Summer 6-2021


Nicholas Costopoulos
ncostopoulos@me.com

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Coming Home Again and Again: Caregiver


Nicholas Costopoulos

MASTER OF FINE ARTS, VISUAL ARTS
LESLEY UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, USA
JUNE, 2021
ABSTRACT

Coming Home Again and Again is an ongoing documentary project researching cultural, religious, societal and familial identity. Caregiver, the initial volume, examines my becoming caregiver to my mother after her diagnosis with vascular dementia. The photographs look into our reversal of roles along with changing family dynamics. This undertaking is the beginning my inquiry into my own identity by means of observing my personal relationships, life and death, what is private and public, and a spiritual reawakening. This inspired the creation of a visual narrative of how our memory of people and past events, personal identity, and our own preconceptions can shape the discourse of what each individual views as historical fact.

INTRODUCTION

My background is of a second generation American of Greek decent, born in the mid 1960s in the Boston area where I have continued to reside ever since. I had a sheltered childhood, since I was raised to believe that I should only trust my family and the people in our church, anyone else was not to be taken into confidence. I became a very introverted and quiet boy and didn’t really approach anyone to socialize, being gay only magnified that shyness and isolation. Later I would realize, like many LGBTQ people do, that a few close friends would become my chosen family. I am one of the lucky ones to have acceptance from my family and support from my chosen family. I enjoyed all forms of art and enjoyed nature. I would be content to be outside exploring, drawing, painting building models, anything that would bring out my creativity. My dad gave me an old camera and a roll of black and white film one day and showed me how to load it. That was it. I could hide behind the camera and collect images of everything I saw or experienced. Primarily a landscape photographer, I broke out of my comfort zone with portraiture and now narrative and documentary. The camera became my creative tool, but also my excuse to talk to people and break my shyness, I’m still very much an introvert, but now I work with people to tell their stories though the images I make.

The book of photographs I’ve created, takes into account the ideas of photographic accuracy in documentary and how the photograph is manipulated, whether intentionally or not, by the photographer and if that influence is to the detriment or benefit of the narrative or memory being presented. A viewer’s own thoughts and prejudices can have a purport on how the image is perceived. This brings importance to the relationship between the photographer and the subject, especially in portraiture. We see this in pictures posted on social media of ourselves where the photographic narratives are highly manipulated to portray the best possible image of the subject that can be produced. Accuracy and truthfulness take a back seat to the perfect lifestyle image. There is tremendous value, we as a society place on the image, in telling the story of “I was here.”
COMING HOME AGAIN AND AGAIN: CAREGIVER

“When an animal, a rabbit, say, beds down in a protecting fencerow, the weight and warmth of his curled body leaves a mirroring mark upon the ground. The grasses often appear to have been woven into a birdlike nest, and perhaps were indeed caught and pulled around by the delicate claws as he turned in a circle before subsiding into rest. This soft bowl in the grasses, this body-formed evidence of hare, has a name, an obsolete but beautiful word: meuse. (Enticingly close to Muse, daughter of Memory, and source of inspiration.) Each of us leaves evidence on the earth that in various ways bears our form, but when I gently press my hand into the rabbit’s downy, rounded meuse it makes me wonder: will all the marks I have left on the world someday be tied up in a box?” (Mann 2015)

The above quote is from Sally Mann’s memoir, Hold Still, where she is pondering all the boxes of memories, photographs, papers, souvenirs and the like that were left to her by her family members as they had past. Not just memories, but evidence of a life lived. Memory is an interesting thing though, it is the person remembering that chooses what parts of a life lived to remember and what to forget. Documentary storytelling and narrative are dependent on the author and the their desires. The author cannot help but include themselves in the narrative whether in an undetectable way or open and truthful in their opinions and prejudices.

The images in this book and exhibition are a culmination of four years of documentation of my mother and her home in West Roxbury (Boston), Massachusetts. These are the photographs that were selected out of twenty-seven hundred pictures. Our family is very private and being an introverted landscape photographer, a personal documentary was completely outside my comfort zone. I chose the images that appear in the book for their narrative, revealing, respectful, empathetic, and compelling qualities.

