

Split Ends

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Seeing is the first step to understanding.

I sit by the window, running my fingers through my hair. Getting to the ends, I hold them up to examine them. There is a golden afternoon light coming through the window. This is the magic time of day when every strand is illuminated. I sift through these tiny fissures, noticing where the breakdown starts. They are the result of wear and weakness, but sprout like tiny seedlings. Commonly seen as imperfections, I look at them with admiration.

This is where my practice starts, with a long look. Seeing is the first step to understanding the world I exist in. I look without my camera and without the intent to photograph. This comes later. I wait and observe. I move and watch. The things that are close to me are what inspire me to make art. Spending extra time examining my surroundings, I see the details. These details compel me; they call to me to be captured. I am engulfed in a sense of wonder that is outside of language. The camera allows me to express this wonder without words. As Andre Kertesz said, "The camera is my tool. Through it I give reason to everything around me."¹ When photographing, I am searching for reason. The act of making pictures creates a sense of clarity for me that is seldom found outside of this act. The camera I choose is a large format camera which requires a slowness that forces me into acute awareness. I set up each image

¹ Bartholomae, David, and Tony Petrosky. *Ways of Reading: Words and Images*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 203.

with great consideration. Framing, depth of field, light, and exposure are all carefully chosen but are informed by intuition.

After finding the perfect split end, I hold the strand and rip it out of my scalp. I get my camera and set it on the tripod. Knowing the split will only be visible if lit from behind, I hold it in front of a frosted light box. This set up creates a silhouetted version of my hand. I take all the steps to get the right focus and exposure. I place the film holder in the camera and pull out the dark slide. Then comes the element of chance; the part that makes shooting film magical. Between the subject and the film's emulsion are the various mechanisms that dictate what is actually captured. I relinquish control and hit the shutter hoping that all my planning comes to fruition but I won't know till the film is developed. This suspense fills me with optimism and anxiety.



figure 1

Looking back at my past.

When I moved away from my home in Massachusetts to Seattle, I had to reevaluate my practice and change my way of making work. Much of my previous work had addressed the relationships I have with my parents, specifically my father's struggle with pain management and addiction. Because I was in a new unfamiliar place, I started to look back at my past rather than focusing on my present. I also started using new mediums in my work, such as fibers and sewing. In the piece, "Baste," the sewing acts as a replacement for cooking.



figure 2

It is a reflection of my own feelings of inadequacy and the expectations of an adult woman placed on me by my mother and society. The photographs are intentionally unappealing and the sewing somewhat haphazard to reflect my dissatisfaction in these expectations. Inspired by the piece "My Living Room Rug in Hyperbolic Space" by Alyzon Shotz, I started sewing fragments of images together.



figure 3

I was drawn to this piece because of Shotz's use of sculpture to add dimensionality to photographs. Sewing is also a domestic activity traditionally done by women. It was something my mother taught me how to do and was a way in which I showed care for

people; by mending my family's clothes. Cooking however, was something my mother tried to teach me but I was never good at or liked doing. Zoe Lenard's piece "Strange Fruit (for David)" was one I had admired for her use of sewing as a poetic act of mending.



figure 4

This piece was in tribute to a friend who had recently died of AIDS. Lenard uses fruit as a metaphor for queerness similarly to my use of Thanksgiving dinner to point towards normativity. A well made piece of clothing or furniture is expected to have even, small, tight stitches that ensure strength and durability while maintaining its aesthetic appeal. Both my piece and Leonard's use loose sewing to emphasize the message of inadequacy and failure in regards to what is expected.

After becoming more familiar with my new home, I returned to my process of observing and analyzing myself and current surroundings. These observations collided with my thoughts about female expectations in my next piece, "Unpolished."



figure 5

I was noticing that when I had my nails painted and would get anxious or nervous, I would start to pick the nail polish off my nails. Nail polish is primarily used by women and is a way of covering imperfections and highlighting femininity. This piece is a metaphor for external female expectations and my wanting to pick them off. Through the use of video, I was able to multiply this action to overwhelm the viewer with the visual and the sound. I put them in a state of restlessness that is a reflection of my own

restlessness about conforming to societal ideals placed on women. Accompanying this piece is a 40 x 50 inch print of all of the nail polish chips that were picked from my nails during the videos.



figure 6

In my image, I use the chips of dried paint that came from my act of literal and symbolic subtraction that expressed my opinions.

