Madonna de la Mer: Reflections of Light and Memory

Amjad S. Faur

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Abstract:

The Pioneers of photography sought to document their lives with a new sense of reality and permanence. The results have persevered throughout photography’s brief history as sparse, elegant, honest and strikingly beautiful images. My research uses late nineteenth century and early twentieth century equipment and techniques to document the timeless beauty, which connects us to those old photographs by creating portraits of people, which will deceive and nurture memory. Without our memories, we respond to the present with only survival instincts. Memory is our pool of reference for all experience. Only two basic elements, light and memory, are used as the primary tools in this study. The medium through which these elements are being studied is the only medium in the creative arts in which light is the mark maker: photography. The vivid sharpness found in large format photographs creates a lush and surreal portrayal of time and reality that lends beauty to the nature of this study itself: the perceptions and myths we hold dear to our hearts and minds. The images created for this study portray the vivid lights of both day and night and the illuminated bodies of our species in a suspended dream-like state. They are pictures of people existing in beautiful worlds, which now act as our tangible and visible memory. These photographs, which are to be exhibited at the University of Arkansas in the 2001-2002 academic year, are a portrayal of modern people in a setting and style that erases all traces of date or origin.

These portraits represent a layering of time, an idea that began to bloom during a visit to Rome, Italy. Being in the presence of such vast layers of time, culture and experience, I became deeply moved by the influence not only of the city but also of the generations of culture which built the Western world. The skeleton of this research is built on dualities: the ambiguity of memory and the literalness of photographs; truth vs. fiction; antiquity and modernity. The pictures included in the study are portraits of people existing in a timeless realm where the photographic process is as sacred as the bodies being photographed. The idea of the photograph contrasting with memory is eloquently stated by Lynda Saxson in Ordinarily Sacred:

It was a photograph of a sand sculpture, a reclining madonna with her child in her arms, serenely awaiting the incoming tide. I used to look at the picture, at the woman lying serenely with her child’s leg resting on her belly, with the inevitability of the tide that would come over her, already sounding under her bed. Why didn’t she try to save the child, I’d think, but then realize-she, like him, is made of sand. This Madonna de la Mer, waiting to dissolve in a tide that had occurred and washed her away long before I or my mother was born, but ironically preserved on pasteboard, made me marvel about the transitory shapes of our eternal desires as much as any eloquence carved from marble.

My project unveils lost time. Like the Madonna de la Mer, the people photographed for this study will be washed away in the sea of time. Yet their bodies, unaffected by sickness, age or death, float in the chemical components of a photograph that will, in time, begin to deteriorate itself. However, this project will preserve the memory of these anonymous beings as they exist now though they appear as though they could have been made one hundred years ago. The figures are an abstraction of time, similar to the abstraction of memory.

The duality of the figure versus its abstraction was investigated early on by photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz.
and Man Ray. They explored figurative transformations within photography with solarized prints and detailed nude studies. Later Ruth Bernhard used foreign textures, such as lace and sand, to paint a new surface on the skin of her models. This research is intended to preserve the classical techniques and craftsmanship established by the pioneers of photography through investigation of early photographic techniques.

Light is important in this project not only as illuminator of the scenes but also as the only mark-maker involved in the creation of the images. Photography exists only through light; it is our modern day memoir. Photography portrays life in an unforgiving moment of truth. Perfect pictorial representation plays a strange game with memory. Whereas memory tells one story, a photograph often tells another. Through the course of this project, the defining differences of each story dissolves in front of the camera. What remains is portraiture born from a moment which will be hidden from the trappings of time or place. Through this research, the original methods of medium and large format photography are re-established as viable and unequaled forms of creativity re-emerging in a digitally enveloped space-age of 1’s and 0’s. As computers begin their inevitable eclipsing of classical methods, the craft and process of photography (drawing with light) breathes life into the visual past from which we have come. To shine the light of imagination into the past we have inherited through photographs and memory, while exploring antique and modern creative approaches, will give birth to photographic scenes that are as revealing personally as they are collectively.

The instruments used in my research are the tools of photography. The photographs are made using large format cameras to create 5x7 inch and 8x10 inch negatives. As large negatives were used exclusively during the dawn of photography, this technique adds yet another dimension to the past/present amalgamation which lies at the heart of this project. Due to the extraordinarily sharp focus and tiny grain structure in large format negatives, prints of these negatives produce an image which bears an other-worldliness quality. Antique, non-silver processes such as cyanotype, Van Dyke brown, and platinum printing methods were used to retrace the path that has been laid down for modern photography.

