The family album: an extended portrait

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THE FAMILY ALBUM: AN EXTENDED PORTRAIT
by
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Thesis Proposal

MFA Photography

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

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PURPOSE

To extend the Family Album into a portrait of my family's life, which also includes special friends. This portrait serves as a celebration of life; a celebration of time.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As I thought about what I photograph most, the idea of a family album came to mind. The inclusion of special friends is important because they help to portray a way of life; a communal way of life which is special to those who live in this way.

Wynn Bullock and his images of man and nature, along with his philosophies concerning time and space have been a continuous influence on me and my work. More recently, Emmit Gowin has shared his view of family, and the special power of Gowin's photographs has further encouraged me.

I hope to convey a feeling of our way of life through the portrait of my extended family, those connected by spirit.

PROCEDURE

Using all formats of cameras, along with printing in silver, palladium and color, helps in representing the diversity of life and time, and creates rhythm and cadence within the presentation.

Exhibition possibilities includes both two and three dimensional pieces. The three dimensional pieces will include collage and children's art which will help in creating atmosphere. Various ways of photographing will take place including the "snap" or "grab" shots, but will consist mainly of more thought out environmental portraits.

Many written thoughts, including life philosophies, visual discoveries and responses, aesthetic influences, and family portrait and album history shall contribute to the thesis journal.
Permission Form

I, Michael Phillips prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction of my thesis, "A Family Album: An Extended Portrait", is made. I can be reached at the following address:

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Date- June 25, 1987 Signature _______________________________
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To me, life is mostly a celebration, and my photographic vision and life philosophies consistently reflect, and revolve around this attitude.

The purpose of this project is, to extend the idea of the family album into a portrait of my family life, which ultimately reveals our way of life. Family, in this sense of the word, is a description not of blood relations, but refers to my nuclear family (Nancy and Alder), as well as, a close circle of friends who are connected to us through spirit. This connection of spirit, ideals, and outlook on life is what moves us to regard ourselves as an extended family. The enjoyment of living and working together, helping to raise each other’s children, growing our own food, and living closely to the Earth, is limitless. We believe it is essential to respect the Earth, and to regard it as our Mother, the ultimate source of life. As part of a "New Age" culture, we look forward to a time of broader and healthier ecological and spiritual awareness.

I owe, of course, many thanks. First of all thanks, goes to our creator. As always, thanks to my parents. Their unconditional support has let it all happen. Dozens of people have helped in this project; my friends Andy and Jane opened their lives to my camera, and shared their birth with us. Thank you Nancy for your love, support and patience, and for being such a willing participant. Many thanks to Willie and Michelle for sharing your home with me. And, thanks to all Board members for your help and support.
The Known and The Unknown

A family is chosen for reasons known and unknown. And the seeds for nourishment and love are sown. Give thanks for all that we have; For everything, known and unknown.

from journal
Eugene, 7/4/86
So few people understand the benefits of celebrating life. Finding pleasure in the ordinary occurrence heightens our awareness that indeed no occurrence is truly ordinary. Every moment is special.

Thomas A Kempis
The concept of family is important for most everyone. People like to be part of some form of family or group. Family, however, can be defined in many ways. The Family of Man includes all of mankind. Nuclear family consists of mother, father, sister, and brother. Then there is the extended family, which in itself has many sub categories. I use the term extended family to refer to my chosen family of peers, as well as, my nuclear family. The Native Americans have recognized this type of chosen relationship, and go so far as to honor and respect the "brother-friend" relationship or chosen brother, more than the blood brother tie. Many alternative community dwellers refer to their friends as "family".

Living together communally has many advantages, especially with regards to our children. Communal parenting is the idea that all adults on the land are responsible for, and invest their love in all of the children. By having more than one influence on a child, more perspectives and broader experiences are open to each person. When children grow up in a nuclear family household, they are limited to their parents' perspectives and ideals as their only role models. As I live with other children, they become like my own, and I feel responsible to both love, and share thoughts with them, and discipline them when need be. The children are really the unifying force behind my work, as well as, community life in general. Another reason for communal life besides spiritual and child sharing, is the need for economical sharing. It is harder both physically and economically for one family to work a piece of land, than for several families.

The exposure to community life brought about a big change for me photographically. Suddenly the desire to photograph something other than the landscape inspired me. Within the first few months of living at a community, I summoned up the courage to confront people, and began making portraits. My life was changing, and so too were my images. Along
with the people of the community, I also photographed the land, the houses, and the more spiritual and visual aspects of the interiors. Something from within me was being stirred by this new life, and my vision was truly awakening.

