BEADS ON A STRING:

EXTENDED PORTRAITS

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When I was first introduced to photography, I was mainly drawn to landscape imagery. I enjoyed being a solitary spectator. Over time, inclusions of figurative elements became more and more apparent in my work. I purposefully began to incorporate a figure into my landscapes, ascribing to it a certain nostalgia and a sense of isolation I was experiencing on many levels at that time. Before long, I felt disconnected from these images because of their ambiguity and generalization. I found myself craving more content and personal commitment in my photography.

At the end 2003, I started experimenting with a 4” x 5” format camera, which forced me, to some extent, to change my way of photographing and seeing. That is how the beginning of this new body of work was born. I was accustomed to shooting with a 35 mm camera, which allowed me to be spontaneous, quick and immediate. I permanently switched to a large format. I could see myself benefiting from this change. I lost some of the spontaneity that a 35 mm format offers but I gained the beauty of working with larger negatives and the endless possibilities of view camera movements. Thanks to this technical transformation, I began to develop new ideas. I tried to focus on what truly mattered to me, initially stripped from any necessary relationships among the images. I photographed pieces of time and space, filled with an emotional and psychological charge. More figurative elements kept reappearing and soon dominated my subject matter completely. My motives became utterly wrapped around human values and the differences that distinguish each of us from one another.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS................................................................. iii

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION.............................................................................. 1
   Statement of the Problem
   Methodology

II. DISCUSSION OF WORK COMPLETED........................................ 6
   An Extended Portrait
   Subjectivity in Photography
   The Presentation

III. CONCLUSION............................................................................ 15

ILLUSTRATIONS.............................................................................. 16

BIBLIOGRAPHY............................................................................... 22
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Maminka (Mom)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>Sama sebou (Myself)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Tatínek (Dad)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Dee Dee</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Babička a dědeček (Grandma and Grandpa)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><em>Terezka</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

When I was first introduced to photography, I was mainly drawn to landscape imagery. I enjoyed being a solitary spectator. I would try to capture the beauty of the Decisive Moment in nature. Over time, inclusions of figurative elements became more and more apparent in my work. I purposefully began to incorporate a figure into my landscapes, ascribing to it a certain nostalgia and a sense of isolation I was experiencing on many levels at that time. Before long, I felt disconnected from these images because of their ambiguity and generalization. I found myself craving more content and personal commitment in my photography.

At the end of 2003, I started experimenting with a 4” x 5” format camera, which forced me, to some extent, to change my way of photographing and seeing. That is how the beginning of this new body of work was born. I was accustomed to shooting with a 35 mm camera, which allowed me to be spontaneous, quick and immediate. However, I realized that my subject matter, still life and quiet landscapes, did not make the most of the advantages of the 35mm format camera. I permanently switched to a large format. I could see myself benefiting from this change. I lost some of the spontaneity that a 35 mm format offers but I gained the beauty of working with larger negatives and the endless possibilities of view camera movements. Thanks to this technical
transformation, I began to develop new ideas. I tried to focus on what truly mattered to me, initially stripped from any necessary relationships among the images. I photographed pieces of time and space, filled with an emotional and psychological charge. More figurative elements kept reappearing and soon dominated my subject matter completely. My motives became utterly wrapped around human values and the differences that distinguish each of us from one another.

I believe that the beginning of this body of work of extended portraits subconsciously originates in my past. My grandparents on my mother’s side lived a very unique, old-time life, very connected to their roots and traditions. When they passed away, I felt that I had lost a significant part of my identity forever. There was no more picking up warm eggs from under the hens every morning. No more sore backaches from digging up a field of potatoes with a hoe for several days when the season came. There would be no more waking up my granny after she had fallen asleep first while trying to put us to sleep with fairy tales we had heard a million times before. I felt sad that my children should never be able to experience the exact moments of something that I found so important to me, to anybody. I felt, however, equally fortunate. I felt fortunate not only because I had had the opportunity but also because I was able to recognize it and hold on to it. I started to see these jewel moments around me outside my family too. I had a very urgent need to record them and preserve
them. I was afraid they would disappear for good. To paraphrase what Robert Frank said about his later work, I no longer tried to be the observer, who turns away after the click of the shutter. Instead I tried to recapture what I saw, what I heard, and what I felt.

