

One Might Weep if No One Saw

In my current work, I have been looking at the female introspective gaze, literalized through the use of a mirror. I am interested in the relationship between the gaze and identification and how women constitute themselves as ‘something to be looked at’. I look at this in relation to both Jacques Lacan’s Mirror Stage Theory, and Judith Butler’s Performance Theory. This process of a woman looking at herself (being looked at *by* herself) references the process of when a child sees herself in the mirror and learns to recognize her image as separate but representative of herself. I also see the use of the mirror as a re-discovery of the self through gendered performance, the repeated performance of the introspective gaze, which comes to constitute modern, western femininity. The mirror becomes the evidence of the self and the record of performance. The mirror image, in some ways, functions as the evidence of the self, which is traced back to the physical body in real space.

Melancholia, part of Freudian psychology, serves as an example of what subconsciously following a trace might look like. Melancholia, set in opposition to mourning, is when someone subconsciously suppresses a memory of loss, but the memory leaks back into their life in strange ways. While someone in mourning will eventually let go of the lost love-object, a melancholic will present a self-destructive loyalty to following the trace of what has been lost. This is the process of uncovering something that is both lost and abundant. The kind of archive that must contain and keep secrets in order to exist; without concealment, the archive does not exist, and you cannot engage in the act of recovery.

Photography offers a specific relationship to death. When you make an image of someone, they become eternally still in their gesture. The photographic image becomes a performance of death and a marker of something past. Making the image becomes the process of making the ghost: the evidence of the lost love object. There is a seduction to this kind of death, as Susan Sontag notes, “the photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death”. I look particularly to the work of Sally Mann, Emmet Gowin, and Peter Hujar, who all turn to communities of family, mixing injury, sexuality, and death.

My interest in this project stems from a specific personal narrative. Towards the beginning of my undergraduate studies, two deaths took place. My roommate’s mother died, and shortly after, my mother’s mother died. The two closest people to me were both experiencing immense loss, a loss that I could not know. I had been told that a girl becomes a woman the moment her mother dies, and it was strange for me to watch my friend and my mother undergo this process at radically different stages in their lives—19 years old and 51 years old respectively. And now they were no longer daughters. They were women. But inherently through internalizing their loss, I underwent my own shift. I became the melancholic. It is the archive of their loss that I want to recover. The seductive quality of this death emerges through the anticipation of recovering their lost love-objects. I want to create a series of hand-stained gelatin silver prints that mark the process of making the ghost, turning the photographic surface into the trace of the lost love-object. In addition to these prints, I intend to make hand-bound folios of smaller silver prints, in an edition of 3-5, to subvert the concept of a family photo album, and to emphasize the project as an exploration of melancholia within the site of the family.

During a time when things are progressively moving towards the digital, I want to focus on the hands-on approach that analog processes offer. Making silver gelatin prints in the darkroom offers the artist more control, where the artist is able to literally shape the image. The process is seductive. I like the idea of having real light shine onto the paper, the anticipation of watching the image emerge through the developing process. I like the materiality of the process. I think it lends itself to the same process of recovery that my project is based on; making the print becomes the act of recovering the lost love-object. The final image seems almost imagined, yet anchored in real life, like a suppressed memory leaking into consciousness. The whole process of photography, the idea of writing with light and the production of a latent image, collectively function as an analogy for the conceptual motivations driving my project, and the paradoxes inherent in the act of recovery. The image exists only if you do not look at it. Making the photograph becomes the literal process of making the ghost, i.e. making the ghost image.

Annotated Bibliography

- Arondekar, Anjali R. Introduction. *For the Record: on Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print. Arondekar explores the seduction and temptation in excavating the archive. She introduced me to the concept of ‘the trace’ as it applies to loss, methods of recovery, and melancholia.
- Davis, Keith F., and Cox Jeremy. Roxbee. *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage*. New Haven: Conn., 2005. Print. I am interested in the way Sommer transforms everyday objects into talismanic artifacts, offering them new gravity. Sommer influenced my interest in the idea of lost love-objects.
- Freccero, Carla. "Queer Times." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (Summer 2007): 485-95. Print. Freccero discusses the role of haunting in historicism. Her writings were influential in my understanding of ‘making ghosts’. Freccero also addresses ‘the trace’ and melancholia in her article.
- Mann, Sally. *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women*. New York: Aperture, 1988. Print. In her introduction to this text, Ann Beattie writes, “Look at the eyes. It is as if we are looking at them but they are *seeing* us” (7). This influenced my interest in shifting the gaze from the mirror surface to an interaction between the subject and viewer.
- Mann, Sally, John B. Ravenal, and David Levi. Strauss. *Sally Mann, the Flesh and the Spirit: [... at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts from November 13, 2010 through January 23, 2011]*. Richmond: VMFA. 2010. Print. Mann’s work serves as my greatest source of inspiration, both aesthetically and conceptually.
- Nunokawa, Jeff. “Queer Theory: Postmortem.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (Summer 2007): 553-562. Print. Introduced me to Lacan’s mirror stage theory.
- Proust, Marcel, Lydia Davis, and Christopher Prendergast. *Swann's Way*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2004. Print. Proust’s exploration of involuntary memory influenced my interest in melancholia.
- Sontag, Susan. "Introduction." *Portraits in Life and Death*. By Peter Hujar. New York: Da Capo, 1976. Print. I am interested in the way she asserts that death has sex appeal.
- Weston, Kath. "Do Clothes Make the Woman?: Performing In and Out of Industrial Time." *Gender in Real Time: Power and Transcience in a Visual Age*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print. Weston’s writing helped make Judith Butler’s performance theory more accessible to me.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990. Print. I am interested in Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse and her contribution to modernist writing aesthetics. I am interested in how the topic of death emerges in everyday activities and the psychological connections Woolf creates between her characters.