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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 Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
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May 2015
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Abstract

197_

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This past year, two life-altering events descended on my life within a few months of each other: the death of my sister from cancer, and the birth of my first child. Both were anticipated, but hit me with a kind of emotional power that I couldn’t have imagined until they actually happened. The extremes of the highs and lows these events brought induced a mental whiplash as I thought about what they meant, and how they would affect my family and me. Grief and celebration seldom inhabit the same place at once, but I found myself living shoulder to shoulder with them both. I was feeling these emotions in all their intensity and poignancy, and simultaneously trying to place them all into rational categories that would help me make sense of a life that had ended, and a new one that had just begun.

My book entitled 197_ Is a metaphorical visualization of my struggle to reconcile the heartache of my sister’s loss, the awe and wonder of meeting my daughter, the ache of living thousands of miles away from her, as well as the tension between the way these experiences felt to me, and what some of the philosophies I had studied told me they really meant. Through a sometimes discordant mix of cinematic images, personal vernacular photographs, and collage, I attempt to show my viewers what this struggle feels like, and in the sequence and structure of the book, I allow the viewer to participate in my search for meaning.
**Extended Artist Statement**

This past year, two life-altering events descended on my life within a few months of each other: the death of my sister from cancer, and the birth of my first child. Both were anticipated, but hit me with a kind of emotional power that I couldn’t have imagined until they actually happened. The extremes of the highs and lows these events brought induced a mental whiplash as I thought about what they meant, and how they would affect my family and me. Grief and celebration seldom inhabit the same place at once, but I found myself living shoulder to shoulder with them both. I was feeling these emotions in all their intensity and poignancy, and simultaneously trying to place them all into rational categories that would help me make sense of a life that had ended, and a new one that had just begun.

That analytic tendency has always been strong, and especially so after twelve years spent working my way through college in pursuit of a degree in philosophy. So it seemed appropriate that I would be dealing with this cognitive dissonance in two different ways- a rationalistic approach, and an emotive, experiential approach, which at times seemed opposed to each other. The last philosophy course I took before finishing my degree was called Philosophy and Human Nature, and many of the ideas and discussions we had in the class would occasionally come to mind during the years after college, but especially so during the last couple of years as they progressively moved from being intellectual fascinations to issues of great personal import— that place where the proverbial rubber meets the road. One of the ideas that would periodically resurface while wrestling with these personal events was an idea sometimes referred to as Reductive Materialism.

Reductive Materialism is the notion that we should be able to explain everything we see by purely material causes, that any kind of explanation is ultimately reducible to chemistry and physics; therefore, the only thing we can make meaningful statements about is matter. Some go as far as to say that it’s meaningless to talk about things like belief, desire, will, or intention— yet these are all the kinds of things that seem real to us in a very self-evident way, maybe even the most real. Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, agreed with this reductionist assessment and believed that there is no such thing as personal identity or free will, and that we
are nothing more than “a pack of neurons”,¹ a sort of biological automaton. His dismissal of what seem to be the most essential parts of our human existence clashed directly with what I was experiencing. How could my love for my sister and my daughter be merely an illusion of brain chemistry? It seemed that coming to some sort of understanding of these particular lives that meant so much to me also entailed pondering basic assumptions about human nature, and whether or not this distasteful philosophy could meaningfully account for the experience I was living.

With this in mind, I have set out to represent something of the way this emotional and intellectual journey felt to me. As the artist Alberto Giacometti is purported to have said, “The object of art is not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity.” My book entitled 197_ is a metaphorical visualization of my struggle to reconcile the heartache of my sister’s loss, the awe and wonder of meeting my daughter, the ache of living thousands of miles away from her, as well as the tension between the way these experiences felt to me, and what some of the philosophies I had studied told me they really meant.

