FOCAL PLANE

A JOURNAL FOR PHOTOGRAPHY EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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Family Dynamics
No. 10 | Fall 2019
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Roddy McInnes
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Focal Plane, No. 10:
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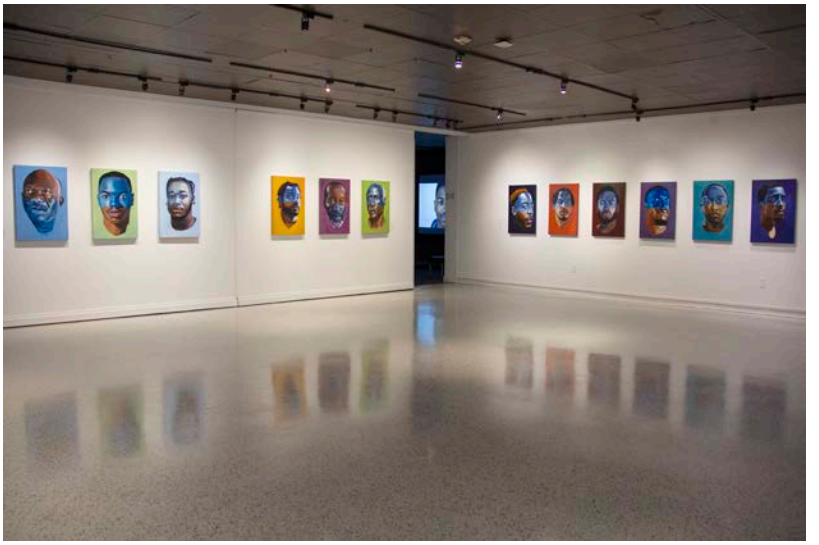

Using photography to inform his process, painter William Paul Thomas explores issues of African-American identity through intimate portraits of black men, titled for the women most important in their lives. Seen here is the installation of a recent exhibition at Barton College, in Wilson, North Carolina.

FOCAL PLANE

Family Dynamics
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Larry W. Cook

Larry Cook is a photographer and conceptual artist based in Washington DC. Cook received his MFA from George Washington University in 2013. Cook is a 2019 finalist for the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Cook is a 2017 Trawick Prize Winner, a 2013 and 2016 Janet and Walter Sondheim Artscape finalist. He completed a fellowship at the Hamiltonian Gallery (2013-2015) and later became an artist-in-residence at the Washington Project for the Arts (2017). He is a recipient of the MASC Individual Artist Grant (2017) and Department of General Services Public Art Grant (2018). Cook has exhibited his work nationally including the National Gallery of Art (2017), the Baltimore Museum of Art (2016) and the Walters Art Museum (2013). Cook recently completed the Savage-Lewis artist residency in Martha's Vineyard (2018). Cook is currently an Assistant Professor of Photography at Howard University.

Alyssa Lanphear

Alyssa Lanphear is a junior undergraduate student in the Honors Program at Barton College, in North Carolina. She is double majoring in English with a concentration in Writing and Mass Communications with a concentration in Public Relations. For the last two years she has been managing editor of The Collegiate newspaper at Barton. She also holds positions of hall director and writing tutor on campus. She is a member of the Theta Omega chapter of Delta Zeta and serves as the Vice President of Programming. Following her graduation from Barton, she hopes to pursue a Masters Degree in Publishing and Writing.

Roddy McInnes

Roddy MacInnes has been teaching photography at the University of Denver since 2001. He considers himself to be an autobiographical photographer, and in that capacity, has been documenting his life through photography for over five decades. He received an MFA in photography from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and a BA in photography from Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh. His latest community engaged photography projects were inspired by an album of photographs he discovered in an antiques mall in Denver, Colorado. A North Dakota woman made the photographs in 1917. Through these projects Roddy explores issues surrounding the relationships between family photography and identity.

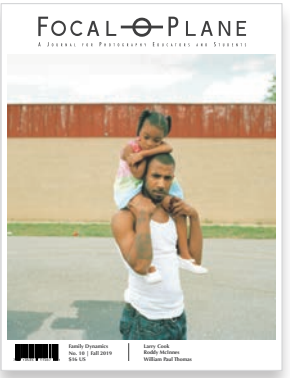
William Paul Thomas

William Paul Thomas is a visual artist based in Durham, NC. His work is centered on making pictures to record his life experiences and observations, with an approach that defies standard documentary practices. Heavily focused on intimate oil portraits of Black subjects, he chooses certain models as a way of recognizing their significance in his life's path. He draws on his immediate social network to offer complex representations that counter the simplified stereotypes found in popular media. He earned a B.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and an M.F.A. from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Families come in many forms: nuclear, adopted, common-law, the family of choice, the family of friends, families one is born into, and families born out of association. The modern family may be traditional or blended, hetero- or homosexual, loving or not. What defines a family is generally considered as a group of persons united by a common bond and organized by their social interactions. This structure comes with predetermined positions such as spouses, partners, parents, children, siblings, and other extended titles. However, in truth the construct of family is purely dependant on how two or more people come into agreement about their own coexistence.

