Photographs of Alexa

Elizabeth Scott

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Photographs of Alexa

A Thesis Report
Presented to
the Faculty of The School of Photographic Arts & Sciences
The Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Elizabeth Scott

Accepted By her Thesis Board February 1982

Charles Arnold, Chairperson

Kathleen Collins, Advisor

Martin Rennalls, Advisor

James LaVilla-Havelin, Advisor
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Introduction

I began to photograph my daughter Alexa for this project when she was less than a year old. I purposely did not study the photographs or the circumstances of my photographing her for several months. It was my objective to see what evolved as I began to detach, disconnect from intention. Specifically, I wanted to set nothing up - physically or mentally. I was taking snapshots, and, as a photographer, had never worked that way before. I had become accustomed to working with a 4 x 5 camera during several years prior to this project, and in setting up the situations.

Initially, I was intimidated by the lack of design in the new way I was working. But in taking snapshots I was breaking away from the traditional photographic arranged portrait and responding more intuitively to Alexa, allowing my unconscious feeling and reaction to surface.

Because I was so emotionally involved with my subject, I had to work backwards. What I mean by this is that I started out photographing everything about Alexa and began to be more selective as I had the opportunity to look at contact sheets and prints and to see where the project was heading. There was almost nothing in Alexa's being or gesture that didn't fascinate me. Being emotionally connected and bonded with her, the separating of my reac-
tion to her photographically and my identity as her mother became an intriguing issue. That she was my own child I was photographing was, then, both an advantage and an obstacle.

A primary concern in photographing Alexa became the need to expose her child-world with the seriousness appropriate to it. But could I, as her mother, perceive her separate space, her apartness and often aloneness?
"What makes it (the snapshot) so recognizable as a style is not only its unpretentious visual aspects but the elemental life from which it springs."

Lisette Model
Discussion

I.

As I perused my growing body of photographs of Alexa I was interested in what I was making known about this person and how that was different from a verbal description of her or an experience of her. I believe that in the act of photographing, the unconscious mind can work without interruption, and in doing so is tapping its own reservoir of symbols. What is revealed and what is responded to, then, in these photographs has as much to do with child-being as with Alexa.

Richard D. Zakia says in his *Perception and Photography*:

...the photographer facilitates the grouping of these two events (the photograph and what is in memory). When this occurs the photograph takes on a much deeper meaning and feeling.1

The photograph of Alexa, small and sucking, with the large white pillars all around (slide #13), and the one of her looking down at the strange puppet while being held by an adult hand (slide #4) are, for me, like photographic recalls of my own child-feelings of insecurity and security. And the photograph of Alexa being thrown in the air (slide #31) of the kinesthetic joy of that flight and secure landing.

Adults in the photographs are, frequently, hands, legs, hips, torsos, backs. Denoting security, usually not too far away, they function in the imagery not so much as
parts representing full human beings as parts designating safety zones, protection, limits.

I had been aware of and amazed by the sensuality of mothering - the strange pleasure of all of the physical contact, the many smells, and mother with baby not feeling totally unlike a lover. And beyond a sensual love of Alexa's body, there was for me in photographing her a sense that clothing was a distraction from her anima, and that her body was as expressive as her face. In fully half of the photographs, Alexa is naked or mostly so. But there is a sexuality, too, about some of the photographs that surprised me. For example, the photograph of Alexa lying on a blanket on grass with her father (slide #6) has a primitive sexuality to it that's Alexa's own.

Suggestions of fantasy and secrets both shared and unshared are an important part of the imagery. They exist as a result of purely photographic concerns - light, shadow, visual hints, clues, indications, concealments - as well as psychological-documentary concerns. There is a photograph of Alexa whispering to another child on a beach blanket (slide #8) that is very obviously about a secret, but there is a photograph of her bent over a doll outside (slide #24) in which light and dark help to create a feeling of secret, and a close-up of Alexa's face in a snowsuit (slide #23) in which sunlight and shadow in themselves suggest ambiguous emotion. Dark, as a word, is a synonym for hidden,
obscure, occult, and light for frivolous, easy, gay.