Returning to Massachusetts in the summer of 2015 placed me back into the setting of my previous bodies of work. Having spent many years photographing my father and our family home, I felt compelled to pick up where I had left off. I called the photographs I made there “Ebb Tide,” to reflect the way I was feeling while making the work; like I was at a point of drawing away from shore but in a hopeful, trusting way, in that I knew I would come back in eventually. The process of making these images was entirely intuitive and an act of catharsis. I continued this project when I returned to Seattle as a way of bridging the gap between my past and family and my present.



figure 7

While making these photographs, there was an over abundance of fruit flies in my apartment. From the end of summer through the fall, we went through a cycle of collecting them and throwing them out to have more come and have to do it again. During this time, I made the piece, "Untitled (Vinegar Universe)," using the carcasses of fruit flies I had collected.



figure 8

I was thinking about the size and life span of a fruit fly in comparison with the human life span. I began questioning their seemingly insignificant deaths, wondering if they were more substantial than a human can comprehend. Or, contrarily, if our human existence is that of a fruit fly in the vastness of the universe.

An endless investigation.

These thoughts lead to my current project, "Split Ends." This project is a photographic meditation on the process of aging and decay. Sally Mann has said, "it's always been my philosophy to try to make art out of the everyday and ordinary...it never occurred to me to leave home to make art."² Aligning with these sentiments, my home is often the setting for my work. Using my own body and domestic surroundings, I photograph moments of atrophy. Mann's work has explored many themes similar to mine including landscape, family, and mortality. Through her work, she gives a weight to beauty that speaks to the condition of being human. This exploration of the human experience is at the core of my practice.

As Sontag writes in *On Photography*, "The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates that reality is fundamentally unclassifiable. Reality is summed up in an array of casual fragments -- an endlessly alluring, poignantly reductive way of dealing with the world."³ Photographs create a dormant documentation of what is forever changing in reality. With my camera, I memorialize the things around me that are perishable but worth seeing. Photographing these findings puts an importance on them that was previously

² *What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann*, (Dir. Steven Cantor, Stick Figure Productions, 2005), DVD.

³ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 80.

not there. The camera elevates the everyday into an art object to be looked at and contemplated. Through zooming in and cropping I am able to understand more deeply the subject of my image. "...a certain kind of abstraction gets closer to the real, an approach that requires breaking away from a practically oriented or abstract relationship to objects and discovering how they are constituted in perception."⁴ The abstract nature of my images makes the viewer focus on the details. By narrowing on these details, I am able to illuminate the subtle nuances I see in my meditations.