This issue of *Focal Plane* takes a brief glimpse into a few of these notions of what constitutes a family. Larry W. Cook, the cover artist, explores the relationships of African-American fathers and their children. Images in this series reveal a tenderness and universality of what it means to be a parent, painting a positive reflection on a group of men the media often demonizes. Continuing with this notion, painter William Paul Thomas depicts African-American men with portraits revealing a multitude of emotions. His images, largely influenced by the photographic process, empower the subjects by simultaneously displaying them with regard to their pride and vulnerability. Thomas titles each portrait with a reference to the woman most important to each man, indicative of the complex relationships of masculine and feminine roles in a family. Finally, Roddy McInnes takes viewers on a journey he himself once took into the gaze of a long-forgotten casual photographer and the influence her images had on him during a pivotal time of change in his own life.

Gerard Lange
Publisher & Editor



ON THE COVER

Larry W. Cook takes an intimate look at the relationships of African-American fathers and their Children in his *Fatherhood Series*. See page 10.

LOOKING BACK

Focal Plane was established in 2017 with the mission to promote the work of teachers and students of photography. Issues have addressed regionality, place, identity, feminism, culture, ecology, science, alternative processes, and, of course, students and teaching. Congratulations to the team on ten successful issues.

FEATURED FACULTY

Roddy McInnes

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

JIM RIVER, ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

Roddy MacInnes happened upon an album of old family photographs at an antiques mall in Denver, Colorado. He was seduced by the images, and purchased the album. MacInnes felt he was rescuing it from oblivion. Little did he realize how the discovery would profoundly affect his life. He's not a collector of other people's photographs. In fact, this was the only such purchase he has ever made.

The album contained some information: the photographers name, Nina Weiste; the date the photographs were taken, 1917, and one geographical reference, Jim River. The album sat on his desk for 10 years. He looked at the images often. So often, in fact, that he began to experience an intense connection to the people and places in the photographs. An uncanny sense of knowing Nina was stirring.

He was compelled to find out more about Nina and conducted an internet search. The search revealed that the Jim River (officially the James River) is considered by locals to be the longest unnavigable river in the world. From its source in central North Dakota, it takes a lazy 740-mile journey towards the Missouri River, which it joins at Yankton, South Dakota. In 1916, sixteen-year old Nina Weiste left her family farm on the banks of the Jim River near Ludden, North Dakota, and travelled twenty-two miles to begin teacher's training at the State Normal and Industrial School in Ellendale, North Dakota. Among her possessions was an Autographic Kodak Junior camera.

Triptych of Nina Weiste (right) and friends, "Sad But Sympathetic" Ellendale, c.1917

Portrait of Nina Weiste with Camera, Ellendale, c.1917

Nina (right) and Friend, Ellendale, North Dakota, c.1917

All the images in Nina's family photo album were taken while she was a student at the State Normal School. From her photographs, he could tell she was popular with fellow students and consequently had many friends. Nina was not a skilled photographer, not experienced in the basics such as composition and lighting, however she was an impassioned amateur captivated by the medium's ability to freeze time. Even though MacInnes has never met Nina in person, he is confident she was well liked because he sensed her reflection in the faces of everyone she photographed.

Armed with several objectives, MacInnes made the first of several road trips to North Dakota. Until then, the project existed only in his imagination, but now a series of chain reactions started to unfold. One person would

The intersection of Nina's family album and my own

Connecting our Family Albums

lead him to another, one place to another, and one idea to the next. He believes this process is perpetually occurring, however, usually in the subconscious. Consigning consciousness to how one thing leads to another or, how all things are connected, became the unifying theme of his project.

When MacInnes first arrived in North Dakota, he attempted to see what he imagined Nina saw. However, he quickly realized how naïve that was, because experience colors everything, especially what we see. The world appears similar but not the same. What he was searching for in Nina's pictures was himself. Per, a hypothesis in sociology known as "looking glass self" theory, we come to know who we are from other people's reactions to us. Which means, when we look at another person, we are also looking at ourselves. We reflect each other. Could the same hypothesis apply when looking at a photograph of a person we've never met before?

As a child growing up in Argyll, Scotland, MacInnes was inspired by how his relatives used photography in their lives. His extended family lived in the city, and he, in the country. There was not much money, so during summer holidays his home was a popular destination. Typically, each person photographed what they wanted to remember, which is why everyone appears to be happy in the photographs. In MacInnes' developing awareness, a profound connection between photography and happiness was established.

MacInnes' parents kept their family photo-

Catriona, My first photograph, 1964

graphs in a cardboard box. Several times a year the box came out and they'd share stories about family history. He does not remember many of the stories, but those experiences left him with a sense of being connected to something larger than himself. Apart from a few professional studio portraits, most of his family photographs are amateur snapshots and, like Nina's family album represent intimate glimpses into a family history.

MacInnes began constructing his own family photograph album in 1964 when his Uncle Alex gave him a Kodak Hawkeye Instamatic camera. His first photograph was a portrait of Catriona, the girl next door, who was also his first girlfriend. "I photographed her, then she photographed me," he recalls. "From the moment I pressed the shutter release to make my very first exposure, photography became an extension of my being. I cannot describe how or why it happened, I simply felt the magic."