*Beads on a String: Extended Portraits* hopefully offers a dialogue about human beings, who, in one way or another, have not lost sense of connection with their existence. My attempt is to depict their story, or more so, my story about them. For the reasons I have stated above, I find it fundamental to portray people, who I know well or at least whom I am connected with on some level, rather than complete strangers. I choose to work in both a documentary as well as an allegorical manner.

**Statement of Problem**

One of the major problems I had in my earlier work was my desire to make my photography more personal and conceptual. In this recent body of work I am frequently having almost the opposite problem. I am trying to stay conscious of how much I am investing of myself in the work, not to make it too sentimental. I am asking the question of whether it is my story about the particular person, or whether it is actually a story about myself through them.

The format of this body of work is closely related to the idea of narrating a story. I decided to piece together several images to give a more complete
impression of each individual. Here is where my next problem arises. The issue of having a certain format formula for the whole body of work to create consistency within has been following me throughout the whole making of this work. Final decisions about the physical sizes of each print have had as important a role as the concept of the work itself.

Another problem I was facing by starting this new work, whose subject matter I had little experience with, was setting boundaries to what an “extended portrait” meant to me. In order to successfully complete this project, it was necessary for me to answer the following questions:

1. How do I determine what objects are portrayed to successfully create an extended portrait of each person?
2. How best can I control the level of apparent subjectivity in my images?
3. What is the best presentation, including the scale and the size of the photographs, for this body of work to give it a personal talismanic sensation?

Methodology

Ever since my beginnings in photography, I had been drawn to the photographic process more than the actual taking of the picture. I truly enjoyed experimenting with various printing techniques such as toning and bleaching. At the same time, I was nearly overlooking the importance of concept of what I
photographed. When I changed from a 35 mm format camera to a 4” by 5”
camera, my procedural interest in photography changed along with it from the
darkroom to the view camera itself. I believe this was a crucial transformation for
me to successfully create a conceptually coherent body of work. The expense
and the labor-intensive process of the 4” by 5” format forced me to take more
time with each image and pay more attention to each negative and each idea.
When it was time for my problem-in-lieu of thesis, I decided to make the most of
the time I spend in the Czech Republic in the summers and I started
photographing at home. I knew my concentration lay in creating portraits of
people, who I knew well. I photographed my mom, my dad, my grandparents,
my aunt and my friends. However, I spent only a small portion of the year at
home. Therefore I continued to photograph my friends and my “family” here in
the United States at the same time. In order to make this project work on all
levels, my goal was to incorporate also the visual appearance of the whole body
of work, which included the sizes and the organization of the exhibited pieces.
CHAPTER II

DISCUSSION OF WORK COMPLETED

An Extended Portrait

One of the biggest challenges I have dealt with as a graduate student has been to work in the body-of-work frame of mind. I always found myself creating images that were single pieces of various natures, not necessarily relating to one another. Since the beginning of the project of the extended portraits I have felt a tremendous freedom of expressing myself. Josef Sudek once said: “It would have bored me extremely to have restricted myself to one specific direction for my whole life, for example, landscape photography. A photographer should never impose restrictions upon himself.” (44) I felt that incredible independence and therefore decided to use that as my foundation to what I wanted “an extended portrait” to mean to me. I photographed the people I was creating a portrait of and their environment. I photographed things, which reminded me of them away from their natural surroundings and also created photograms about them without the use of an actual negative. I fell in love with this lack of restriction of a process and subject category, which made complete sense to me, especially after joining these individual “words” into “whole sentences.”

This approach is reflected for example in Figure 1, the triptych Maminka (Mom). The centerpiece of the triptych depicts more of a traditional documentary image of my mom. One of the moments that I see of her all the time. She is
sitting in her garden, at her favorite place, by the shelter where my parents store the garden tools. The garden is "her" place. She has just cropped the garlic and it is drying hanging inside. She always wears old shoes in the garden because as she says, "there is no need to wear out the new ones when you are working."