It is indeed difficult to photograph people, even one's friends. It takes even more courage and experience to make meaningful portraits of strangers. I began travelling to different communities throughout the Pacific Northwest, as well as, attending gatherings and fairs (which will be discussed later in the essay) to meet new people, and in a sense document their existence, both at home and at these gatherings. Because I am part of this culture, people are generally more at ease when I approach them to make their portraits. More importantly, I carry a box of work prints with me wherever I travel, to allow people to see what kind of images I make. This is perhaps the best way to ease peoples' apprehensions. Any portrait, is a three way communication between subject, photographer and the viewer. All three forms of communication must be taken into consideration, for a meaningful image to emerge.

When it came time to pick a subject for a thesis project, it seemed natural to work in the area closest to my heart, and closest to my strengths, as an image maker. Due to time and geographic limitations, a broad study of alternative culture was too grand a subject. The connections that I had were in the Northwest, and I was in Rochester, NY. Therefore, a logical step was to narrow down to what was accessible, and ultimately, the most important aspects of my present life. At the time of moving to Rochester, I noticed I was using the 35mm camera more than ever, photographing Nancy and Alder, but especially Alder. I was recording daily events and actions which seemed both meaningful and precious. Recording these family events led to the idea of a family album, which seemed like a viable, cohesive, and potentially meaningful project.
I began thinking in terms of the family album, and researched others who had photographed their families, and had created meaningful bodies of work. Artists such as Emmitt Gowan, Harry Callahan, and Nell Dorr, (to name a few) had already published their accounts of family; creating an already saturated area of study. People in general have collected images of their families in scrap books or albums since photography was invented, thus making the family album as old as photography. The big challenge for me was; What could I do to elevate the common family album into a new, exciting body of work which would interest and communicate something of importance to a variety of viewers?

I needed to expand the album idea, not limit it to images of my nuclear family engaging in everyday activity. This would be too personal, and not challenge the viewer, or hold their interest for very long. Thus the extended portrait emerged; The inclusion of close friends and their children, the nuclear family, and a glimpse of a couple of communities near my home in Eugene, OR, became the crucial parts to the album. Now the documentation of family began to communicate some of our philosophies, and in general give a feel for, our way of life. The idea of the extended family album is to allow others into our lives, and provide a look at a different culture than normally encountered. What better medium is there to educate people about another culture, than through the visual language of photography?

To gain a well rounded view of family and lifestyle, I believe it is necessary to include many forms of imagery or genres of photography. These various genres can illustrate the many aspects of life. The snapshot, which comprises nearly 100% of the usual family album is an important motif in this project. Snapshots are important because they best capture the everyday experience; those fleeting moments so especially vital to a child's existence. "Snaps" tell a story, completing the
sense of the moment, and allow for a degree of candidness. They have a
vitality unmatched by anything in which the photographer becomes more
involved, other than being a window for the viewer. The fascination of the
moment, that moment which can be looked back on and smiled at, is truly
beautiful. Images, which bring about smiles are so precious, they are
invaluable.

...sharing beauty in pictures is another way of giving a loaf
of bread. The world is being fed so much fear and
horror that someone must distribute a simple loaf of bread,
and that I feel is my task.

Nell Dorr

The more formal, thought out portraits, and environmental portraits,
are equally important types of images. Whereas snapshots are truthful in
their objectivity, the more formal image is truthful to my subjectivity,
and thus speaks more about my way of seeing and interpreting. Silver and
Palladium prints reflect my romantic and beauty seeking outlook on life,
and are the mediums used for the more thought out images. They (silver
and palladium) are the mediums which lend respect, and a sense of
masters of process, to the body of work, and are more central to the way I
choose to present the world.

Color is important too, because it lends a sense of reality and presence.
The snapshot is most often presented in color, and to me the addition of
color adds another crucial dimension to the album. Creating mood and
atmosphere through expression is a basic idea behind art. Presentation
and choice of medium should embrace this mood, and provide the vehicle
for expression. For example, Palladium prints create a sense of timelessness, and since our lifestyle reflects the past in its simplicity and practice of living closer to the land, Palladium is thus a reinforcing medium.

How fortunate are you and i, whose home is timelessness; We who have wandered down from fragrant mountains of eternal now to frolic in such mysteries as birth and death.

E.E Cummings
Countless times during the day I reach or could reach for the camera. So many wonderful things happen that should be recorded. The originality of childrens' acts and the power behind them makes me stop and think, and ultimately want to record.

from journal

Eugene, 6/29/86
The following descriptions of Rainbow Gathering, Barter Fair, Healing Gathering and Sweat Ceremony, are intended to help the reader understand the nature of these gatherings, which are important to us, as ways of celebrating life with each other.

Warmth can be felt when people assemble.
Warmth is always present between mother and child.
Warmth is always present when families gather.
Warmth of love.
The sun is the symbol of love.