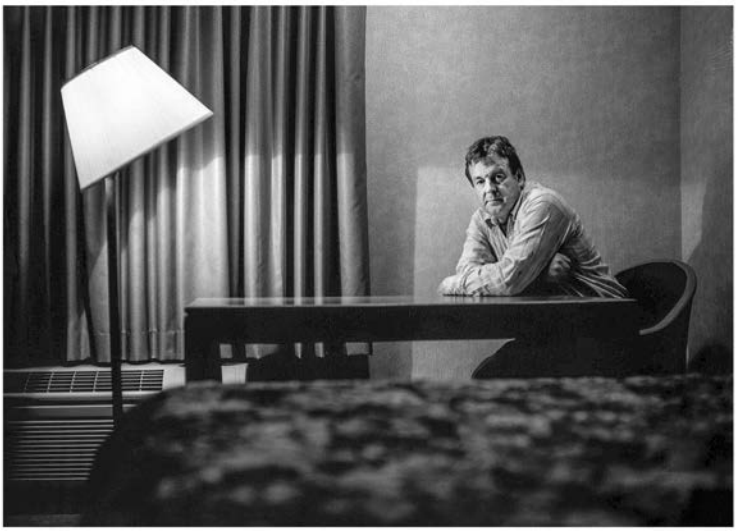
In high school, MacInnes spent more time looking out the window than at the blackboard. Primary school was a positive experience, but high school was not. The only subjects he related to were geography and art. At age fifteen he dropped out and began to travel, taking a camera along to record his adventures. In the beginning his use of photography was casual and naïve, the family album genre his only reference. Just as his parents had done, he began filling a cardboard box with memories.











Mote, North Dakota

Motel, Nebraska

Savo Township, South Dakota, where Nina's family homesteaded in 1882
(opposite)

North Dakota, Memory and Time

North Dakota Landscape Triptych

With minimal self-awareness, he put himself in many of his photographs. He now appreciates that doing so produced visual evidence of where he had been, and to the extent that any medium can, confirmed his existence. In the beginning, the primary audience for his photographs was his parents. The ones he chose to share illustrated happy memories, but often didn't tell the whole story.

Early in his adventures MacInnes was traumatized by a sexual predator. Incapable of processing the subsequent negative effect on his development, the experience was consigned to the primitive recesses of his brain. For twenty-five years, the pain festered in darkness. Alcohol became a coping mechanism. His condition was made worse by spending years living a nomadic existence as a minerals prospector in Canada and the United States.

Ultimately Denver, Colorado became his base; however, tents and motel rooms were his home. He drank so much alcohol that panic attacks and depression dominated his life. His doctor presented an ultimatum: stop drinking or die. At the same time, he happened to find Nina's family photograph album in a Denver antiques mall. Little did he realize the positive impact Nina and North Dakota would have on the continuation of his journey.

Nina's photographs triggered a search that became deeply personal. They created a lens through which he could examine how family memories are constructed and reinforced, and they allowed him to extend that understanding to his own experiences. The general themes in Nina's photographs and his own are essentially the same and led MacInnes to invite Nina into his family album and himself into hers. The Universe created photography, photography introduced him to Nina, and Nina brought him to North Dakota. ■

FEATURED FACULTY

Larry W. Cook
LECTURER & COORDINATOR – PHOTOGRAPHY
HOWARD UNIVERSITY

FATHERHOOD SERIES

Larry Cook is an artist working in photography, video, and installation as he explores race, history, and their impact on contemporary culture. Originally from Landover, Maryland. Cook received his MFA from George Washington University in 2013. Cook's career as a photographer began as a club photographer throughout the Washington DC area, setting up makeshift photo booths that featured hand-painted backdrops. This foundation of capturing subjects before the camera would influence recent works by Cook entitled *Fatherhood Series*, *Urban Landscapes Series*, and *High Roller Series*.

In Cook's work *Fatherhood Series* the personal is interpreted through the lens of his 4x5 field camera with intimate portraits of African-American men and their children. Cook's portraits display the closeness and connection fathers have with their children. As a father himself, Cook states, "I use portraiture to document the vulnerability and strength of everyday fathers. The subjects are family members, close friends, and father-like figures of my childhood situated before the camera as a way to reconstruct the gaps within my own father's presence."

In "Fatherhood #1," a father is seen standing with his son, both of whom are gazing away from the camera. Perhaps they are looking into a mirror as the father stands with a pair of clippers in his hand, and his son sits with a cape

wrapped around his torso. "Fatherhood 2" displays a father holding his young toddler. In contrast, both father and daughter stare directly into the camera. A large pink and purple book bag juxtaposes a suspended boxing bag in the background, grounding Cook's subtle conceptual touch.

Cook's *Fatherhood Series* reflects his artistic craftmanship and dedication to photographic traditions of analog film and portraiture. Cook's portrait "Fatherhood #2" earned a coveted spot in "The Outwin 2019: American Portraiture Today" exhibition. The Smithsonian sponsored contest is a highly competitive national exhibition that showcases how artists working in painting and photography are defining portraiture. Hosted at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Cook's work will be shown alongside other notable photographers of color such as Nona Faustine, Genevieve Gaignard, and Adrian Octavius Walker.