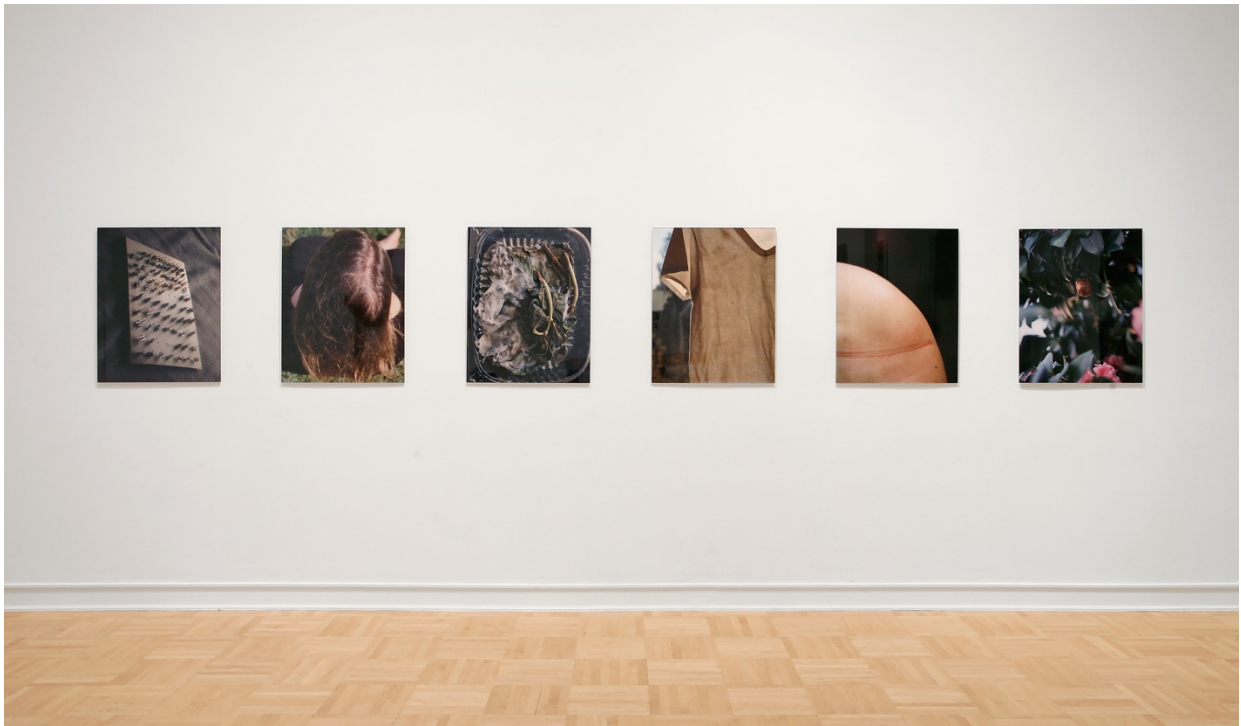


figure 9

⁴ Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2007), 152.

Earring backs speak to the right of passage many adolescences experience once they reach a certain age. The puncture marks in a postcard are similar to those made in the piercing process. Wounded ear lobes give children a feeling of maturity.



figure 10

I sit in a field of grass soaking in my surroundings. The top of my head receives the beating sun while my hair blows in the wind. The light and air exhilarate me; they are among the most basic necessities for flourishing.



figure 11

I find an old container of basil on top of the fridge. What wasn't used for cooking has molded over. It is covered in a sheet of frosty spores with a few stems poking through.



figure 12

A stained t-shirt isn't just a piece of fabric, but a vessel which concealed its wearer. Noticeable discoloring becomes a story of the body it held.



figure 13

I get ready for bed and notice the mark left behind by my clothes. An indent as a sign of a long day.



figure 14

A wilting flower amongst the blooms points towards the inevitable decline of all living things.



figure 15

The investigation into these natural processes of degradation is motivated by a feeling of internal unrest. Growing up Catholic, I was instilled with ideals of religion and that human existence was substantial in the eyes of God. As I've experienced life and began to question these ideals, I am searching for more tangible proof in the importance of my own existence. I use the camera to enact "small deaths" that are easy to comprehend to help negotiate my fear of the unknown. To be human is to exist in a constant paradox that is exclusive to man. "Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with."⁵ Unlike other living things, humans have an awareness to their own demise which is anxiety inducing. Being bombarded with news of tragic and unexpected deaths through various media sources heightens this anxiety. With photography, I build an archive of images as an act of catharsis that opens an endless investigation.

⁵ Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death*, (New York: Free, 1973), 26.

Image List.

1. Image from series *Split Ends*. archival inkjet print. 2016.
2. *Baste*. archival inkjet prints on canvas, thread, Poly-Fil. 2015.
3. *My Living Room Rug in Hyperbolic Space*. Alyson Shotz. double-sided inkjet print on folded paper. 2007.
4. *Strange Fruit (for David)*. Zoe Lenard. Orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, and trim wax. 1992-1997.
5. *Unpolished*. 5-chanel video. 2015.
6. *Unpolished*. archival inkjet print. 2015.
7. Image from series *Ebb Tide*. archival inkjet print. 2015.
8. *Untitled (Vinegar Universe)*. archival inkjet print. 2015.
9. Instillation shot of *Split Ends*. Henry Art Gallery. 2016
10. Image from series *Split Ends*. Archival Inkjet Print. 2016.
11. Image from series *Split Ends*. Archival Inkjet Print. 2016.
12. Image from series *Split Ends*. Archival Inkjet Print. 2016.
13. Image from series *Split Ends*. Archival Inkjet Print. 2016.
14. Image from series *Split Ends*. Archival Inkjet Print. 2016.
15. Image from series *Split Ends*. Archival Inkjet Print. 2016.

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