented. It seems this geographical gap between New York and Florida further reinforced my lack of emotional connection with everyone in the Thombs family. Thus, after moving to upstate New York, I was determined to build a relationship with a family I never knew growing up.

Through this concept, I could use photography to examine the emotional and physical detachment existing between artist and subject, myself and my relatives. When thinking about visiting family members whom I hadn’t seen in a decade (or in some cases have never even met before), I decided to exclusively use my 4x5 inch large format camera. The view
camera established my purpose for visiting relatives by professionalizing my process. Each visit became a significant moment and further heightened the importance of family. The camera’s technology also allowed for aesthetic distancing as it was positioned in between different family members and myself. This proximity between camera and subject revealed through my photographs speaks to the notion of intimacy within a contemporary context. As I traveled across the country on a number of solo road trips in order to photograph and connect with family members, the entire process became an event for myself.

Within the context of nineteenth century portrait studios, I became interested in this concept of making a formalized event out of taking one’s portrait. Traditionally, sitters would visit the photographer in the portrait studio. However, in *Family Reunion* the process of photographing my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents was more extensive. I figured it would be near impossible to have all of my relatives travel to Rochester just to have their picture taken in a studio. Thus, the role of a typical nineteenth century photographer would be reversed and instead, I the photographer, spent time traveling to each of my family members’ houses to photograph. Although bulky, the large format camera, felt only appropriate for my series of formal portraits. Requiring more patience and labor than a hand held camera, the 4x5 further supported the importance of time involved in my photographic process. As many steps were involved from start to finish, the making of one family portrait was a laborious process, and thus became that of an event.

While traveling throughout the Northeastern United States to spend time with family, my camera functioned again and again as mediator. It was continuously welcomed into all of the homes I visited. The mobility and vintage aesthetic of the 4x5 was attractive and demanded my family’s attention. The camera became a conversation piece. Each relative’s
interest in my project led to discussions about their own feelings toward photography. Vintage photographs, albums, and objects passed down from ancestors all surfaced within our conversations, which opened the door for my permission to photograph them within their domestic spaces. These invaluable conversations alleviated my initial stress that came with photographing family members for the first time, and allowed me to work with both ease and insight.

As I gained dexterity with the view camera, the notion of formality being made out of the act of taking one’s picture started to bleed into the aesthetic values of my photographs. Viewing all of the photographs together on the gallery walls, one will notice that formal characteristics remain consistent, including poses and gestures, facial expressions, characteristics of light, and the neutrality of color. When I first began shooting for Family Reunion, I didn’t initially notice these aesthetic qualities, but after I photographed several families, I started to observe these distinct visual elements within my work. Ultimately these formal characteristics influenced the way I shot the latter half of my portraits and I was able to create a visually cohesive body of work by allowing the portraits to influence each other.

The collection of Thombs Family Portraits maintains a modern aesthetic. Each portrait is clean, simplistic, and subtly reveals characteristics relevant to each individual. Whether depicted through a domestic setting or with the inclusion of objects, the photographs intentionally expose specific information about my family members. More often then not, the surrounding environment is shallow or out of focus, drawing attention to fine detail in the person’s face, figure, or gesture.
Fig. 2.4 *Family Reunion*, Installation shot, 2010

Fig. 2.5 *Family Reunion*, Installation shot (detail), 2010
Excluding specific background information allows the viewer to solely focus on each person and their space within the frame. In addition, these explicit elements allow a dialogue to occur between the images and the viewers who occupy the gallery space. One begins to think about the photographs in relation to their own domestic settings, and ultimately their own dynamics and relationships with family.

Each portrait was also carefully composed either indoors or out in order to obtain the appropriate amount of ambient light. Collectively, each photograph reveals a neutral balance of light and color. This idea of neutrality contributes to a larger aesthetic within contemporary photography. By maintaining a balanced aesthetic throughout the series of formal portraits, I consider each photograph to act as an objective record.

