36 FRAMES:

A SELF PORTRAIT

by

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Honors Degree in Bachelor of Fine Arts

In

Photography and Digital Imaging

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There is no doubt that we live in a highly mediated culture, more and more images are readily available to us. We view them instantaneously as events are unfolding on our computers, tablets, cellphones, as well as in newspapers and on television. We are constantly barraged and influenced by images from advertisements to news sources; and from television to hollywood films. Photography, and the photographic image, has been the most important tool through which we convey narratives of commercial and cultural significance. We have given meaning to the world around us through the lenses of our cameras. We have created a visual culture that has a great impact on how we view ourselves and the conventions through which we describe our own personal narratives.

The objective of my new photographic series, 36 Frames, is to explore the images that have become iconic over my lifetime. In researching for source material starting from 1976 to 2012, the scope of the project, I started to react to the images in an unexpected way. On one hand, the images were full of emotion, whether humorous, sad, disturbing or joyful, depending on what the pictures were depicting. On the other hand, there was a flattening that occurred as the pictures were dislocated in time and physical space, a cycle of images culled from the depths of the Google image archive. The pictures were unmoored from their original context and meaning and my experience of viewing them was of a passive disassociation.
I reacted to this feeling by creating an alter ego, Jean Meursault, a time traveling tourist who casually experiences past mediated events by popping into frame with an uncanny sense of timing. Meursault’s journey is documented in photographic images and travel diary entries that heighten a feeling of disconnection and alienation. To keep 36 Frames: A Self Portrait synonymous with an experience of history through mediation, the series is being presented as a gallery show, a self published book, magazine, and downloadable e-book, as well as a social media experiment in which Jean Meursualt has a travel blog, Facebook page and Instagram account in order to mirror the devices and ways in which we experience the media today.
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INTRODUCTION

Photography has been linked to memory since its invention. When Louis Daguerre first created silver coated light sensitized plates, respectfully named the Daguerrotypes, in 1839, they became known as “mirrors with a memory”. The inference of memory is embedded in the photographic image, as we use photography to document the events that we hope to preserve, or to document places and people that we consider culturally important, etc. It is, however, a complex association, since memories are intricate negotiations with past events, free to be colored by present perspectives, certainly not a static and rigid narrative fixed for eternity. On a larger level, our cultural memories are often being re-explored, called into question and challenged. Since the rise of high modernism, however, our sense of cultural memory has been expressed and assessed primarily through the photographic image. We have created, and live, in a highly mediated culture.

What are the implications of this linkage to memory and photographs in a mediated culture? As Susan Sontag notes, “[Photographs are] not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement.”(pg. 165) She argues that the photographs become surrogates of the actual event, which ultimately it becomes the photograph that we experience. We then create connections with experiences that are both our own and the experiences of others. Through the mediated image we access events that are unfolding in distant lands. This connection has been amplified in the digital age where through our computers, tablets, cellphones as well as traditional media, like newspapers and television, we can tune in and experience events in nearly ‘real time’. We have crested the hill of what Baudrillard described as “hyper-media”, culturally living in a
‘simulacrum’, or a virtual reality, of media sensation and hyper-awareness. The ‘simulacrum’, Baudrillard expresses, codes our representation of both cultural and personal narrative, leaving no clear distinction between reality and the mediated simulation, or image.

What happens to the ‘virtual’-ness of our reality when we revisit the past icons of our culture? Can they, and do they, remain intact as pure descriptions of the events they document? As Susan Sontag also states, “A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passing of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract past-ness, open to any kind of reading” (pg.71) My intention with this project, 36 Frames: A Self Portrait, is to explore the impact of the images that have become iconic over my lifetime, to challenge them, renegotiate them, and to create a counter narrative to them within the accepted paradigm. In this series I hope to explore themes of mass trauma, as well as themes of mass celebration and triumph.

Likewise, the creation of 36 Frames: A Self Portrait was inspired by the intense anxiety that I feel when I consider how images in the digital era are consumed and processed, often at an incredible rate of speed. With new technologies allowing for image making to be made with a simple press of a button on ubiquitous items like cellphones, personal media players, tablets and even computers; we have initiated a culture obsessed with documentation. These documents are presentations of often-mundane events, and are shared to anyone with an Internet connection instantaneously through social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This conflagration of image making and sharing is building up in image archives and servers, like Google, and contributing clatter to what is an already noisy media environment.
METHODS

In order to express ideas of alienation through mediation, I experimented with different methods of photographic image making. Initially I staged actors in front of a rear projection screen on which past photojournalistic images were projected. I hoped that through this method, I could create tableaus that would heighten a sense of disconnection. However, due to limitations in projection size, scaling and framing of the actors became problematic. The images made through this method were abstract and interesting, but fell short of my goal of creating a tension between the actor, the event, and the time in which it was occurring.

I continued to compile images for the series by searching the Google servers while considering a new approach to creating the final images. The process of selection was based upon a list that I made of historical events that have occurred since 1976, the list included multiple events per year, allowing me to grab multiple images to represent each year. I then selected the final images by following both my intuition as well as a personal emotional response to the selection.

It was by researching for the source material that I started to react to the images in an unexpected way. On one hand, the images were full of emotion, whether humorous, sad, disturbing or joyful, depending on what the pictures were depicting. On the other hand, there was a flattening that occurred as the pictures were dislocated in time and physical space, a cycle of images culled from the depths of the Google image archive. The pictures were unmoored from their original context and meaning and my experience of viewing them was of a passive disassociation.
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From the travel diary of Jean Meursault
Compiled by Michael Marciniec
New York, NY

9/11/2001
Persian Gulf

5/17/1987
Tehran, Iran

11/4/1978
Kuwait Oil Fields

1/17/1991
Gulf of Mexico

4/20/2010
East Moriches, NY

7/17/1996
Cape Canaveral, FL

1/28/1986
Jonestown, Guyana

11/11/1978
Skamania County, WA

3/20/1980
Beirut, Lebanon

7/12/2006
Goma, D.R. of Congo

8/2/1998
Miami, FL

4/22/2000
Sarajevo, Bosnia

1/8/1993
Blacksburg, VA
Sarajevo

2/9/1994
Point Salines, Grenada

10/25/1983
Miyagi, Japan

3/11/2011
Termez, Afghanistan

5/15/1988
Washington, D.C.

2/9/1999
Logar Province, Afghanistan

8/14/2003
Chicago, IL
SOURCES