Coming Home Again and Again was to be an unexacting photographic documentary chronicling my mother’s dementia diagnosis, but became much more. During its evolution, the project dissociated into volumes reshaping into a personal examination of self-identity. The first volume Caregiver, being presented here, meditates the changes and effects my mother’s illness has produced in our relationship and to the home we’ve created over the past fifty years. During my observations and caregiving in the past five years, I have explored religion through her eyes which has lead me to question my long held spiritual beliefs. My further observations led me to ponder my beliefs on the aging process and dementia. A process that intertwines nostalgia, love, emotional connections, life and death, and, most importantly, strong family bonds that I have been so lucky to possess.
I reexamined the objects of my childhood home, items I took for granted, and saw them in a different light. Objects of personal identity, trophies to the self for overcoming struggle and obstacles or items created from the rawest of materials transformed into beautiful and useful handcrafts. In tearing down bathrooms, kitchens, and bedrooms to build a safe environment for my mother, I began to see the beauty in the old weathered and cracked finishes and dated items that may not be of use now, but they still have a history, a meaning and a purpose to our family. Their purpose is different now, than it was in my younger, more naive years. They are my mother’s meuse, as Sally Mann says, and this narrative attempts to show both of our meuses together [space through which animal track passes]. (Chrisomalis 2014)

ARTIST RESEARCH

I looked for, and took inspiration, and some advice from the artists, Alec Soth, Sally Mann, Maggie Steber, Olivia Parker, and Josef Sudek while creating the images for Caregiver and during the editing and sequencing process.

In his recent book, I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating, Alec Soth creates portraits of people within the subjects’ private spaces. (Soth 2019) Soth says:

“When I returned to photography, I wanted to strip the medium down to its primary elements. Rather than trying to make some sort of epic narrative about America, I wanted to simply spend time looking at other people and, hopefully, briefly glimpse their interior life. In order to try and access these lives, I made all of the photographs in interior spaces. While these rooms often exist in far-flung places, it’s only to emphasize that these pictures aren’t about any place in particular. Whether a picture is made in Odessa or Minneapolis, my goal was the same: to simply spend time in the presence of another beating heart.” (Dickerman 2019)

I search to communicate more than just the subject in the image being presented, but the essence of the person who created the item, purchased, or placed the item on the shelf. Taking inspiration from Alec Soth and Sally Mann, I try to examine the presence of the spirit that was or still is in the space when I select the pictures to include. While there is definitely the mother son connection in the portraits, I hope that the viewer also sees more within the image. In a Zoom gallery art talk, Alec Soth, spoke of how he developed a new approach to portraiture in his latest work, I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating, by experimenting at the Frankle Lab in San Francisco and combining his pervious experiences with portraiture.

“It’s two people looking at each other and there is an exchange of energy. It can be an exchange of power, and exchange in different sorts of ways. There’s separation but we’re
connected by a certain form of energy. I became less dualistic. It’s a portrait that is both separate and connected. I want to explore portraiture at its most fundamental.” (Soth 2020)

In the above quote, Soth is referencing a portrait he made of Anna Kentfield [figure 1] where his camera set up was divergent from his previous portrait sessions and as he says, a connection of energy between model and photographer. I thought carefully about, and drew more inspiration from his words. While my portraits in Caregiver do have the connection of mother and son, there is a distance and a separation, a distraction that is the disease showing through my mother in many of the images. I believe there is energy flowing there but there may also be a rift being formed by the illness that is causing the distractions, melancholy and detachment, which I see as her memory. [figure 2] Perhaps all these emotions and feelings being captured are her trying to hold on to what memories she can.

Soth goes on to explain, the images of private spaces [figure 3] he includes in the book act as portraits representing the people who live there just as much as the pictures of their faces do. This motivated me to take a closer look at the things that my mother surrounded herself with over the course the past fifty years. Things that I took for granted growing up, now had a new meaning, a new efficacy. Photographing them in the fading light of day or the early glimpses of morning sun, was inspired mainly by the work of Josef Sudek’s images of ordinary objects in the window of his studio in Prague, Czechoslovakia. (Sudek 2008) [figure 4] The objects in my images are mostly ordinary, everyday, household items, light and shadow become a second subject, and often the only subject, of the photograph.
To help edit away distractions and allow the viewer to either see and contemplate on the object and its meaning; to simply pause and meditate on what they had just seen in the image prior, light became the topic of a few images.[figure 5]