Conceptually, the portrait of my grandfather is the most honorary visual record within *Family Reunion*, as he symbolizes a crucial element within the Thombs family circle. At the beginning of my thesis endeavors, the first family member I photographed happened to be my grandfather. I later returned to re-photograph him, but specifically waited until the tail end of the project in order to photograph him last. Thus, he not only began but also completes the photographic process for my thesis by representing both the first and last portrait recorded. It’s significant for my grandfather to be the one representing this circle, as he carries the Thombs family name and is responsible for passing this surname down through multiple generations. Hence, I titled the collection of formal portraits *Thombs Family Portraits*, after my grandfather’s family name.
Fig. 2.6 *My Grandfather, Dick*, 2010, digital C-print, 24x30 in.
With regards to the collection of family documents, the inclusion of my self-portrait is also extremely significant. Referring back to Jan van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Double Portrait*, the self-portrait essentially validates the full record of Thombs family portraits. Van Eyck placed himself within the painting to confirm that relationships existed between subject, artist, and viewer. Likewise, depicting *Self-Portrait* within the collection verifies that all of these relationships existed. The photograph states that I, the artist, was also part of the Thombs family. Leaving my record out would falsely represent an incomplete family dynamic. Thus, I include myself within *Thombs Family Portraits* to complete and authenticate the pictorial record of my mother’s family unit.

Ultimately, the *Thombs Family Portraits* further contribute to the larger album of my family’s records. Accumulated over time, the collection of my mother’s family portraits serve as a narrative whole, ultimately allowing for the re-construction of my family’s story through groupings of images. Just as we attempt to understand our ancestors through photographs, my anthology serves to provide future generations with visual evidence of their family’s identity.
Fig. 2.7 *Self-Portrait*, 2010, digital C-print, 24x30 in.
III. FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

*Family Reunion* also visually investigates how family photographs traditionally function within domestic spaces. I am interested in the means by which we, as an American culture acquire, store, preserve, and display these objects. I examine how family photographs either preserve or lose meaning as they are handed down through generations. Two approaches to photographic representation are addressed through my *Still Lifes* and *Untitled Snapshots* #1-5 series. Within a contemporary context, the *Still Lifes* demonstrate how and why certain family objects exist within my family’s domestic spaces. The series of *Untitled Snapshots* illustrate how individual photographs retain different meanings for Thombs family members. By working with objects of familial history, both formal photographs and family snapshots, I consider how these two photographic forms connect through their ability to perpetuate self-knowledge and self-representation.

Photographs from the series of *Still Lifes* focus exclusively on traditional methods of photographic display. *Grandpa D’s Portrait as a Child*, 2010, for example, depicts a framed childhood image of my grandfather, which rests on a table in my grandparent’s home. The hand-colored photograph of my grandfather remains protected behind glass. Its value as a sentimental family photograph is clearly defined through the idea that other preserved replicas of the same photograph exists within the homes of other relatives. One copy of my grandfather’s framed portrait was also given to my mother, which currently sits on a shelf in her office.
Fig. 3.1 Grandpa D’s Portrait as a Child, 2010, digital C-print, 24x30 in.
Whether formally displayed in frames, glued in albums, or loosely preserved in boxes, I am interested in how my relatives store and display their familial objects. Since the introduction of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, family photographs have existed in a variety of representational methods. Different display methods implicate and reveal different meanings. For example, in Geoffrey Batchen’s *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, several different traditional models of photographic display are discussed:

“When fitted into a frame, photographs become three-dimensional; and that framing makes us aware that...photographs are objects, with physical presence...” [As a set,] “portraits were sometimes gathered and grouped in one frame, thus becoming in the resulting object, part of the same familial genealogy.” [With regards to the album.] “photographs taken on separate occasions are...sometimes brought together to form a single coherent object...with the capacity to tell a story, a power which few individual photographs possess.”

My series of *Still Lifes* expose each of these traditional approaches discussed by Batchen. The use of portraiture within them becomes a visual tool of genealogy, as I come to know ancestors through preserved photographs. In addition to displays of other family portraits, I present other significant objects which have facilitated familial knowledge within the Thombs family, such as *Genealogy Chart* and *Oak Tree*.

*Genealogy Chart* and *Oak Tree* are conceptual parallels to one another. These two images mutually work through both historical and contemporary contexts of familial growth. Thus, I intentionally placed the two images back to back on one of the gallery walls. As seen in Fig. 3.2 and 3.3, *Oak Tree* rests on the front of the title wall when viewers first enter the gallery space. *Genealogy Chart* resides directly behind *Oak Tree* on the opposite side of the wall.

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Fig. 3.2 *Family Reunion*, Installation shot, 2010

Fig. 3.3 *Family Reunion*, Installation shot, 2010
Fig. 3.4 Genealogy Chart, 2010, digital C-print, 24x30 in.