Through a sometimes discordant mix of cinematic images, personal vernacular photographs, and collage, I attempt to show my viewers what this struggle and ambivalence feel like, and in the sequence and structure of the book, I allow the viewer to participate in my search for meaning. The book has a variety of structural elements such as pages that fold out, photographs taped to the pages, and layers of images that must be lifted up to reveal further content beneath them. By presenting the viewer with diverse visual information, and revealing and obscuring details that the viewer needs in order to make sense of the narrative, I am asking them to search out the connections between them; this work of investigating and hypothesizing mirrors the character’s experience of trying to understand, explain and quantify the things and places he encounters on his search. Rather than creating a compliant container for my own thoughts, the interactive nature of the book’s form disrupts the act of viewing and further reinforces this collaboration in the search for meaning. By using this play of materials, forms, metaphors, details, and tone, I am able to direct the viewer’s attention back and forth between their physical interaction with the form of the book as they literally investigate the book, and with the content of the images as they

On his way to developing his own philosophy of photography, photo theorist Geoffrey Batchen, in his book *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography*, critiques both modern and post-modern theories of photography as being oppressively “logocentric”;\(^2\) that is, while their theories of photography may differ strongly about whether photography has an essential nature or is culturally-conditioned, they both preserve the binary logic of Western thought (for instance, pairs of opposites such as man/woman, nature/culture) which Batchen describes as “an inescapable politics, an order of subordination, that inhabits every thought and action that our culture undertakes.”\(^3\) For Batchen (who leans heavily on Jacques Derrida for this idea), this binary logic always privileges a particular side of any given pair of binary terms.\(^4\) Following Derrida and Michel Foucault’s concepts of deconstruction and difference, Batchen believes that the way to overturn this oppression is by blurring and problematizing the boundaries of categories; he is less concerned with harmonizing the tension between these binary pairs than he is in disrupting the politics he sees as inherent in Western culture’s way of approaching them.\(^5\)

I too am interested in the notions of tension and disruption, but I differ with Batchen in some key areas. Batchen sees politics beneath the surface of every photograph,\(^6\) but for me, every photograph instead contains hints of the foundational philosophical assumptions we all make in order to make sense of our lives; these foundational assumptions are logically prior to and inform our political worldviews. In my work, I purposely try to avoid the particulars of political implications so that the broader philosophical questions I address can be engaged by people of any political or creedal stripe. My agenda is not to disrupt unseen political structures as Batchen would, but to induce a kind of personal disruption in my viewers in order to bring about a reexamination of their foundational worldview assumptions. In a sense this is a sort of meta-theme that links together the themes of life and death, memory and nostalgia, unsettled psychological spaces, and

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\(^3\) Batchen, 179.

\(^4\) Batchen, 178-179.

\(^5\) Batchen, 200-202.

\(^6\) Batchen, 202.
the conflicting methods of a strict empirical way of understanding as opposed to an emotional, intuitive way.

Tension and struggle can be found in images of things such as urban decay, meat, road kill, snakes, desolate gardens, medical examinations, and military vehicles; these symbols imply death, violence, threat, brokenness and barrenness. There are glimpses of babies, children, eggs, or an ultrasound photograph, punctuated by the occasional warmth of a yellowing page from a family album, with their connotations of life, of potential, and the remembrances of a personal history. Here too, there is ambiguity and ambivalence; for example, without any additional information, the medical examination and the ultrasound photographs give no indication of the health of their subjects.

The physicality of the book also contributes to the communication of the ideas and emotions I am dealing with. Tension, struggle and ambivalence are manifested in the book’s form through the use of a wire-bound book glued into a stained, water-damaged hard cover, suggesting a hybrid of a library book, family album, and technical reference manual. This ambivalence of form is also evident in the feel of the different surfaces of the pages; these sensations becomes encoded as a kind of tactile symbolism, representing the cool precision of a scientific text, the intimate, down-to-earth feel of the family album, or the nostalgia and implied history of an aging vernacular photograph.

