

clandestine: conversations with a shadow

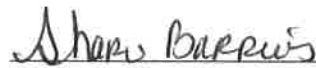
A Master's Exhibition

by

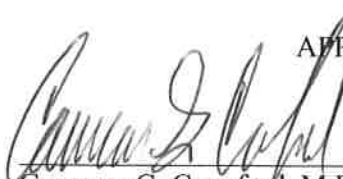
Hope Blackwell

Spring 2019

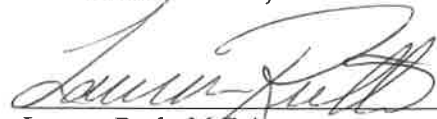
APPROVED BY THE INTERIM DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:


Sharon Barrios, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:


Cameron G. Crawford, M.F.A.
Graduate Coordinator


Tom Patton, M.F.A., Chair


Lauren Ruth, M.F.A.

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Hope Blackwell

07833242

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clandestine: conversations with a shadow

A Master's Exhibition
of Photographs and Video
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Art

by
Hope Blackwell
Summer 2019

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JACKI HEADLEY UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
SUMMER 2019

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ABSTRACT

clandestine: conversations with a shadow

by

Hope Blackwell

Master of Fine Arts in Art

California State University, Chico

Summer 2019

In my thesis exhibition, *clandestine: conversations with a shadow*, I render elements of my psyche to act as a window for the outside world, exploring the psychological concept of the shadow self. The concept of the shadow self, is a psychological archetype suggested in research conducted by psychologist Carl. The shadow self is understood to be the repressed unconscious of an individual that can manifest in feelings or thoughts that contradicts the character of an individual. The research of Jung was the foundation for this exhibition alongside my personal experience with the loss of my father. This exhibition consists of projected still images and videos that attempt to bring the shadow self and the exploration of loss out of the subconscious and into the physical world. I use lens-based media to record my body as the primary subject for this work. The gallery installation is meant to become the physical representation of my mind, where the shadow lives, creating an environment where viewers can encounter something that normally is not seen.

CHAPTER I

THE SHADOW SELF

In my thesis exhibition, *clandestine: conversations with a shadow*, I render elements of my psyche to act as a window for the outside world, exploring the psychological concept of the shadow self. This exhibition consists of projected still images and videos that attempt to bring the shadow self out of the subconscious and into the physical world. I use lens-based media (photography and video) to record my body as the primary subject for this work. The gallery installation is meant to become the physical representation of my mind, where the shadow lives, creating an environment where viewers can encounter something that normally is not seen.

Twentieth-century psychologist Carl Jung's research suggests the presence of a psychological archetype known as the "shadow self." The shadow is described to be the repressed unconscious that embodies feelings or concepts that contradict an individual's conscious identity¹. Jung theorized that the shadow self is naturally a part of every human being. Unfortunately, according to Jung, many do not acknowledge this part of themselves. He further describes, "everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."² The shadow can manifest in feelings or ideas that oppose one's morals such as self-judgments, anxieties, obsessions, and lustful thoughts, which in turn can create internal conflicts. Jung explains

¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), 65.

² Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (New Jersey: Yale University Press, 1966), 93.

that we cannot rid ourselves of the shadow, but we can come to a place where we live in harmony with it. This can only be achieved by acknowledging that this aspect is a part of ourselves.³ Jung's research is an inspiration for my artwork, and his concepts help provide a basis for discussing my exhibition and the exploration of my own conversations with my shadow self.

Through still photographs and video images, in *clandestine: conversations with a shadow*, I engage with my "shadow self." By presenting imagery that displays feelings of self-judgment, such as anxiety and obsession. I became aware of the growing intensity of my shadow self in the later part of 2017, after the unexpected passing of my father. Growing up with a toxic and abusive mother, my father was the one person who had always supported me, providing unconditional love. Losing him not only left me feeling completely hollow and lost, but also allowed obsessions and strong emotions to take over and distort my world.

The first video I made after the passing of my father is one part of the installation piece *why don't you stay awhile* (Figure 1). In this grayscale video, I am on the shower floor, holding a corded shower head with water spraying. I force the water onto my face until I cannot take any more. I gasp for air, which was reminiscent of how I was unable to breathe receiving the news of my father not surviving the accident. After a few moments, I return the showerhead to my face and continue the waterboarding until I need another air break. Losing my father was forced upon me, and now I was forcing the water onto myself trying to navigate the discomfort and life without him. I repeat the process of forcing water onto my face, while gasping for air, and I get increasingly more

³ Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, 93.