While Cook's conceptual interest in portraiture can be subtle it is a deliberate method to re-imagine photographic pasts. *High Roller Series* draws from the collective experience of people, specifically African-American club-goers rang-

Fatherhood #1

Fatherhood #2

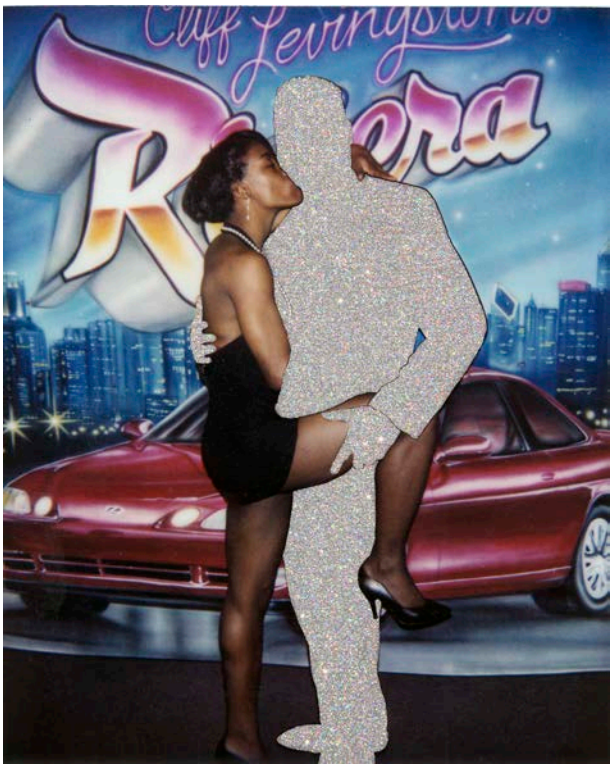
Fatherhood #4
(opposite)

Fatherhood #3
(previous page)

ing from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Using a variety of methods, Cook acquired an extensive collection of authentic polaroids featuring shimmering silhouettes and African-American subjects posing joyously together before fantasy hand-painted scenes.

In this work, each collaged photograph represents the act of Black Joy, togetherness, and the evolution of blackness beyond the Civil Rights Era. Singular and coupled subjects, twinkling or reflecting light, pose before the highly metropolitan and modern scenes. Cook states, "The pose is extremely important in this photographic tradition, embodying status, visibility, prestige, and freedom" each of which represent the presence of black life and contributions in major U.S. cities such as Detroit, New York City, and Washington, D.C. These photographs of the past become new documents that emit light over African-America life.

Urban Landscapes Series continues Cook's conceptual investigation, this time with the club backdrop as his subject. Since the invention of photog-



High Rollers Series #2

High Rollers Series #3

raphy, photographers used backdrops as a specialized prop to enhance their subject. They have been handcrafted via paint, spray paint, and other media. *Urban Landscapes Series* places special focus on how the artistic material of the backdrop denotes a particular cultural expression that is a part of black life.

Referencing the historical movement of African Americans, the backdrops migrate and travel to be photographed in different locations by Cook. Each backdrop is situated in landscape or an urban environment setting, which are heavily repeated as illustrations on the surface of the backdrops. Cook creates a "doubling" effect of subject and environment to heighten the sense of fantasy that the backdrop symbolizes when used as a photographic device.

Cook will open his first solo show, "Eternal Splendor," with Galerie Myrtis in Baltimore, M.D. this November 9, 2019. "Eternal Splendor" will combine several works by Cook that explore how the visual aesthetics of "club" and prison photography become intertwined with urban culture and incarceration systems. ■