Of the materials used in this research, light is the mother—the sole creator. The photographs are lit with a large variety of light sources such as studio lamps, fresnel theatrical lights, candle light and sunlight. These simple but magnificent sources paint the skin of the images. The light creates deep shadows and milky skin tones and opens a luminescent world not unlike that
found in the paintings of Caravaggio in which bodies seamlessly emerge from darkness and are captured by a divine light that throws the space around the figures into an ambiguous realm of darkness and light. The use of these different lighting techniques helps to create a sense of mood and an atmosphere similar to that of Baroque painting or old tintype photographs. Tenebroso, the technique of using severe contrasts of dark and light, is balanced with the smooth and even tones typically found in large format printing. The final effect creates a dreamlike world where time and place are suspended and we are left only with a quiet reflection of ourselves.

The final goal of this research was to create an enormous body of work to be exhibited as a whole so that viewers may walk into the exhibition and feel as though they have stepped into another world. Hopefully, those who see the exhibit can embrace the whispers of the photographs and forget the present momentarily to find a hidden place within themselves in which they can reconnect to generations long since gone. These photographs become portraits of people who represent the timeless, anonymous beauty seen and held by us all. By calling upon one of the uniquely revolutionary forms of visual expression available (large and medium formats), the photographs escape the slick, quick-clicking trappings of digital imaging which are noticeably dated soon after they are made. Large format photography exists in the same creative realm as puppetry and theater. All are hands-on, extraordinarily challenging forms of creativity. These outlets remind the world of a time when tangible, primitive resources such as wood and clay were the lifeblood of art. The physical relationship of human to medium animates creations, making them that much more a part of ourselves, giving the work a sense of nearness and compassion impossible to find inside of a machine. My research relies on this relationship to weave human experience and human imagination.

Since its discovery, photography has granted mankind the ability to document history as a visual experience. Photography has recorded the thought processes of generations with a new clarity. It is our inevitable connection to old things that attracts us to folklore, or books, or even old photos. This psychological connection is what initially drew me into this project, and it should eventually touch a great number of people in the same fashion. Photographs and their stories are how we will be seen. Memory will no longer be our sole evidence of life lived. It is vital that photography survive in its purest form to act as a storyteller as timeless as our myths.

In our disposable culture, photography as a medium for myth-making is invaluable to us now more than ever. The speed of our planet’s pace makes it difficult to find clarity within everyday life. It is not only beneficial but also absolutely essential that we take time to close our eyes and remember a part of ourselves so easily clouded by the frustrations of a world passing us by. Popular culture, mass media and computer globalization are quickly changing visions of mythic and universal themes. Popular ideas and portrayals of beauty and self-reflection have become little more than anorexic ideals on an advertisement parade. Neglect of the imagination is becoming a global trend. Perhaps by digging into soils of the past, present and future, it will be possible to see a vision of ourselves as timeless beings once again. Dedication to the preservation of the past and the evolving picture of the future is the beating heart of this project. The final exhibition of this work will be in the University of Arkansas Fine Arts Gallery during January and February of 2002.

Bibliography


Newhall, Beaumont. The History of Photography WPC?
Faculty comments

Marilyn Nelson, Amjad Faur's faculty mentor, describes Mr. Faur's photography in glowing terms:

I am very pleased to recommend Mr. Amjad Faur's research paper, defending his visual creative artwork, for consideration for publication in Inquiry, the Journal of Undergraduate Research.