These that she is wearing in this photograph do not even have laces anymore. Another part of this image shows how frugal and skillful my mom is. She is stitching, fixing a piece of clothing as she frequently does. She "never" uses scissors so she is tearing the thread with her teeth as always. This image takes on a further meaning because of the background. My parents lived most of their lives under communism, which did not allow them to travel to many countries other than possibly Yugoslavia, Hungary, East Germany and Russia. Now that they are in their fifties, they feel too old to travel anymore and instead, live these adventures through my sister's and my experiences and souvenirs that we bring from our travels. This is represented by the Dutch clogs in the upper right corner of this image of my mom. The last thing to mention is my parents' relationship towards their heritage and their roots. As I mentioned earlier, my grandparents on my mother's side used to live a very difficult country life. They used to grow a field of wheat, which they beat themselves to get the grains. The crop beaters show hanging as a decoration now behind my mom, one of the many memories too hard for her to leave behind. This is more of the traditional documentary approach I try to incorporate in this project, imagery that I do not manipulate in
any way. On the other hand, I feel just as strongly about the left piece of the triptych to be a true representation of my mom. I photographed it in the tower of my hometown’s town hall. Up there, I came across a dove sitting on a couple of her little eggs. It only made sense to me to use this image of the mother-to-be bird as a symbol of what a nurturing, caring and loving mother my mom is. Her face is not in the image but it is still she in the photograph, so are my sister and I, the only two children of my parents, represented by the two eggs. This connection is fully conveyed through including the same image of the window without the bird showing the eggs, Figure 2. It is titled Myself for an additional reason of my desire to have a family one day like the one of my parents’.

Another great part of my mom’s life is cooking. The gender division in the Czech culture is very apparent. A woman is still often expected to take care of the cooking for the man, do the laundry, dishes and other housewife responsibilities even though there are very few women in our country that can afford not to have an 8-5 kind of job on top of that. I hope to reflect my mom’s love for our family through this traditional Christmas soup that she makes for me every time I come back home in the summers. She usually makes about five little dumplings for each of us at Christmas time. When I come home she always says, “You can have as many as you want.” I had ten in my soup.

I tried to reflect this separation of gender roles in the portrait of my dad as well. In the left image of the triptych Dad, Figure 3, the viewer can see my
dad’s workshop, the place in our house where my dad fixes our shoes, our car, our watches, as well as musical instruments. Furthermore, through the upper bass, I am also making a connection with his profession as a musician. An upper bass was his major during his studies at the Music Conservatory of Brno when he graduated in mid-1970s and still is one of his favorite instruments to play. The freedom I am experiencing with this body of work is illustrated in the right piece of this triptych of my dad. I am able to use a landscape image of my hometown to symbolize my dad because of his affection for it. He has lived his whole life in the little town of Boskovice. When I come back home and show my parents snapshots from my travels saying how exciting this or that place was, my dad always says: “But there is no such place as home, is there? It is the most beautiful of all.”

The Subjectivity in Photography

“With the help of pure photography, we are able to make portraits that show their subjects absolutely truthfully and in their whole psychology. I proceeded from this principle after I said to myself that, if we can make true portraits of people, we can create a mirror of the age in which these people live. [...] By capturing through absolute photography both the individual social strata and their surroundings, I hope to give a true psychology of our time and of our people.” (50) August Sander, who made this statement in 1925, worked in a
much broader and sociological approach than I would ever wish to attempt. Nonetheless, I feel a tremendous connection with him about his desire to stay truthful. I usually work in two major manners: rather literal and symbolic. In the traditional sense of photography, this literal approach, which is more or less documentary, might seem more factual and ingenuous. I try not to pose too often in order to stay visually truthful to the reality. According to Roland Barthes, by posing in front of a lens, the poser does not seem to risk as much. He metaphorically derives the experience from the photographer. I am aware of this phenomenon and therefore when I do pose, I simulate my previous observance of my experience with that particular person. However, I do not believe in visual truth to be more precise than psychological or emotional truth. I am attempting to capture my non-verbal and non-visual experience with the people I photograph too. I am interested in making the allegorical part of their portrait just as truthful. For instance, in the image of Terezka, Figure 6, I am not only portraying a cabin of my friend’s parents where she loves to go to but also I am expressing the warmth and feeling of being so welcome, which I always experience with her. The most subjective element comes in with my decisions of the moments I choose to photograph. This is highly dependent on the mutual relationship of each person and myself. In the case of Dee Dee, Figure 4, I choose to recreate my narrative about her through her real self as well as the use of symbols. The pure and fresh white calla juxtaposed with her very fragile
aged hand signifies her lifelong yearning for beauty. This idea is reflected also in a portrait of her with butterfly wings. The wings are no longer complete; unable to fly, like her state of mind. Through my images I feel it is quite apparent at what level I know each individual that I photograph. As Barthes describes: ”The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.”(13) I realize I am quite in control of who I want the people I photograph to be in their portraits. I try to express the most truthful part of themselves, which they allow me to know and share with me.