Brad Steiger
To focus on children is to focus on light. Their lives are fleeting, always in the present.

from journal
Rochester, 5/1/86
Rainbow Gathering

Once every summer in late June thru early July, there is a large gathering held on some pristine National Forest land somewhere in the U.S. The location changes annually so as to encompass and touch every corner of the nation. It is a totally free event, open to all who wish to come.

The most special day of the gathering is July 4. It is a silent day, one of peaceful thoughts and actions. At noon, a large circle of people gather to pray for world peace. Individuals from all walks of life attend; some for the first and last time, others gather every year. The event is organized by the Rainbow family, who live in California. Kitchens, drinking water, and waste refuse areas are set up well in advance of the gathering. For the duration of about a month, the gathering sight is a self-sufficient village for hundreds of people.
Barter Fairs

Twice a year, once in Spring and once in Fall, Barter Fairs are held in various locations throughout the Northwest. It is a chance for people to gather and celebrate the Spring renewal and Fall harvests. People bring their crops, canned goods, home made furniture and clothes, and various other crafts and services to trade at the fair. As with the Rainbow gathering, kitchens and other services vital to a self sufficient village are constructed. People camp in a large circle to display and trade their goods. Music and dance are part of most gatherings.
Healing Gathering

The aim of a Healing gathering is to heal body, mind, and spirit in many creative, and in many cases traditional methods. The gathering of people and friends is in itself a celebration, and thus is a healing of spirit. A variety of workshops are offered by those who feel qualified to share their knowledge of a given subject. Many areas are explored. Herbal medicine is taught as a way of healing the body through the traditional use of plants. Channeling workshops help us to realize the "higher self" or all knowing abilities in each of us. And discussion groups help us to understand the many complexities of life. Music, dance, and energy come together to provide a positive, healing experience.
Sweat Ceremony

The Sweat Ceremony is an ancient Native American ritual which, for them, dealt with the purification and cleansing of both body and spirit. The ceremony takes place within a sweat lodge which is a temporary structure made of thin, pliable branches covered by canvas, blankets, and animal hides. Rocks are heated in a large fire, and then brought into the sweat lodge and placed in a hole in the center of the circle. We sit in a circle because the circle is representative of the four seasons, and the continuous flow of energy characteristic of the circle. Water is then poured onto the rocks to create intense heat and steam. The lodge is completely dark inside, and represents the womb or center of the earth. The earthly elements of fire, water, rock, and steam combine to cleanse and renew.

We have revitalized this custom to purify as well as unify ourselves with each other and the earth. While in the sweat, we sing songs and prayers for the healing of the planet. Usually a large feast follows a sweat, and inevitably we feel revitalized and indeed closer to one another.
I see the world more simply now, taking more and more joy in simplicity. The life force of the weeds, the rocks, the hills, and the people; they are what make up a photograph. To bring this life force out is the challenge. If I can convey what I know to be true about the world, then I am communicating something within me to others. The wonders of nature reveal themselves to me only because I am open to their subtle energies, and I actively try to perceive them, communicate with them, and ultimately become one with them. If I become one with my subjects, than my photographs are about my psyche, and my vision. To have a viewer feel strongly about an image, I must first feel very strongly about that subject.

from journal

Boulder, CO 1/6/86
You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true.

Richard Bach
A nearness to nature keeps the spirit sensitive to impressions, not commonly felt, and in touch with unseen powers.

Charles Alexander Eastman
You are like a mirror. You are reflecting things. You look at a beautiful object; it is reflected in you. Whatsoever you are seeing penetrates deep into you. It becomes part of your consciousness.

Bagwan Shree Rajneesh
When you love your whole energy becomes your eyes. Then the energy moves, touches deep, goes down into the other person, meets at his center of being. Then only can you see and know.

Bagwan Shree Rajneesh
There must be unbeautiful days, but they are forgotten, and only beauty remains.

Nell Dorr
Some form of celebration is what usually moves me to photograph. Whether it's the celebration of the beauty, strength or uniqueness of an individual, or the celebration of an event or gathering, or even the celebration of a moment in life, I photograph from the heart, and prefer my images to affect one's emotion rather than their intellect.

I photograph to express my joy for being alive, and to me that is reason enough for making images. Love for children, love for friends, and love for the earth, are all reasons to engage a camera. I hope love shines from the portraits of the people, and from this body of work as a whole. This visual stroll through time, and our lives, hopefully creates an emotional voyage for the viewer. The family album is a compilation of time and imagery. These images are meant to tell a story, and to educate those who have no idea that life can and does exist in such a manner.

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MFA THESIS EXHIBITION
Michael by Phillips

Feb 16 - 20
Opening Reception - Mon 2/16 5 pm
Thesis Sharing - Thurs 2/19 11 am
RIT Photo Gallery
Rochester Institute of Technology