Fig. 3.5 Oak Tree, 2010, digital C-print, 24x30 in.
Genealogy Chart epitomizes a historical component of pedigree diagrams. These charts generally offer records of one’s particular ancestral past with historical data. The hand-written account of my grandfather’s family genealogy tree contributes to the broader concept of self-knowledge facilitated through a non-photographic object. Allowing viewers to enter a specific portion of the Thombs surname history, the pedigree chart depicts the subtle changes that the paternal name carried throughout several generations. This lineage not only connects the past with the present, but it also allows viewers to further enter into the notion of family documentation, through a literal, hand-written record of ancestry.

On the other hand, Oak Tree was my literal family tree. When it measured no more than 6 feet tall, the tree was planted in my front yard soon after we moved into our Florida home in 1986. For twenty plus years, the oak tree physically grew alongside the family, adding and extending its branches like that of genealogy tree when one’s family expands. These two objects became increasingly valuable to our family over time. Not only do they gain sentimental value the older and larger they get, but they also continue to represent concepts of growth and development.

The act of taking these family objects from their personal setting within the home and placing them into the art gallery introduces a question of public vs. private. I visually address this idea through the Still Lifes and Thombs Family Portraits series, which have an authentic dialogue with each other within the gallery space. While visiting family members, I observed the interesting ways in which they displayed family photographs. I specifically mimic the placement of photographs within my relatives homes to their placement on the gallery walls. For example, Uncle’s Bobby’s Wall, stands alone on a wall within my grandparent’s house. Fig. 3.6 depicts the intentional placement of the photograph on its own wall within the
gallery, imitating its positioning within the private home. This allows for a deeper dialogue to occur between my personal family members and the viewers who occupy the gallery space, and brings forth an awareness of public vs. private. A relationship between subject and viewer is formed, and ultimately connects the private home with the public setting.

Fig. 3.6 *Family Reunion*, Installation shot, 2010
The duality of public and private can also be revealed through Fig. 3.7 Untitled Snapshots #1-5. This sequence of five individual snapshots depicting each of the six siblings from my mother’s immediate family supports how the photographic medium has the ability to record and present one’s history. These snapshots once existed grouped together in one of my grandmother’s photo albums. When my grandmother decided to get rid of her family photographs, the images were taken out of the album and passed down to her children. She disbursed the appropriate images to the child dominant within each picture. Many family images from the same album were thus separated and now exist in five different places.

While I was traveling around to photograph, I started collecting old family images and I borrowed these particular snapshots from each of my aunts and uncles. Each photograph belongs to a different sibling from my mother’s immediate family. Ironically, the snapshots which once existed together and later separated, now exist in the same space once again as part of Family Reunion, only this time, they rest in a public one.

Referencing the tradition of displaying family photographs in albums, these vernacular images concern themselves with the act of collecting, organizing, and preserving photographs. This idea of “re-uniting” the disbursed snapshots again contributes to the pictorial family reunion along with the Thombs Family Portraits. In addition to photography creating family centrality, they also situate themselves within the thesis by illustrating a photographic family reunion, this time using a smaller scale and different aesthetic: the vernacular snapshot.

The turn of the twentieth century marked the rise of the snap-shot.9 Also referred as the vernacular in contemporary art, “the term itself derives from hunting and refers to a shot

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quickly fired with little or no aim, but it began to be applied to photographs…”

Unlike the process of the posed formal portrait, snapshots were seen as “casually made” pictures, “usually by untrained amateurs, and intended to function as documents of personal history…”

*Untitled Snapshots #1-5* certainly fit within the realms of the conventional snapshot aesthetic. The photographs were all taken between 1963 and 1964, noted by the typed dates on each image’s perimeter. The photographer was most likely one of two people: either my grandmother or grandfather, neither of which had any formal training in operating a camera. Had the photographer been someone else, perhaps any of their six children, their oldest child at the time would have been no more than ten years old. On the other hand, I believe that these five images “defy the commonly held belief that most snapshots are dependent on chance…” Instead, I find that these snapshots were anticipated; they were set up and intentionally taken to memorialize specific family events. Robert E. Jackson, author of the afterword from the exhibition *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson*, contributes to this idea. He writes:

“Snapshots by an amateur essentially represent that person’s private life: the people and family loved, the places visited, the good times enjoyed, the accomplishments reached…snapshooters try to capture and impart meaning to their lives by staging scenes that encapsulate the essence of a moment before it passes…In sum, a single snapshot signifies one moment in a narrative thread of a person’s life, and it is in a private or family album of those snapshots where that narration can often be best understood.”