Several artists have made important precedents that have influenced the formation of this body of work. French filmmaker Chris Marker’s 1962 film La Jetée used black and white still photographs (and a split second of motion picture film) to tell a post-WWIII story of memory and loss. The film functions like a book in motion picture form, and Marker himself referred to it as a ciné-roman (cinema storybook). His contemplative treatment of these themes in a sci-fi setting and atmosphere inspired me to create a world of my own that referenced some of the visual tropes of science fiction as a place where these philosophical ideas and personal concerns could play out. Another visual reference for the work was the look of 1960’s and 70’s B-grade science fiction movies, such as the 1968 dystopian classic The Planet of the Apes, directed by Franklin Schaffner. Science fiction has long been fertile ground for thinking through issues with philo-
In contrast to the sublime perfection of Modernist photography of the time, there was a quieter, more complex kind of photography emerging in the 1950’s and 1960’s that relied on sequencing and the photobook, such as Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, Dave Heath’s book *A Dialogue With Solitude*, and Nathan Lyons, whose 1974 book *Notations In Passing* used sequence and metaphor to create open-ended visual dialogues using photographs of storefronts and commercial signage. Lyons demonstrated that the meaning of a photograph can be radically altered by the placement of other images with it in a sequence, creating a new context for them all, and that photographs can work next to each other based on formal, graphic commonalities in the images, and/or by metaphoric connections.

In 1977, Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel published the ground-breaking book *Evidence*, which again used sequencing to give disparate images new possibilities of meaning, harking back to Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s theories on montage and motion picture editing. In the 1920’s, Eisenstein pioneered the idea of linking sequences of images through visual continuity, as a way of establishing an emotional tone, or to introduce intellectual concepts. Mandel, Sultan, and others working in this vein of artist books used the photographic sequence to create books with incredible subtlety, mystery and complexity. My work follows in this tradition of seeing a body of photographic work as more than the sum total of all of the photographs in it, but rather, giving more weight to their relationships with each other in the sequence, and what they can say as a unit. No longer does an individual image have to bear the entire weight of transmitting complex ideas; it can be spread out over many images working together and communicating with each other across the pages. In a sense, each individual image is less important because it is subordinated to the sequence, but in another important sense, the individual image is crucial because as a part of the sequence, each one plays an important role in communicating these ideas.

The films of Terrence Malick have long been an artistic inspiration to me. In the late 1960’s, he studied philosophy at Harvard and Oxford, where he nearly completed his Ph.D., before abandoning philosophy for a career in filmmaking. His 2011 film *The Tree of Life* is a semi-
autobiographical exploration of a man coming to terms with the death of his younger brother as a teenager; Malick’s own younger brother Larry committed suicide in 1968 while studying classical guitar in Spain. The concept of striving for meaning is important to Malick, particularly because of its prominence in the work of Martin Heidegger, on whom Malick’s philosophical studies focused. Author Steven Rybin explains that "artworks exist for Heidegger in a state of phenomenological aliveness and productive temporal tension. They exist not to settle questions of Being for us but to open up those questions and to dynamically set in motion an interplay between the sensuous material of the cinema and its potential philosophical significance." Malick uses sublime imagery to point towards a myth that transcends his characters, even when they may be in the middle of intense suffering. For him, beauty guides our eyes and our thoughts to something beyond ourselves that can give meaning to our lives, both in suffering and in happiness. Though my work takes on a colder and more somber tone, and we use very different aesthetic means to achieve our goals, I too, am interested in using the interplay and tension of the materials and the content of my work in order to consider larger philosophical questions, and I resonate with the sincerity of his film’s treatment of a heart-breaking subject.

The process of making this body of work was a complex, frightening, and hugely rewarding journey through research, intuitive gathering of photographic fragments, analysis, painful vulnerability, and playful experimentation, to arrive at a combination of form and content that embodied what for me became the primary way I have processed the events of the last two years of my life- a kind of emotional, creative, and critical catharsis, a form of therapy, and in a sense, an artistic counter-argument to the idea that everything and everyone we encounter can be completely contained in tightly prescribed empirical categories and boxes. On the contrary, they stubbornly overflow these boundaries and ask to be appreciated as they are. These experiences will be with me for the rest of my life, and in that sense I will never be done trying to understand them, but I have the consolation that as a first attempt at understanding, I held nothing back, and put all of myself into it, heart and mind.

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8 Rybin, 22.
Installation view from Solve For X
group MFA thesis show
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from the book 197__, Jason Paul Reimer, 2015
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