The Presentation

By using a 4” by 5” view camera, the question of an appropriate size of each photograph, which constantly existed in my work, reappeared. I fell in love with the small size of the contact print. I thought it enhanced the concept of forming something personal and precious. I admired Sally Mann’s later work, such as “Deep South” (1998) and “What Remains” (2003), for an incredible alliance of process and concept and had the aspiration to reach this unity of both in my work. I also liked the idea of having a definite sharpness by not enlarging my negatives. I could relate to Josef Sudek who once said that the moment he
recognized an enlarged print, he could never go back to enlarging negatives again. On the other hand, I did not fully identify with the program of the Group f/64, who were also great supporters of sharpness, which is already revealed in their name. They liked using a small aperture such as f/64 and contact printed for a maximum clarity of their images. However, as David P. Peeller describes they also rebelled against “the fuzziness and obscurity of pictorial photography” (229), which is undoubtedly a part of my aesthetics. I knew I did not want to contact print only. I was not ready to give up experimenting with larger prints in order to give these intimate moments a greater presence.

My initial vision was to construct a portrait as a triptych. That way I would have the opportunity to work with three images to create each person’s story in its wholeness. At first, I wanted to include the three images into one mat, 16” by 20” or 20” by 24” at the largest. After several trials, I was very disappointed with the result. By making 4” by 5” contact prints I was achieving very deep black photographic space around my images. By overmatting them with my standard bright white matting board I lost this darkness that very much supported my idea of drawing the viewer into something treasured. My next natural choice was to try to mat the triptychs with a black mat board. This attempt let me down even more because of the tremendous loss of the rich black of the photographic paper and the mismatch of the black of the mat and the paper itself. At this point, I was printing my contact photographs on 8” by 10” size paper. I was ready to
invest into 16” by 20” paper and discover the possibility of using the black of the actual paper instead of using any mat. An issue of registering my negatives arose. I created a registration 16” by 20” board with the right placement of the three 4” by 5” negatives. Then I placed a glass of the same size over it and carefully stuck my negatives with a double stick tape at two corners at the right positions. I had to be overly cautious about dust issues but the result was very pleasing. Nevertheless, it did not take very long and I started to feel that all the three 4” by 5” images could not breathe well enough in the 16” x 20” space. My final decision was to print each of the three 4” by 5” images individually on separate sheets of 16” by 20”. I believe this was the right decision. This way each print received its own importance rather than scanning through all three images all at once when viewing them on one sheet of paper. I kept the unification of each person’s portrait by situating all three prints right next to one another, creating a nearly panoramic feel for the project. Once again, I tried to progress in this work, this time by introducing larger prints to go along with the contacts. My instant thought was to establish alter-like pieces by having the center one bigger than the side ones. I felt that way I would make references to something spiritual and sacred. However, in the case of Babička a dědeček (Grandma and Grandpa), Figure 5, I could not apply this rule. My grandparents celebrated their 61st wedding anniversary this year and my constant concern was to keep “them” together. Therefore when I got the idea to photograph each of
their bedsides I started realizing it needed to be one piece on both of them rather than two separate triptychs. I planned on printing about four to six images with their bedsides on far right and far left. The rule of having the center of the three larger did not seem to fit in this case.

My final decision, therefore, was to consider the bigger, 20” by 24”, size for certain images but not to obey a particular rule. This way I could give a maximum attention to what each photograph conceptually and visually demanded and at the same time, keep a variety that would eventually break up the larger exhibition space. To tie the two together aesthetically, I printed both the small as well as the bigger size images with at least some black space around it.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Through this project I found out about things that are essential for creating a consistent body of work in its process and concept. Despite constructing, more or less, traditional black and white, two-dimensional work, I discovered more diversity and potential of photography than ever before. I investigated the conceptual meaning in art, my biggest challenge, which stayed hidden to me until the beginning of this project. To help me do so I tried to study the subject of Beauty, so apparent in my early work. Inspired by the art philosophy of Agnes Martin, I tried to understand Beauty as something that is part of our mind rather than a part of the object itself. I realized that I couldn’t anticipate for someone to relate to my photography if I couldn’t relate to it myself. I couldn’t expect my images to be successful in their meaning and communication if they didn’t have a meaning to me in the first place.

When I was about ten years old I read a little comment made by my favorite Czech author, Jan Werich, who said that happiness is like small beads, which we put on a piece of string; the more of them we have the bigger the happiness becomes. I have learnt to feel this way about life – pieced together out of little fragments that I treasure and attempt to protect. I hope for this to come across in this new body of work in its entirety.