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11 Ibid.
12 Sarah Greenough et al., 4.
13 Sarah Greenough et al., 271-72.
Like Jackson iterates, my grandmother’s original snapshots can be best understood when displayed collectively. Since the photographs were dispersed to the Thombs children and taken out of their original context of the album, their narrative automatically became altered.

My objective for the *Untitled Snapshots #1-5* was to put the Thombs family narrative back together again. Through the act of collecting snapshots from my aunts, uncles, and mother, I was able to organize and preserve a group of images belonging to the same original album that my grandmother once deconstructed. My reassembly of the snapshots allows the Thombs family to have a new, mediated, and cohesive piece of a pictorial story from their past. It also allows this family to be reminded of a specific time period when the family all resided together in Glens Falls, New York.

*Fig. 3.7* *Untitled Snapshots #1-5*, 2010, digital C-prints, each 8x8 in.
IV. FAMILY REUNION

The title *Family Reunion* functions in two different ways and can be discussed both literally and figuratively. Culturally speaking, a family reunion typically refers to a social gathering of one’s family members. “Because of increasing global mobility, family members often move farther and farther away from the communities they grew up in. The practice of holding family reunions helps assemble branches and generations of families together, normally helped along by organized activities and meals.”¹⁴ In my thesis, the physical process of planning, uniting and celebrating family through an organized social activity lies within the exhibition itself. As I gained a newfound intimacy with my relatives by spending time with and photographing them in their domestic spaces, I became further interested in extending the experience of family connection beyond myself.

I reassembled my mother’s family by holding a family reunion at my exhibition opening. Each relative I photographed was invited to attend a private opening at the SPAS gallery in Rochester, New York. Formal handmade invitations were sent out cordially inviting each family member to attend a weekend event. Each invitation provided general information about *Family Reunion*, including the time, date, and address of the gallery opening. In addition, I attached a map with directions from the gallery to a nearby hotel and restaurant. Largely influenced by contemporary graduation or wedding ceremonies, I decided to provide a reception for my family after the private opening. The reception, a family style dinner, would be held the day after the exhibition opening requiring family members to stay overnight and spend at least one day with each other. This two day event, in turn was intended to be a traditional celebration.

In addition to honoring a step forward in my academic career, the private opening reunited family and supported notions of tradition and celebration within social and cultural contexts of traditional family reunions. My arrangement of this social gathering seemed only appropriate, as a way to bridge the physical gap between a widespread family. This performative aspect of *Family Reunion* also contributes to the larger idea of subject and viewer participation within contemporary art practices.

Not only does a physically reunion occur, a pictorial reunion also takes place through the photographs within the gallery walls. Thus, *Family Reunion* also refers to the photographic collection of portraits joined together in one space. The main series of *Thombs Family Portraits* come together on the gallery walls in order to visually create a celebratory story of a uniting family. The *Untitled Snapshots #1-5* also hang collectively within the same space after a period of separation. I united the Thombs family through my camera. For it is through this mechanism that a photographic and social family reunion is possible.
V. CONCLUSION

Living during a time where divorce rates are extremely high, I have a stronger desire to connect with family members than ever before. Although the family unit has subtly fallen short of its function as a primary institution for familiarity and intimacy, it has become a complex and prevalent topic within contemporary photographic practices.

Through the visual exploration of personal records, I have engaged in both artistic and conceptually inclined issues regarding intimacy, self-representation, and the formation of family itself. I would also like to express that despite concluding an academic study, *Family Reunion* has only begun its journey. Fortunately, families will never cease to expand, and my familial investigation has the potential to be a lifelong and enduring interest. With each photograph I have become more passionate about understanding my ancestral past and present. As I gain more knowledge regarding my family history, I also am able to comprehend my own identity. Graham W.J. Beal touches on this idea, in the foreword of *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul*. He writes:

“Like a portrait made by a painter, a photograph of an individual does more than reveal the appearance of a sitter at a particular moment in life; it also says a great deal about the photographer.”

Thus, there exists a genuine desire to collect and obtain records of relatives whom I never knew. It allows me to understand where I came from and how I became who I am today. I recognize that my family’s dynamic influences my character, and like most, will always continue to change.

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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