FEATURED FACULTY

William Paul Thomas

RUBENSTEIN ARTS CENTER ARTIST IN RESIDENCE
DUKE UNIVERSITY

CYANOSIS

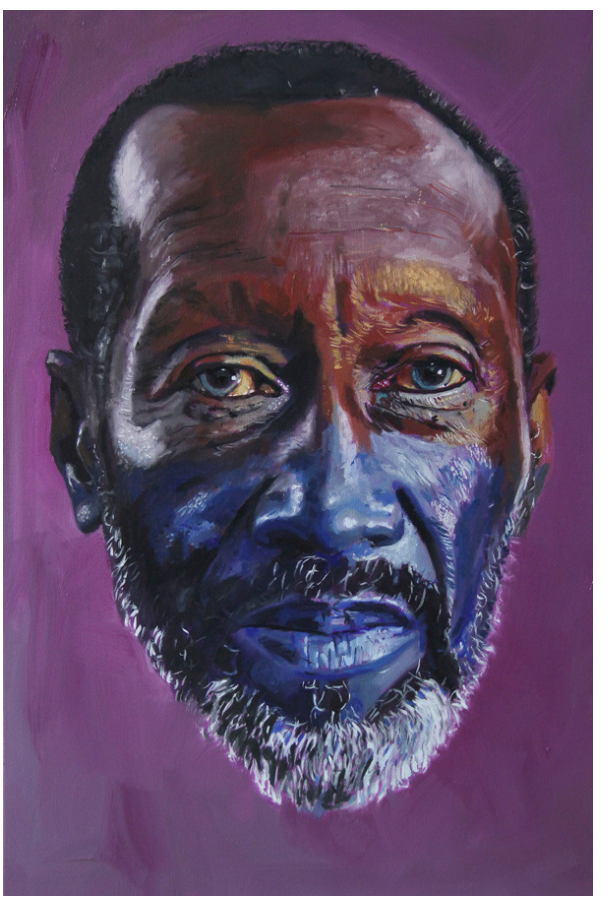
by Alyssa Lanphear

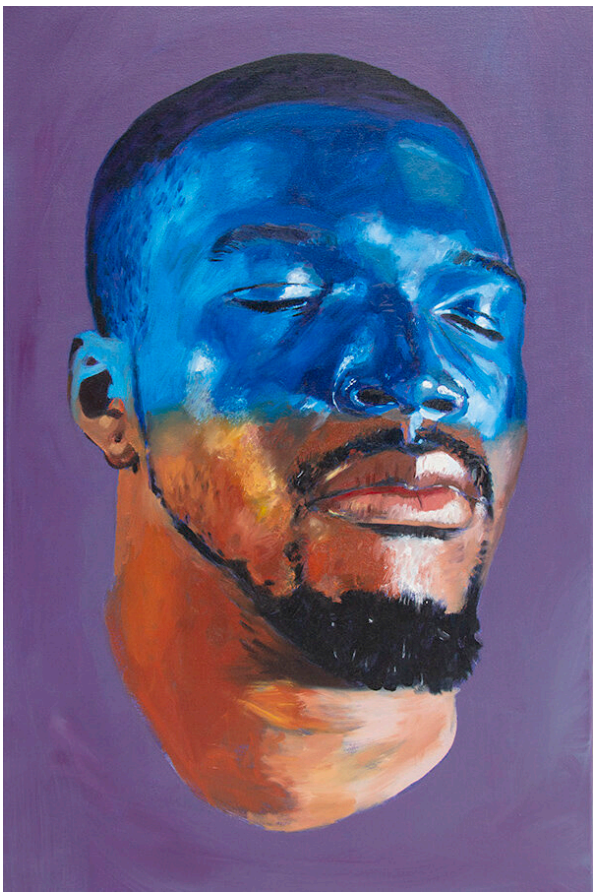
William Paul Thomas' *Cyanosis* is a collection of portraits of black men who each play an important role in his life. The portraits represent Thomas' philosophy of recognizing and appreciating those closer ones, those he considers family. Through *Cyanosis*, Thomas is able to evoke an emotional connection to his subjects while simultaneously starting a conversation about white supremacy in America.

There are 33 paintings in the collection, each featuring a portrait of a different black man. The portraits are striking, focusing closely on the disembodied faces of each man. Some of the men have their eyes closed and others opened; some stare directly back at the viewers and others into the peripheral direction. Despite these differences, each portrait, "squared so closely on their faces that you can almost feel their breath,"[1] speaks to the viewer. These specific characteristics of the portraits contribute to the overall feeling of intimacy and familiarity, indicative of the close relationship Thomas has with each subject.

The subject of each portrait in *Cyanosis,* though anonymous to the average viewer, is an important member of Thomas' life. The subjects are all black men; the first to be featured in the series was his nephew. Each selection is intentional, providing the viewer with a visual representation of Thomas' social network. Of his decision to choose these particular men for the collection, Thomas says, "We regularly celebrate women and men of prominence in mass media, so I take advantage of the opportunity to highlight the people that impact me on a more direct level than the untouchable celebrity or distant historical figure could."[2] Thomas includes each model as a way to honor that person's individual impact on his life.

Thomas' intentional inclusion of these important men in his life makes the viewer consider how familial relationships can extend beyond one's bloodline. For Thomas, a majority of these men are not directly related to him, but





their connections to him are just as significant. The men in this collection of portraits are important enough members of Thomas' network to be included. One could argue that these men serve as members of his extended family, worthy of the love and recognition proven by his work. The celebration of these individual men contrasts the everyday celebration of celebrities in society. With this collection, Thomas proves that these people are just as worthy of praise as a celebrity.

In fact, the focus on each subject's face separated from body also contributes to Thomas' theme of idolizing the men. The portraits resemble busts or statues which are typically representative of iconic historical figures. This resemblance succeeds in "elevating the individual to the status of iconography"[3]. Though the average viewer may not recognize the subjects of the portraits, they are important enough to Thomas to be idolized in the collection.

The title of the collection comes from the medical condition cyanosis. The condition is characterized by a bluish coloration of the skin caused by a lack of oxygen in the blood. This specific characterization is exhibited in the portraits of this collection. Each subject's face transitions from dark skin to a rich blue, starting either at the top or bottom of the face. In reality, people with darker skin rarely exhibit such extreme visual side effects of the medical condition because of the melanin in the skin[4]. By using this colorization and reference to cyanosis in his work, Thomas incorporates a metaphor that symbolizes "the disenfranchisement that people of color have experienced by way of white supremacist ideologies."[5] As a result, he stimulates political conversation through his art about the black American's experience. The black men in the paintings represent minority groups who experience oppression at the power of a majority group. The cyanosis blue that shades their faces represents the deprivation resulting from the oppression. In reference to the metaphor, Thomas says, "We all exist in this kind of duality—living our normal life but then having this other thing we might be oppressed by or stressed out by… lacking something that keeps us from doing well."[6] When minority groups are deprived of certain opportunities because of oppression, there are negative effects, symbolized in the blue shading of the portraits.

