MFA and BFA in Photography

Thesis Exhibition

Megan Reilly  Amanda Bogatka  Li Lin-Liang  Sam Mazzara
Alexa Guevara  Nicholas Rouke  Shabiha Jafri

State University of New York at New Paltz
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This crisis sharpens and exacerbates the inequalities of our society. It is the most vulnerable of us, who are the most hurt. These seven artists’ projects warn us, provoke critique of our complacency, and engage our empathy.

As their teacher, I’m proud to have watched the development of their ideas, their experimentation with multiple forms and approaches and I commend them on their poise and resourcefulness in bringing these series to completion in such uncertain times. All of them use art to transform their grief and anxiety into beauty. For all of us, art is the language of hope.

Nadia Sablin
Assistant Professor of Photography
May 2020

In the fall of 2019, seven of my students began projects they expected to exhibit at the Dorsky museum, and to celebrate the fulfillment of their degrees with friends, families and faculty at the opening. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken away that celebration, stranding all of us in uncharted territory. From the current perspective the projects in this catalog seem almost prescient. Megan Reilly’s chaotic search for signs of impending doom, Nicholas Rouke’s hapless character mucking about after an unspecified disaster, Sam Mazzara’s photographs of a world shimmering on the edge of perception, all speak of the fragility of contemporary existence.

As our nation mourns the loss of family members, neighbors and respected figures, Shabiha Jafri’s project documenting her mother’s illness and passing resonates on an even deeper level. We are all Shabiha today, or could be tomorrow. As we are sheltering at home, our family connections take up ever more of our time and energy. Amanda Bogatka’s troubled relationship with her mother and its impact on her health are no longer a persistent memory – they have become her current reality once more. Alexa Guevara’s project examining her family history through the lens of U.S. immigration policies, gains a new urgency, as immigration is currently suspended by executive order. Li Lin-Liang also turns her lens on her family and their new normal.
Human existence is collapsing from the inside out as a byproduct of its own making. These photographs are my keepsakes for the end of the world. I am not so much afraid of the uncharted years of life ahead, but I am scared that everything I have come to know will slowly die out before I am aware of it. By photographing the world as it lays around me, I can give myself an illusion of control and process the end of human life. I am mourning the present I know I will soon long for.
Self-love has never felt attainable; crippled by the awareness of my emotional irregularities, I view what is beyond my control as a fault of my own. The failure to accept my thick-bodied self, impressionable mind, and sensitive nature has led me to become unsympathetically critical of my identity. The delicacy of an appetizing meal fills a void where joy and security are alarmingly absent, providing sensory relief to a persistent depressive state. Messages of low self-worth from the mother wound – described as a mother’s emotional absence in childhood – evolved into a trauma-based belief system I kept for myself as I grew older.

Over time, my infatuation with food has begun replacing the love I lacked, while mimicking the romantic love that I long for in my personal life. Due to a lengthy battle with major depressive disorder, feelings of worthlessness have impaired my thoughts and disrupted my behaviors to no avail. Targeting moments of acute distress, monotony, and heavy ruminations, these images work to combat a negative internal dialogue plaguing my day-to-day existence, while sharing the immense discomfort of insecurity with those who resonate with the experience.
Remnants of a Breakdown
Yearning
Under Suburban Sky

Under Suburban Sky is intrinsically tied to my experience when I moved at age 40. Life is always like a drama. I dressed up as a normal suburban housewife to express daily life scenes. I made some images like movie stills via longtime exposure and 16:9 ratio. Each photograph depicted a dramatic conflict between the family members. The male, as husband and father, was sometimes absent in the images. He was never fully absent, as he always shows up as some symbols. The main actress, as mother and wife, showed up in most of the images; however, she never set a complete view of herself. Since the mother is not just herself; she represents all mothers in the same situation.

