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A Year with the Hincheys

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Ariel Chollet
Author

I am a senior Arts Studio major at the University of Kentucky. My primary focus in my major is Digital Photography. I plan to continue my studies in Photography at graduate school once I have completed my undergraduate degree. Throughout my time in the Fine Arts Department, I have had the opportunity to learn from instructor Dennis “Bones” Carpenter, Associate Professor of Photography. While obtaining my undergraduate degree, I have overcome challenges regarding conceptual ideas and subject matter in my photographs. From these challenges, I have developed the necessary skills in order to continue to develop my work as I advance in my education and my career as an artist.

Dennis Carpenter
Faculty Mentor
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Anyone can make a photograph. Making a significant image...now that's an entirely different matter. Some sources estimate that eight billion photographs are made annually. The vast majority of those images are predictably cliche and of little interest to anyone other than the maker and their immediate friends. The task of an artist/photographer is to create images that speak to universal truths. It is an elusive goal; requiring articulation of an idea and sustained, in-depth, exploration. “A year with the Hincheys” is such a project. The relevant continuum begins with the casual family snapshot and ends with archetypical images of life’s milestones - adolescent courting, weddings, births, graduations, etc. While this work highlights moments in time, it embodies ideas about family, friends, and interpersonal relationships. The photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue, Eileen Cowin and Emmet Gowin come to mind as historical precedents. “A Year with the Hincheys” celebrates and builds upon that tradition.

A Year with the Hincheys

For one year, I became a part of a new family with the hope of capturing the family dynamic through photography. I have always been interested in the way people live and interact with one another and how these interactions are influenced by our earlier relationships with our parents. The social conditioning of family life ultimately affects the way we build relationships with others. With this idea in mind, I wanted to use photography to document what goes on between family members. To make the project more specific, I decided to focus on the mother and daughter rather than on the whole family. Out of this project, my senior B.F.A series, A Year with the Hincheys was developed. This series revolved around the relationship between Stacy and her daughter Michelle. The level of comfort the family and I developed allowed me access to situations an outsider would normally not have. As a result, I was able to capture intimate moments of their life together.

To better understand my own work, I studied other artists who dealt with similar themes and processes. I started researching documentary photographers who specifically dealt with themes of family and the relationships within them. I found most of the artists documented their own families, giving their photographs an intimate feel. I realized that if I wanted my photographs to have as much intimacy I had to become like family.
to the Hinceys. However, I also realized that no matter how much time I spent with my subjects, I would never witness the same interactions I would if I were related to them.

This dichotomy both posed a challenge and presented an opportunity. I needed to build a relationship with Stacy and Michelle, which meant gaining their trust. To do that I learned to read their body language so I could tell when the photo session felt forced, or made them feel uncomfortable. I learned to back off in such situations, to focus my attention elsewhere until they felt relaxed again.

I had met the challenge of developing trust, but only to a point. I was still an outsider, not family. I realized this was an opportunity to photograph in a different way. I discovered that my presence affected Stacey and Michelle’s behavior, as though I was an interruption in their life. These instances showed up in my photographs as a taint of uneasiness, which compelled me to concentrate on finding and capturing such moments.

This new focus led me to artist and documentary photographer Doug DuBois, whose images evoke an emotional feeling of detachment, tension and isolation. DuBois photographed his family for over 20 years, and described his feeling about his work this way:

“The interruption itself: the tension, however slight, that registers on the face and body, the silent negotiation between photographer and subject. The regrettable analogy that pops into my head is two dogs sniffing each other - tentative but intimate.”

DuBois’ process of painstakingly setting up shots and planning the scenes is completely different from my process of waiting for the shot to occur. But the way he photographs his subjects, so slight and silent yet so profound, has shaped the way I think about my art and photography. Instead of allowing photo sessions to unfold naturally, I tried to control them. This caused the sessions to become too mechanical. As I changed my approach, the tension and interruption that DuBois speaks of occurred more and more frequently.

What helped me turn things around was advice from my classmates and Bones, my professor. One particular suggestion I acted upon was capturing Michelle in environments other than her home life, including time with friends and at school. In this attempt to capture her “social life,” I found myself one day at a Halloween party that Michelle was attending in her neighborhood. I remember approaching this event as a break from my normal process, and thus didn’t feel the need to control what I was photographing. Later, when I presented these Halloween photographs to my classmates and professor, they reacted not to the pictures of Michelle and her friends, but to a single image of Stacy dropping by unexpectedly dressed in fur coat and tennis shoes. Bones found this photograph humorous and revealing, an interesting look into how Michelle and Stacy related when outsiders other than myself were around.
Despite this encouraging feedback, I was still unsure of the direction I wanted to go with this series. I even confessed to Bones that I might not want to continue photographing the Hincheys. Bones was quiet for a moment, and then suggested I capture Stacy and Michelle in as many environments as possible, both physical and social. He said that the best way to show the uniqueness of something is to juxtapose it with its opposite.

Continuing with the Hincheys was not the only advice from Bones that I received and followed. At his suggestion, I began to research an artist who focused on becoming a part of her subject matter. Niki S. Lee is a Korean-born artist known for her unique method of observing subcultures and ethnic groups and then adapting to their general style and attitude through dress, gesture, and posture. She then re-joins the group in her new guise, while a friend photographs her as she participates in the group’s activities. Lee maintains control by choosing which images to display, and also deciding when she wants a picture to be taken of her with the group. This participatory technique used by Lee affected the remainder of my project. I found myself becoming a part of the Hinchey family. I adapted to their living conditions, lifestyle and daily activities in order to accurately portray the mother-daughter relationship. This involvement with the subjects allowed my work to develop in a new direction. I intend to pursue this new direction by exploring other personal relationships beyond mother-daughter and experimenting with other media besides still photography.

Work Cited