With this collection, Thomas is not only able to recognize important figures in his life, but he is also able to contribute to the conversation of racial oppression in America. Ultimately, he creates an important narrative which breaks down the idea that family is limited to those within one's bloodline.
Cyanosis is part of a larger collection of Thomas' work, *Mood Swings*. In addition to the collection of paintings, *Mood Swings* includes a series of videos of black men smiling, called *TEEF*. ■

Monica's Son
(this page)

Marley Messai's Uncle
(page 17)

The Son of Agatha Jeremiah
(previous pages)

Nellie Mae's Son

Donna from New Jersey's Son

Lindsay's Friend
This painting depicts James Gadson, the first African American studio art professor in the Department of Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. James died in April of 2017 and is an alumnus of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in Philadelphia.

Sis. Beatrice's Husband

Kenna's Dad

Ms. Nell's Nephew

Plural (Titled By Victoria)
Painting of a U.S. military veteran.

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1. "William Paul Thomas: Achromatopsia Panacea." Indy Week, September 9, 2019. Web.

2. "'Mood Swings' Exhibition To Open In Barton Art Galleries On Thursday, August 22." Barton College News, August 15, 2019. Web.

3. "Brightwork Series: William Paul Thomas." Anchorlight. Web.

4. Kirkland, Allison. "William Paul Thomas, visual artist." Allison Kirkland, July 19, 2018. Web.

5. "Brightwork Series: William Paul Thomas." Anchorlight. Web.

6. Kirkland, Allison. "William Paul Thomas, visual artist." Allison Kirkland, July 19, 2018. Web.

Kaitlyn Whiting

HOWARD UNIVERSITY

forward by Larry W. Cook

Kaitlyn Whiting is a name not to be forgotten. During her time as my student at Howard University, she quickly proved that she possessed the drive and compassion needed to create a fulfilling and sustainable art practice. Though Kaitlyn was a photo minor, she pushed herself creatively with each assignment. She confidently displayed her work alongside her classmates, most of whom were photo majors, and her craftsmanship challenged even the best of them. Kaitlyn's strength was in documentary photography, taking candid photos of her subjects blending into the environment. This effect was best shown in her project, *The Bus Stop Series*. Whiting produced several typological photographs of Washington, D.C. bus stops, visualizing the bustling routine of everyday community members in the style of Gordon Parks and Ed Ruscha.

The Bus Stop Series, by Kaitlyn Whiting

My photographic artwork reflects my interest in the world around me regarding the people and the environment. And much of that process was done in capturing people and spaces as is; candidly. The act of exploring this contributed to the creation of conceptual work that focused mainly on an environment and the people within it, leading me to *The Bus Stop Series*.

The Bus Stop Series takes a look at how people interact when doing an everyday activity that requires one to be in public: waiting for the city bus. It captures a diverse group of people that engage with this space and each other. Furthermore, to capture how they may or may not interact with each other when waiting at a bus stop. The work is essentially documentary style for an artistic pursuit, meant to be captured without the subject's awareness of the camera. I wanted the subjects to be captured as real characters in their world, each adding to the higher expression of each photograph. I wanted to focus on the various juxtapositions created in the landscape.

This topic being an exploration of city life and how people relate to one another in an urban area. Living in the city is generally known to cause isolation amongst individuals while usually requiring them to be around each other in public for many reasons, this one being transportation. I was able to capture moments of strangers, both interacting and completely ignoring each other. There were some people that were completely lost in their world, disconnected from others, usually occupied with their cell phones. And then some knew each other and interact in different ways.

My process in creating these photographs and capturing these moments was pretty

simple, but the difficulty came with finding what was expressive of the purpose of the project. It also took time finding what was distinct in the photos and how they differed from one another. Each photograph has its own distinct expression. I traveled to many different bus stops throughout Washington, DC, at different times of the day. At times, I was able to capture many photographs instantly, and other times I had to wait for people to take up gather in the space. There was also a bit of strategy that I had to implore during the shooting. I did not want to become part of the photograph, and I had to eliminate the engagement between the subjects and myself. The focus is simply the subjects in the space, their interactions, similarities, and differences with each bus stop. ■

Audrey Miklitsch

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

forward by Roddy McInnes

Unnamed explores Audrey Miklitsch's personal experiences with trauma and identity through photographic and sculptural lenses. In collaboration with her friend support group, she created a body of work focused on shared experiences related to themes of invalidation and empowerment. Sculptural forms and photographic portraits illustrate stories, emotions, and symbols associated with the personal narratives of her collaborators. Audrey encouraged each to identify emotions that relate feelings of invalidation and empowerment. Although the project materialized as a multi-media exhibition, the following statement is specific to her photography.

Unnamed, by Audrey Miklitsch

The subjects in my project *Unnamed*, expressed having mixed feelings of terror, anticipation and, also, empowerment regarding their queer identities and trauma associated with sexual assault. However, labelling people in relation to their experiences of coming out and sexual assault can be detrimental to the healing process. To address this concern, I invited some of my friends, who've had similar experiences to my own, into the photography studio to make portraits and, also, to encourage them, through interviews, to share their stories. My portrait style attempts to maintain each person's anonymity by obscuring their identities.