Maggie Steber and Olivia Parker both had some sway over the content of Caregiver in different ways. After attending an artist talk at the Leica Gallery Boston, March 18, 2018 by Maggie Steber titled, “The Secret Garden of Lily LaPalma”, I asked her about her project “Madje has Dementia”. [figure 6] We talked about photography and our mothers but one thing she said stood out to me, “Make the picture, you can decide later what you will do with it, but if you don’t make the picture, you’ll have nothing.” This resonated with me and allowed me to think in more practical terms about picture making for this project. Along the same vein, in the late summer of 2019, I went to an artist talk by Olivia Parker at the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, MA, and had an opportunity to ask about her work dealing with her husband’s bout with Alzheimer’s Disease. She was on the opposite end of the spectrum and said she did not want to remember him in “that way” and she did not want to represent him “like that publicly, there’s plenty of pictures of that sort out there for people to see, I don’t have to add to the collection.”[figure 7] I took both artists, whose work I admire, and tried to reconcile between the two very different approaches to a very similar subject. After much deliberation I landed somewhere in the middle but leaning toward Steber’s advice of making the images and deciding later if it is to be used or not. There are definitely images that will not be published but they exist and I have them. The passage of time does incredible things and I know I will not regret having created the pictures that will go unseen.
Josef Sudek looked to the still life to create images of the world around him. He photographed simple objects on the window sill of his studio in Prague in differing light and weather conditions.[figure 8] The simple objects then took on new life and meaning, even a new purpose. Sudek said he was “fascinated by photography’s ability to bring seemingly dead objects to life through light or by its surroundings.” (Gallery 2018) Sudek being reclusive, or maybe just introverted used the still life to portray an interesting dichotomy in his work of the interior space versus the exterior space. Here in the found still life images of my mother’s home, I am displaying the private interior space as well, using light and shadow to guide the viewer through the home and its contents. Pausing for moments at a time to reflect on an object, or even a pool of light on a wall or a floor, remembering to be mindful of the experience. Sudek's still life draws us in and shows us a quiet world of intimacy and poetry. The still life images in Caregiver are attempting to slow the viewer down, look closer, remember and meditate on what you see. Sudek achieved this very simply with a seashell, or a glass of water, a rose.[figure 9] The images of my mother’s tea cups, or Byzantine icons, or a vase, evoke stillness and memory that can be different depending on the viewer. We all can have a variety of memories that can be brought to the forefront by seeing a stranger’s belongings and pictures.[figure 10]

Sally Mann says, “Using photographs as an instrument of memory is probably a mistake because I think that photographs actually sort of impoverish your memory in certain ways, sort of take away all the other senses — the sense of smell and taste and texture, that kind of stuff.” (Gross 2015) There are just as powerful ways to invoke memory as looking at a photograph. We have to have images in conjunction with the other senses to get a full representation of memory or remembrance. The photograph cannot be alone in this endeavor, other factors are at play. The concept of context, and Mann's second point on photography and memory or accuracy is
something I explored here looking at photographs I had taken and remembering the events at the time, sometimes differently. Mann says the photograph is just a split second of time. She spoke of this when discussing her book, *Immediate Family*, and especially the cover image (Mann 1992) of her three children.[figure 11] In order to have complete context of the picture, the contact sheets would be needed to see the images take before and after in order to establish a timeline of events. She goes on to say that the same is true of photographer Diane Arbus’ image, “Child with a Toy Hand Grenade”. (Arbus 1962) [figures 12, 13] Mann says if the viewer were to see the images right before and the images right after that one iconic photograph, they would see a boy playing with a toy in the park, and the same was true of her pictures in *Intimate Family*. (Gross 2015) This was very intriguing, was the artist manipulating the storyline? The storyline had to be manipulated in order to stand to reason and be successful. This does not imply any fabrication of events or experiences, but a softening of the edges, or waiting for the right moment to present itself or knowing where to place oneself in relation to the subject for a stronger composition to achieve the goal of the narrative.