I quote Susanne K. Langer:

In creating an emotive symbol...The creator does articulate a vital impact which he could not imagine apart from its expression, and consequently cannot know before he expresses it.2

II.

Before undertaking this thesis project, I had been 'doing portraits and self-portraits with a 4 x 5 camera. As I have talked about previously in this report, it was a difficult transition to 35mm. In photographing, I was accustomed to planning and previsualizing and waiting.

When I began enlarging and printing, I was disappointed in the texture of the images and in the flattening of light. I was enlarging the 35mm negatives to the same size prints and larger as I had enlarged 4 x 5 negatives, and, of course, there was quite a difference.

Because of the nature of this project, and the ease and flexibility which I needed to photograph a small child, I had decided and, after some doubts, felt strong in that decision to use a 35mm camera. As time went on I truly enjoyed and appreciated the accessibility of the small camera, but, in honesty, I missed the print quality of 4 x 5 enlargements.
However, for the ability to follow a rapidly moving child, a small camera was a delight and a necessity.

III.

I began with the belief that by setting nothing up when I was photographing Alexa I was taking purely from her world - from spaces, inner and outer, created by her. There is nothing about this project that I have come to question more.

I have thought in looking at my photographs for this project that I was making self-portraits, or that I was spiritually double-exposing myself onto Alexa. By my choices in photographing and editing I have set up her world - her sometimes dangerous world - with alligators, and strange puppets and little statues, and adults to protect her, and fences to keep her in. And her distance, her lack of eye contact and involvement with me, the camera but also the mother - was that my doing or hers?

How much of this ambiguity is because Alexa is my daughter and, therefore, of me, and how much I would feel it photographing anyone in this way is unknown to me. I am certain now, though, that 'apart from self' is a more difficult concept to actualize than 'a part of self'. 
"...knowledge is a thing you know and how can you know more than you do know...Before that in all the periods before things had been said been known been described been sung about, been fought about been destroyed been imprisoned been lost but never been explained. So then they began to explain. And we may say that they have been explaining ever since. And as I say we are still in the shadow of it."  

Gertrude Stein
Conclusion

In my thesis proposal I stated that I would be photographically examining my family life. As I began the project, my focus became, exclusively, the world of my daughter. This change was approved of by all of the members of my thesis board. For most families, the birth of a first child creates, temporarily at least, the same narrowing of focus, as so much time and energy are put into caring for the child that begins life in a near helpless state. My family and friends appear only peripherally, as the camera was concentrating on my daughter. It was my relationship with her that I explored, by necessity as her mother and by choice as her photographer.
Technical Data

**Camera and Lens:**
- Canon E.P 35mm
- Canon 35mm lens

**Film:**
- Tri-X

**Film Developer:**
- D-76

**Paper:**
- Agfa Portiga 2,3

**Paper Developer:**
- Beers A & B

**Print Size:**
- All negatives were printed full frame either 11 x 14 or 16 x 20
Footnotes


Bibliography


Thesis Proposal

For
The Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

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Title: Home life (working title)

Purpose: To make photographic images within the context of the everyday events of my life that explore my relationships with people and things important to me.

Submitted by: Elizabeth Scott

Thesis Board:
Chief Advisor: Charles Arnold
Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisor: Kathleen Collins
Assistant Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisor: Martin Rennalls
Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Scope

My intent is to create images that reveal the nature of both my relationships and the interrelationships of myself, my husband, my child, the material things I live among, possibly my extended family and my friends. I would like these photographs to expose the ongoing and continual dimensions involved in those relationships.

Procedure

The prints will be black and white, and will number from twenty to one hundred. My main camera will be 35mm. I estimate that the project will be completed in one year.