I originally planned the interviews to be formal, with predetermined questions, taking notes and recording the conversations. However, during the first interview, I realized this approach was too stiff and not conducive to discussing topics difficult to speak about. Four questions were asked: what experiences do you relate to invalidation; what experiences do you relate to empowerment; which emotions do you relate to invalidation, and which emotions do you relate to empowerment?

My first interview was with a friend who had been sexually assaulted. It was the first time she related the experience with me. Subsequently, she became the first person I felt comfortable enough with to share my own experience of sexual assault. The conversation turned to strategies for healing. She told me about coming to terms with her trauma and seeking peace. Which in turn encouraged me to begin addressing my own pain in a constructive way.

Another friend I've known since high school came out in college. His relaxed attitude and self-confidence inspired me to become more open about my own sexuality. Empowerment for him came from feeling loved and supported by his family. This was surprising for me to hear, but encouraged me to reflect on my own experiences. I associate my coming out experience with both invalidation and empowerment.

One of the most impactful conversations I had was with a friend who related both experiences, coming out, and being sexually assaulted. During our conversation, we discussed details of our shared traumatic experiences. This was the first person I shared my coming out experience with, and consequently they have become a major support person in my life.

What I learned from conducting such deeply personal interactions with some of the most significant people in my life was extremely gratifying. Exhibiting the work was especially empowering. I hope that my project encourages others to have conversations about healing and empowerment. The photographs represent glimpses into the trauma experienced by others. They focus on emotions rather than the details of each person's story. They reveal experiences of healing through a safe lens. *Unnamed* was a therapeutic experience for myself and for those involved. ■

EDUCATION

PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY

BY RODDY MACINNES

I was profoundly affected by the serendipitous (or so I thought) discovery of an album of photographs made by a North Dakota woman, Nina Weiste, one hundred years ago (described in my personal work essay). Connecting the people and places in Nina's photographs enhanced my appreciation for how all things are intimately related. Consequently, due to Nina's influence, 'one thing leads to another' has become a recurring theme in teaching assignments and in my personal work. Sharing life-stories, across generations, cultures and geography, using family photographs as catalysts, has evolved to become one of my principal instructional methods. Illuminating what connects people rather than divides is the desired consequence.

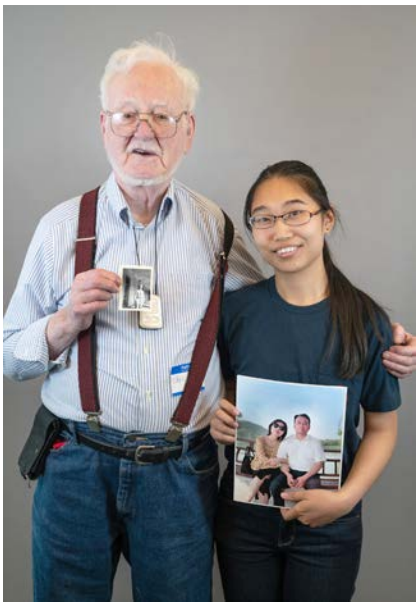
We seldom think about why we take photographs. Typically photographs are taken to preserve the things we want to remember. Most often they memorialize significant people and life events. While working in a retirement community as a visiting artist in Ellendale, North Dakota, Nina's home town, I became acutely aware of the intimate connection that exists between family photographs and memory. Most resident's rooms in the retirement community resembled shrines to their existence. Walls were decorated with framed photographs of significant people and important life events. What's "worth remembering" was abbreviated to a handful of photographs.

Mindful of this I began conducting community engaged intergenerational projects with my photography students at the University of Denver, with the primary objective of illustrating the intimate association that exists between family photography and memory. More specifically, how family photographs can be used as facilitators for sharing life stories. Since conception, this idea has generated approximately twelve collaborations between my photography students and community partners in and around Denver, Colorado.

The images here are from the *Photography and Memory Project*, and illustrate a wonderful collaboration between University of Denver students and Denver Public Libraries. My project partner at the library, Amy DelPo, has been conducting a Memory Café class for older adults experiencing memory loss. In addition, we recruited Anne Walker, an educational consultant and PhD candidate at the University of Denver. Photography students were paired with older adults at the Schlessman Branch of Denver Public Library. Because some of the community members were experiencing significant memory loss, a unique challenge was presented. Mindful of this, prior to the first engagement, Amy and Anne, tutored the students on how to engage in conversation with older adults, regardless of memory ability.

The collaborative project we developed created a compelling sense of community and gave participants a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Our process was relatively simple, yet the results were stunning in their complexity and impact. We asked each person to choose a treasured photograph that holds meaning for them: the one photograph they would bring with them when fleeing their house if it caught fire. Community members and students brought their photographs to the library and shared them with each other over three Friday sessions. Project documentation included: making a portrait of each person holding their photograph; recording their story and then transcribing the story to accompany the image. During these sessions, a beautiful thing happened: the photographs created a bridge between strangers—


LOVE



between people of different ages, races, genders, and backgrounds—and suddenly, strangers became friends. Subsequent images and stories generated from our collaboration were exhibited at the Denver Art Museum.