**PERSONAL NARRATIVE AND MEMORY IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY**

Annette Kuhn explains that photographs by themselves don’t trigger memory

“but are generated in a network, an inter-text, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these cultural contexts, historical moments. In this network, the image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning making; always pointing somewhere else.” (Kuhn 1995)
With this theory in mind, images can evoke any memory the viewer subconsciously perceives to be in front of them. This puts the storyteller or documentarian at a disadvantage of sorts, since they cannot predict without question the reaction to the image being presented. This only magnifies the importance of some text in photographic, or image based documentaries or narratives that need to get a singular point rather than an interpretive chronicle. Kuhn further explains that the viewer of the work has preconceived notions or ideas that are brought to the work being viewed and those cannot be completely ignored while interpreting what is being seen. In Caregiver, there are images of pools of light either on the floor or on the walls of my mother's home. The human mind is fascinating and does try to find shape, form and order in even the most chaotic of abstractions. While these pictures are not incredibly abstract in nature, their subject is the light and are meant to be resting images for the viewer before moving on to the next series of pictures. They are meant to be meditations and memory inducers, harbingers of past events that stopped me in my tracks as I felt compelled to make the picture and include it in the project. My hope is others would have a similar reaction to the pictures. Kuhn continues with her analysis of the photograph and memory with a passage on Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, where he finds a picture of his mother as a child soon after her death and believes to see something of his mother in it that he doesn't see in any other image. (Barthes 1981) Kuhn goes on to interpret that perhaps memory is as an archive and that this photograph serves to bring the “memories and grief-work in that it brings to life a moment he could not have witnessed.” (Kuhn 1995)

To supplement memories that may be brought forth by photographs, the storyteller sometimes can use other means to get their objective across. Ephemera, such as newspaper clippings, medical records, marriage certificates, locks of hair, jewelry and the like can be combined with the image to create a sort of memory shrine that helps to maneuver the beholder to the desired conclusion of the author. Geoffrey Batchen writes in Forget Me Not, a framed object found in an antique store that he refers to as “At Rest”. [figure 14] He concludes that it is an albumen print from the 1890s of a woman surrounded by flowers and butterflies made of wax and woven with, he assumes, is the woman's own hair, and a metallic plaque under the picture that reads “at rest”. He further states that these remembrance frames were made by mourners as to not forget a loved one that has died. Additionally, there are descriptions of boxes which when opened have a photograph of presumably the deceased on one side of the lid and a lock of hair and maybe a sprig of rosemary (symbol of remembrance) and other personal artifacts. (Batchen 2004)
“Finding such artifacts gives you pause for thought. Who was this woman? What was her life like? What possible relationship could I, as a viewer of this picture today, have to her?...A faded picture, some ruined flowers, a desolate feeling. She could be speaking about an artifact like this one, or she could be offering a metaphorical description of memory itself.” (Batchen 2004)

These photographic objects were created out of the trepidation of forgetting loved ones, according to Batchen. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, when a person dies there are services that are to be performed within certain timeframes. Memorial services are held on the third, ninth, and fortieth day after the death of the person and again on the one year anniversary. These services are usually held at the church after the Divine Liturgy but may also be served after Vespers (evening prayers) or Matins (morning prayers). For the memorial service, Kollyva, a ritual food of boiled wheat, is often prepared and is placed in front of the "memorial table" or an icon of Christ and is blessed by the priest afterwards. Kollyva consists of wheat kernels which have been boiled until they are soft. These are usually mixed with a variety of ingredients which may include pomegranate seeds, sesame seeds, almonds, ground walnuts, cinnamon, sugar, raisins, anise and parsley. Wheat is used because it is considered to be symbolic of the resurrection. Traditionally, the family will then visit the grave, which in Greece will have portraits of the deceased on the gravestones as well as other photographs that may have been left by family and friends as remembrances. The greeting is, May their memory be eternal. Fear of forgetting is real and is something to examine. In the short documentary film, Genocide - A True Story, there is a compelling monologue being given by one of the performers, Olga Karapanagiotidou-Tsaousidou, who is playing a Pontian-Greek woman, a victim of the Greek/Armenian genocide of 1913-1922 addressing the current Turkish government in its zeal to acquire more weapons.