This body of photographic prints, "Madonna de /a Mar (Reflections of Light and Memory)" is significant for several reasons: First, conceptually, by capturing subject without historical reference or documentation of existing time, Amjad is investigating the 'ambiguity of memory' result'. He is utilizing subject and light to 'create spaces which allow the viewer a doorway into a word which is without reference to time, trends or cultural specifics'. Traditionally, the photograph moves the spectator toward contemplation, a place where the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Amjad sees this viewing place as an important and necessary contrast to our contemporary society of motion graphics, film, and of viewing the world from moving vehicles. In those media the eye often has a difficult time grasping a scene before it is immediately replaced with another and the spectator's process of association in viewing Images or scenes is interrupted by their constant, sudden change. These views parallel writings of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in his essay, 'The Work of Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' where he contrasts the viewing of art with the viewing of the new genre of film. Second, technically, the exploration and utilization of classical cameras, techniques and craftsmanship established by the pioneers of photography enhances the timeless qualities of his images. This interest has inspired a deeper understanding of the history of photography and the preservation of historical photographic techniques. And third, these photographs have challenged Amjad to expand his research skills and conceptual thinking as an artist. They are of a quality and quantity suitable for solo exhibition purposes and they will increase Amjad's recognition as a serious and dedicated artist. He has already begun to establish an exhibition record, which is unusual for an art student of junior standing. For artists, the exhibition of creative, visual work is equivalent to publishing...
written research in other academic areas. However, the written description of his work will increase his opportunities to give conference presentations, to publish, and to apply for grants and visual arts projects.

Amjad is pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with an emphasis in Photography. It is clear that he embodies the qualities of a dedicated student as well as the potential to become a fine photographer. He is an extremely self-motivated individual. He possesses a willingness to explore and problem-solve, to challenge himself, and to accept criticism while maintaining an energetic work ethic. This sustained and concentrated effort to produce an extended series of high quality photographs is ambitious and unusual for an undergraduate art student; it is equivalent to what we would expect of a graduate student. His dedication to and love for the art of photography is evidenced also by his commercial employment within the field.

Amjad’s creative research abilities and his performance as an outstanding art student have been acknowledged by the art faculty as a whole. Through portfolio reviews of student work he has received several competitive awards. This year he received the Blanche Elliott Award for Outstanding Junior Art Major, and in 2000, he received the Bedford Camera Award for Outstanding Creative Photography. In 1998 he received the only freshman level award available, the Tom Turpin Award for Outstanding Freshman Art Major. As a result of receiving a scholarship based on his ACT scores, he studied at the Savannah College of Art and Design before entering our program.

As mentor, my advisory role has been to critique the content and formal visual aspects of the work in progress, to encourage critical thinking, and to provide technical criticisms. These meetings help to keep the work focused on project objectives while allowing room for artistic growth. I am fortunate to be working with Amjad and am impressed with his focus, energy and visual interpretations of creative problems.

Larry Swartwood, one of Mr. Faur’s studio critics echoes Professor Nelson’s sentiments:

Amjad Faur has engaged in a project that is beyond the capabilities of most undergraduate students and which would present a challenge for a mature artist. His project, "Madonna de la Mer (Reflections of Light and Memory)," is a project, which is conceptually, aesthetically and technically well developed. Amjad seeks to find the universal and timeless aspects of visual imagery. Aware that the modern human is bombarded with thousands of images daily—more than individuals in the past may have seen in their entire lives—Amjad seeks to produce images that we can fix and reflect upon.

As a student, Amjad displays those qualities—dedication, motivation and self-discipline—which are important to a serious working artist. At the same time Amjad is willing to listen to criticism, and to grow with that criticism. Amjad has the ability to meld the touch of the poet with the mental discipline of critical thinking. In addition, he has the particular desire that artists have had since they began to paint in caves: to give form to the abstract.

Another of Mr. Faur’s studio critics feels much the same way about his work. Joanne Jones says:

I have been monitoring Amjad’s work in photography this semester. Amjad is producing work that reflects the intent which he set forth in his grant proposal. He has secured an antique, large format view camera in order to replicate the large negatives used in the early years of photography. The large format provides a negative of high resolution that is contact printed rather than enlarged. The availability of the large negatives allows him to produce prints by print processes developed in the nineteenth century which are very different from those used today. The process he used in taking the photographs—a large view camera—is also special. Working with the large view camera involves a slow, methodical approach that is quite different from today’s popular point and shoot or digital methods that record an instant with clarity. Through careful observation and adept control of the camera and subject, Amjad has been able to embody his image with the “timeless, anonymous beauty” that he has specified as his goal. Amjad’s stated significance of his study, ‘Dedication to the preservation of the past and the evolving picture of the future…’ is achieved through the use of the large format camera, the focus on the reality of today, and the vision of establishing myth. I have found Amjad to be a very dedicated and responsible young man, who approaches and embodies his creative work with a passion that is ultimately embraced by the viewer.