Figure 1. Hope Blackwell video still from installation *why don't you stay awhile*.

disoriented as the process continues. Finally, after withstanding the longest stint under the water, I find this to be the point in which I leave this situation, resulting in me leaving the scene completing the video with it fading to black. The break is short lived, and as the black fades away, a looped version begins over and over, revealing an indefinite repetition that parallels my daily obsessive thoughts.

After losing my father, I also experienced intense levels of guilt. My shadow self wouldn't stop reminding me of the disagreement my father and I had at the time of his passing, so inherently I needed to find a way to process these emotions. The shadow made me feel as if I needed to pay for my behavior that resulted in guilt. My work allowed me to process the darkness now residing inside me by allowing me to express the obsessions, anxieties and the anger I was feeling. By exploring the shadow in the physical world, I am working to find a bridge to live in harmony with it. I find that these darker,

more difficult parts of life often are not explored. Dealing with grief is not always a topic people want to discuss due to the emotional vulnerability and fear of judgement that surrounds it. In my experience, I feel we live in a society filled with social media where many overshare a superficial version of the lives we all want to live. It seems that our interactions are heavily skewed towards the emotions and experiences that feel good. This allows for the more difficult aspects of the human experience to be avoided and creates an imbalance of how we express ourselves. As a society, we should not shy away from these difficult times, and instead we should be allowed to express all parts of what it means to be human.

By creating artwork that represents the unconscious psyche of the shadow, a nonverbal dialog can occur with the viewer. My work does not intend to provide relief from the shadow, rather it seeks to start the process of coming to terms with it's elusive presence. Through personal experience, I find myself allowing the shadow to infiltrate my life in an unhealthy manner, which results in self judgment. I embody the experience of the shadow having a heavy impact on me to create the work, thus trapping it in the art. This exhibition is a space to share my vulnerabilities in the hope that anyone who chooses to view the work can have an experience with these ideas. I hope that my willingness to be vulnerable will create a space that allows this to happen for others.

CHAPTER II

THE SELF-PORTRAIT

Self-portraiture is used by photographers for numerous reasons. It allows the subject and maker to merge and have complete control over the final outcome. This process can be beneficial for those creating work that tends to be more self exploratory by allowing a direct connection from the idea to the final outcome. Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) photographed her body in much of her work, creating imagery that pushes beyond the physical representation of her anatomy and suggests concepts related to the psyche. Woodman's work was influenced by the 1920s surrealist movement as this genre extended into the 1970s. Surrealism has been defined as artwork that touches on subject matter such as the dream state and the unconscious mind, which were originally drawn from theories by Freud.⁴ It was not uncommon during the 1970s for photographers to explore Surrealistic imagery. Jerry Uelsmann, Duane Michals and Ralph Gibson are a few of the era's photographers who represent imagery of the dreamscape or concepts rooted in psychology.

A common motif in Woodman's work is the relationship of the domestic space to the way she places her body within it. Francesca chooses to juxtapose her body within physical structures that are distressed and decaying Woodman suggests that her body in relation to these dilapidated buildings mirrors her own mental state.⁵ In *Untitled*

⁴ Ian Chilvers, *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵ Marian Bleeke, "Considering Female Agency," *Woman's Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2010): 44.

(1979) (Figure 2), a young woman, whose unzipped dress exposes her back, is turned away from the viewer. She holds the skeleton of a fish over her spine while standing and



Figure 2. Francesca Woodman
Untitled (1979) detail. (Silver
gelatin print, 8”x 10”)

facing a wall that appears to be crumbling. Looking at the small details, we see that the plaster of the wall in front of her is disintegrating and thus exposing the skeleton of the structure. We see these cracks and the internal framing that looks similar to the pattern made by the fish bones she holds over her body. By juxtaposing the skeleton to her body with this crumbling wall, Woodman makes a connection to the structure and how she and it are one and the same. They both are falling apart and are distressed, though the structure’s surfaces are further along in this decay process. Woodman’s decay is more internal and away from the public eye.

In *clandestine: conversations with a shadow*, I also use my body to represent something beyond its physical representation. My body is a material that I manipulate to represent complex visceral emotions. Like Woodman, my work uses a domestic setting. However, in my imagery, the space is stripped of personal information that could add unwanted context. The domestic space helps me render ideas concerning my shadow self and the emotions tied to it. There are certain comforts that a home can provide and by choosing to take that away from the space, my depictions create a sense of stagnation and uncertainty, the perfect place for a shadow self to reside. While Woodman's context relies on the representation of the structure and her body within it, my commentary on the psyche comes in actions performed by the human form. In my image, *a new day* (Figure 3), I am laying in bed with tousled hair covering parts of my face. My eyes look up to the



Figure 3. Hope Blackwell *a new day* (projection, 7.5' x 5').

ceiling, while my body is twisted inside the sheets. By composing the image to be framed around a small portion of the figure, the focus lies on how the sheets are wrapped around my neck. This image appropriates the feelings associated with depression and the lack of

motivation, which is something I was processing after the loss of my father. By playing out what my internal thoughts were communicating to me, I was able to live with these feelings and began to process them. By creating emphasis on the conditions of my body in my work, I use performative tactics such as immersing myself into the moment and drawing on feelings, to enact ideas instead of relying purely on the juxtapositions of setting and subject.