“Turkey is gathering an army and weapons, why? Who do you fear? The Greeks, the Armenians, the Assyrians or the Cypriots? These countries don't have a strong military. Who do you fear? Let me tell you who you fear. It is me you fear! The insignificant Greek woman of Pontos, since you know very well that memory is stronger than all the weapons combined.” (Tsanaktsidou 2020)

Photography, in essence, cannot be wholly relied upon to be the keeper of memory but can and is the starting point for many. The photograph can become the activator of the memory that then leads to other objects, writings, recordings and, reportage.

While photographing for Caregiver, I noticed a difference in my mother's body language and facial expressions whenever I had the camera pointed in her direction. This is true of any person that would sit for a portrait session, but for some reason her gestures, positions and
appearance interested me more than before. Marianne Hirsch writes about Naomi Scheman's concept of the "Maternal Gaze," and I think this is what I was experiencing in the portrait sessions, the difference being, our roles being reversed with me being the photographer. Hirsch uses Immediate Family (Mann 1992) to explain that Mann's photographs are,

“…allo-portraits, rather than as representations of childhood and of her children. Reading Mann's work as her own self representation, reading it in relation to fictional depictions of maternal photographers, makes her work, like theirs, a meta photographic discourse, a commentary and critique of photographic conventions and in particular, of dominant cultural myths about maternity, of the familial gaze.” (Hirsch 2012)

She further states, if the pictures reveal to the children how the mother sees them, they also reveal how the children must see their mother. A point of personal interest, since there is a role reversal involved in my project the observer, photographer and storyteller being the child and the mother is the subject. As my project progressed, I began to question, is she really my subject or is she attempting to reveal the true subject of my narrative to me? The mother child relationship continued and continues as the portraits in the series say as much about me as they do the perceived subject.

TRUTH AND ACCURACY IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

An exhibition at the International Center for Photography brings several artists together for a collection of documentary images taken as the photographer saw the scene unfolding before them without manipulation, no studio lighting, no placement of props, seen, as reported in the New York Times, as a return to the "New Documents" photographs of Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. (Lubow 2020) The photographers all make pictures by observation, documenting the world around them, and are not concerned with presenting a false narrative of a perfect existence to the audience. Here flaws are celebrated and normalized, curiosities of how people may live are satisfied. According to Arthur Lubow's reporting, photographic constructions and digital manipulations are more in fashion and documentary has taken a backseat so to speak to the polished, posed and perfected image. The photographs at the exhibition and in the book But Still, It Turns, (Graham 2021) are influenced by the image maker to some degree. The artist choses what to include in the frame, this in turn provides context for the image. The viewer cannot know what is happening outside the frame and neither what has preceded nor followed the frame. The civil unrest of the past year, the pandemic and the political turmoil, along with all of us having cameras in our possession at all times, has created an opportunity for documentary that had not existed even a decade ago. We all have the potential to document, not only our own lives and the lives of our loved ones, but the injustices we see out in our communities. The danger
comes when those images are taken out of their context, or manipulated to fit a false narrative. There is a responsibility that comes with documentation to present accuracy in the narrative or even to offer assistance when needed. Sally Mann says in her interview with Terry Gross that she would make a terrible photojournalist because when her son was hit by a car, instead of taking a picture, she sat, holding and comforting him until the ambulance arrived. (Gross 2015) She is still considered a documentarian with the work she has produced, but a line was not crossed. Pulitzer Prize winner Kevin Carter, who ultimately committed suicide, had taken images of unimaginable horror that deeply affected him.

“The suicide note he left behind is a litany of nightmares and dark visions, a clutching attempt at autobiography, self-analysis, explanation, excuse. After coming home from New York, he wrote, he was “depressed . . . without phone . . . money for rent . . . money for child support . . . money for debts . . . money!!! . . . I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain . . . of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners . . . ” And then this: “I have gone to join Ken if I am that lucky.”(MacLeod 2001)

Truth and accuracy in documentary should not be confused here. Photographs are interpreted and the interpretation is based on previously held concepts and knowledge. Captions help guide the viewer to understand the narrative being presented. So instead of truth in documentary, accuracy of image to reality may be a better way to understand the concept or meaning of the work. How accurately is the reality of the situation being portrayed. This is up to the photographer to reveal.