For the past two years, this project has been my primary source material in creating bodies of work which explore the migrant narrative and experience, albeit through a personal lens. Photography is an effective way to recreate real scenes in life and challenges norms of female sexuality, beauty, domesticity, and identity. While my need to decipher and address my own life is personal, my work has always touched upon universal themes, with the potential to start a dialogue about cultural differences and universal similarities.
Double Faces

White Rose
Bed
There exists, in all of us, an innate human desire for reason. Any evidence of the order we seek, however, is limited to what we can gather from our own experience. Great frustration follows when we become aware of the indifference of the world to this yearning, what Albert Camus called "the Absurd." This unreasonable silence can be overwhelming, but it is accompanied by immense freedom; it is a relief from the burden of responsibility we impose on ourselves to meet societal demands, to satisfy expectations. By making permanent the frequent, if fleeting, moments where the world reveals itself to be much stranger than it may initially appear, I create unrelenting reminders of the absurdity of the world and, in turn, of the immeasurable freedom that we all have in our constant confrontation with our own obscurity.
April 24th, 2020 marks the day that my father has been in this country for 27 years, 10 months, and 24 days. The process of being documented is long and does not follow a straight path. There are multiple applications that build up over time. These documents along with archive photos show testament to the legal application. My family now serves as validation for my father, alongside the millions of others who are in this country, living normal lives, and collecting these papers.

Alexa Guevara is a recipient of the Luigi and Anita Traverso scholarship.
Americans like to believe that we are better than everyone else. The cultural message is that someone born here can grow up to be whatever he wants, and live the American Dream. I was lucky enough to be born into the generation that ruined everything. As the economy and global standing of the United States declines, millennials have been accused of not working hard enough to achieve the traditional milestones of success.

This series was born out of my own anxiety about the future. After surviving the undefined “Collapse”, the last millennial on earth searches for a refuge in a brand new world. He resorts to trying things he learned from TV, but is trapped in a cycle he doesn’t have the tools to break, chasing a dream that doesn’t exist. The sequenced photographs are derived from an endlessly repeating slideshow.

Nicholas Rouke is a recipient of the Luigi and Anita Traverso scholarship.
Shabila Jafri
BFA 2020

*Shazia, I Pray You Are Recovering*

My mother’s death has left a growing absence in my home and in my heart. Her diagnosis of a grade III brain tumor destroyed her mind and body. Her presence still lingers in small pieces: her bed, her clothes, her photographs. Her clothes are the strongest pieces of her identity; they are the only part of her that never changed. Cyanotypes of my mother’s MRI brain scans are handsewn onto her clothes to document the specimen that invaded her body. I confront and acknowledge the new version of herself I never wanted to accept as reality.

I am desperately trying to latch onto all my memories of her, from the mother I grew up with to the woman who forgot who she was. I am afraid of her disappearing from my mind. This is my attempt to bring her presence back into my life before I forget her.

Shabila Jafri is a recipient of the Luigi and Anita Traverso scholarship.
Specimen 1 - Diagnosis

Specimen 2 - Intruder
It is important to understand that the artwork presented in this catalog began in the fall of 2019 in what appear retrospectively to be carefree times. The work was completed away from campus, without the physical and collegial support afforded by the college, under the extremely stressful conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The student artists in this catalog are to be congratulated on their courage and their persistence in the face of these obstacles. In 2004, during another disturbing time in American history, Toni Morrison wrote in *The Nation*: “In times of dread, artists must never choose to remain silent... Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge – even wisdom. Like art.” These students have indeed persevered in the face of this difficult situation and their accomplishments are proudly displayed in these pages.

The educational enterprise, flows from the many collaborations that create and transmit knowledge. First, there is civilization’s collaboration in the creation of the body of knowledge worth knowing. A just and provident society taxes and sacrifices to create great educational institutions for its students. Teaching takes place within those institutions that supply buildings, heat, and an admission process that brings qualified students to the teacher. Within those institutions, one teacher collaborates with all the other teachers.

And finally, and most importantly, there is collaboration between the teacher and student. Indeed the students are absolutely the most important part of this entire process. Without their energy, devotion, and excitement, a teacher cannot teach. Teachers learn so much from students. This catalog is a reflection of the gifts that these students have brought us.

Francois Deschamps
Professor of Photography
May 2020