Community collaborations such as the Photography and Memory Project, illuminate the power of stories in an instinctual, immediate way. I observed joy on people's faces as they interacted with others in the group—their connections were made possible through the catalysts of photography and storytelling. Stories matter. The stories we tell ourselves matter. And the stories we tell each other matter. They remind us of who we are, and they connect us to other people. They highlight our shared humanity. They help to create community. In doing all these things, they help to enrich our lives. This is true of spoken stories. It is true of written stories. And it is true of stories told in photographs. ■

Betty, Ellendale
(opposite, photographs by Roddy MacInnes)

Justin, Ellendale

Ken and Frank, Ellendale

Lawrence, Ellendale

John, Ellendale

Jeanette, Ellendale

EDUCATION

NO SNAPSHOTS IN CLASS

BY WILLIAM PAUL THOMAS

In my practice as a visual artist it is important for me to maintain an open mind about the tools and processes that I select to explore and bring ideas to fruition. The bulk of my creative work includes naturalistic, meticulously rendered oil paintings ranging from miniature representations of strangers to larger than life depictions of loved ones, and a broad spectrum of other connections in between. Virtually all of the figurative paintings I have made and exhibited have been translations of my own photographic references.

Because I choose to integrate the use of digital photographs in my process, I often encourage the use of that medium in the painting, drawing, and design classes that I teach. In those courses, the use of photography is often preceded by exercises working from intentionally arranged objects in real space. Extensive painted or drawn studies of dramatically lit forms reinforce the idea that our perception of depth is informed by the overlapping of shapes, relative changes in tonality, linear perspective, and shifts in scale. These lessons in seeing and translating volume into two-dimensional illusions are critical before leaving students to their own philosophical or electronic devices. Thus, the flattening and compression of space that is inherent to the photographic medium is one that we acknowledge and push against by employing the understanding of the ways in which light can accentuate the roundness and sculptural qualities of living and breathing subjects that have been reduced to two dimensions in an artwork.

In the earlier stages of my development as an instructor I had an unhealthy habit of telling students without showing them. That is, I overlooked a painfully obvious aspect of visual arts as a discipline, and assumed I could give exclusively verbal prompts and have students successfully produce artworks based on those prompts with no problem. Thankfully this oversight was short-lived, but

produced some valuable lessons for becoming a more effective art teacher. Recalling my own undergraduate experience as a studio art major at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, the most impactful instructors offered thorough demonstrations and examples of what their expectations were for each given assignment. They were also generous with the physical resources that helped us gain more skills and experience. My painting professor, Greg Porcaro, volunteered the use of his personal DSLR camera for students to make hi-resolution reference images to use for self-portrait studies.

With that formal art education in mind, the most obvious learning outcome was that I needed to highlight representative examples of each prompt that I assigned. This might include documentation of other students' work, examples from art periodicals, or from online sources. It frequently means that I share multiple images of work made by prominent contemporary artists to help illustrate the ways in which creative ideas often resonate deeper by virtue of exhaustive repetition. When students opt to work from photographs

for any assignment, I encourage them to take many images rather than relying on a single capture. Creating multiple references allows them to explore variations in composition, and can serve as the foundation for building a series attached to a database of aesthetically unified images. These photos can function similar to drawn or painted sketches, where you produce a number of studies before settling on a final design. They also capture time and the creative process in a sequential format.

When preparing a still life set up in a drawing class I usually invite students to participate in the placement of the objects on the stage and play an active role in setting the light source. We work to emphasize dynamic shape relationships between each object and position the light, (typically a singular light source), so that shadows are cast in a way that activates the drama of our premeditated arrangement. Although our established reference points in class are strategically designed in preparation for value studies, I also look for moments to identify the interplay of light on form in natural or built environments without excessive human intervention.

For a 10 a.m. drawing class we might direct our attention to one of the east facing windows to observe how the fragmented sunlight pressing diagonally through the blinds strikes the base of a white pedestal and bounces up to illuminate the undersides of our resin-coated fruit replicas. One goal here is to simply witness and appreciate the ways in which rays of light travel across the surface of an object, making notes about the turn of its planes as indicated through the subdued or occluded areas of reflected light. The other relevant outcome is that the sensitivity to this phenomenon should carry over to the use of photography as a resource for image ideation.

Some standard best practices I suggest to students for using digital photography to produce strong references include the following:

- Avoid using the built-in flash, as the use of the flash tends to reduce the variation and contrast in tonality that accentuates three-dimensionality.

- If possible, control the intensity of the light source and be mindful about the direction of the available light in relation to your subject(s)

- Use a reflector to bounce a less intense concentration of light onto your subject. A piece of white foam core is good for this.

- Use cropping and leading lines to create dynamic, open compositions.

Because cell phone cameras are so ubiquitous today, incorporating the use of digital photography into visual arts coursework is more feasible than it may have been 15 years ago. This increased accessibility to a democratizing image-making tool, asks those who teach the art of seeing to propagate a philosophy of intentionality and nuance. There is no shortage of haphazard snapshots or vapid selfies in the world. I champion the idea that the same kind of focus and attention to detail that one applies to a carefully rendered portrait painting should be applied to the creation of digital images. The corresponding aesthetic value of images produced in this mode is immeasurable. ■

Work by students in order of appearance:

Charlie Wilcher

Karen Zaho

Alex Dai

Sonya Zhang

Durga Sivhamani

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