We know that photographs conceal as much as they reveal, because a photograph is always a decontextualized representation of reality recorded by a subjective human being who makes plethora of choices before, during, and after taking the photograph. Photographs are, therefore, both referential, representing reality as the camera saw it, and self-referential, representing reality as the photographer saw it. (Borgre 2019)

In essence, what Borgre is saying is, the photograph is subject to the subconscious as well as the conscious edits of the creator and the limitations of the mechanics used to capture the moment in time. Is it the truth? Is it reality? It is reality and truth the photographer wants the viewer to see, and the interpretation of that reality and truth by the beholder. Even saying that a photograph is accurate can be a misnomer of sorts. Kevin Smith’s Pulitzer Prize winning photo [figure 15] “The Vulture and the Little Girl,” (Carter
Carter reportedly said later that he waited twenty minutes to see if the bird would spread its wings, then after taking the image he chased it away. Similar stories have been told of photographer, Dorothea Lange when creating "Migrant Mother" (Lange 1936) Many different angles and positions [figures 16,17,18] were tried as were different lighting conditions and more, before settling on the iconic image. Who’s reality, or truth are we witnessing in these two esteemed and influential images? The subjects’ in the pictures, the photographers’, or even perhaps the people who gave the assignment to the photographers. This is where the personal narrative can conflict with the strict documentary of the photo journalist. In these two examples, the photographers personal experiences, emotions and empathy shows through, but is it the impulse for creating the work as it should to create such strong pictures? According to Borgre, the documentary photograph is being considered a relative reality, since it can hide as much as it reveals and is only a split second of time in a continuum. The photograph can bear witness but it also depends on what the point of view was when the image was taken as to what the image will record. This does not negate the need for truthful representation, especially of real world atrocities that the photograph does offer a historical record to help guide the seeker of past factuality.

In the world of photographic manipulation, however, photographs can be made to depict things that do not exist, especially with today’s digital manipulations, photographers can, and do create the images that they want on a computer or
a smartphone. The temptation to manipulate the image to our liking is always there. Looking at the enormous popularity of the selfie, and all the editing filters, poses, suggestions, and even classes to take better selfies, it's easy to understand why a documentary photograph might be subjected to manipulation and become less truthful. The fascination with selfies has been going on for years. In a New York Times Magazine article, Albrecht Dürer's self portrait [figure 19] from the Alte Pinakothek region of Munich is examined as the first selfie. According to the author, Dürer's painting is one of the greatest self portraits in Western painting. (Farago) The painstaking process Dürer took to paint the portrait is discussed in detail and also how it was manipulated to create the best version of himself. The same is seen today in the world of the self portrait, we all want to be represented in the best way possible even if that is not always truthful nor accurate.

IMAGERY AND THE PHOTOGRAPH IN STORYTELLING

Spirituality and religion are topics that came up during the process of creating photographs for Caregiver, and warranted a closer investigation. Byzantine iconography as an art form fascinated me during my childhood. I would stare at the walls and ceiling of the church during services and think of all the different stories the icons were depicting. Like other children being raised in Greek households, we learned the language but the Liturgy was in an archaic Greek dialect, most of us didn't understand. What I didn't know at the time, was that the icons purpose was exactly what I was using them. Later, not being a part of the church, I viewed them as artwork and would appreciate the techniques of the craftsmen who created such beautiful frescos and murals. Having a new found appreciation of the church in which I was raised and of the Orthodox religion, I spoke to clergy and scholars of the church, and I see the icons differently. They are teaching tools and much more. They are and were used to preach the teachings of the church to the illiterate so they too could follow along. (Constas 2014) They are also seen as windows the people use to look upon the Divine and have a very specific way in which they are created in order to achieve this purpose. [figure 20] (Martin 2002). Photographs, photo books and monographs can serve as an instrument of storytelling through imagery with minimal text serving as a hint or a whisper to position the viewer towards the direction the chronicler wishes.
CONCLUSION

When the MFA in Visual Arts program began two years ago, an uncomplicated documentary of my mother's diagnosis with dementia and its effects was an ambitious goal. Opening up and allowing the project to evolve and change into its current form has been a cathartic and an enlightening experience for myself as an artist and a person. The research and study of photography as well as a variety of other mediums in the visual arts, historical archive, and the subjects of psychology, mental health, theology and social justice have sparked curiosity and inspired further creativity in me. My original intent was also achieved, I spent more time with my mother and we became even closer in the process.
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