Another contemporary photographer whose work draws parallels to mine is Cindy Sherman. While Sherman uses self-portraiture, her photographs are not directly about herself. In her *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman is both director and actor; she acts out roles by manipulating her body. She selects specific garments and locations that seemingly reference Hollywood films and specific ideas of female archetypes. This allows many viewers to identify these as shared experiences.

While Sherman's work relies on iconic cinematic imagery and roles of women, I rely on my personal experiences as inspiration for creating the work. While my work displays a female form, the work is not about ideas of womanhood. Instead, while I as a woman use self-portraiture, I render concepts relating to the human experience in general, allowing anyone, regardless of gender, to connect to this work.

While my work parallels both that of Woodman and Sherman, I push beyond their influence. I use my vulnerability and openness to share the process of coping with loss in order to make a connection with the viewer. While Woodman also shares vulnerabilities in her work, her message is guarded in the way she renders her images through crafted distortions created in traditional film-based media. In my work, I explore

psychological vulnerability without such distortions, creating them with current technologies such as video and digital projections.

CHAPTER III

PROCESS

When creating work for this exhibition, I begin with a storyboard. Concepts of control are present in the imagery of my work. By controlling every step of my process, I embed the visceral feelings and pressures associated with this dominating force. When making the still images, I stage each scenario by stripping the majority of personal objects from the scenes. Anything left in the final pieces are there intentionally. After creating my setting, I set up my camera and lighting. The next part of the process is to get in front of the camera and start immersing myself with the emotions that I am trying to portray. I allow myself to fall into self-judgment and over analyze my experiences. The process of being in front of the camera can last up to a couple of hours. The more time I spend in front of the camera the more I separate myself from the physicality of my location and dive deeper into a place where my visceral feelings reside. This same process is done for the video performances, but in the videos, I have set specific goals in mind to signify to myself that I have completed the performance. The performances are played in a loop, as they are representational of the thoughts that continuously play in our minds. The work is immersive, and by using my body I am able to control every aspect of the work, thus playing into the ideas of confronting my shadow self.

When entering the gallery, the viewer encounters a nine by eight foot wall that divides the space. In the center of the wall is a screen where still images are projected on rotation. The viewer sees each image individually for ten seconds until it transitions to the next image. There are six images to cycle through. The screen is seven and a half feet

wide and five feet tall, and the bottom edge of the screen is raised two feet off the floor. This allows the images to be at eye level, allowing viewers to stand in front and face them directly. As the viewer moves closer, their shadow becomes part of the work and they become a participant. Moving to the other side of the wall, viewers see that the projections are visible on both sides, referencing the idea that thoughts or feelings are always there and can be looked back on at any time.

In the back of the gallery, there is an eight-foot by four-foot rectangular box that houses ten video monitors. In this structure, videos play on loops to represent the chronic thoughts that constantly play repetitively in the back of our minds. In front of this large structure, lit from above, is the physical couch from several pieces of the work. This space is intended to invite the viewer to sit and watch the videos that render my obsessions and processes of dealing with loss. This part of the exhibition represents the darkest parts of my shadow. The videos depict the emotions and obsessions that are deep-seated in my psyche and are always there. They are not meant to be ignored, and viewers are asked to sit and confront them. All of the work has been converted to grayscale, in order to separate these actions and imagery from the physical world.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The shadow self is inherent in everyone and it is not meant to be something we grow out of. There are times in life where we can succumb to this shadow self and find ourselves facing it directly. *clandestine: conversations with a shadow* is my way of coming to terms with this shadow and finding ways to understand it. While the shadow was my initial idea behind the work, I also began exploring ways to grieve the loss of my father. This work allowed me to process life after him, while also allowing me to come to terms with my shadow. By combining my two biggest struggles, I made a path to start my process of growing beyond them. This exhibition aims to create a dialogue about this fundamentally human condition. This is the first of my many conversations with this shadow in order to continue growing in understanding our complex emotions.

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MASTER'S EXHIBITION

JACKI HEADLEY UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

SUMMER 2019



FIGURE 1. “a new day”



FIGURE 2. “the whispers still find me”



FIGURE 3. "it never washes away"



FIGURE 4. “perpetual state”



FIGURE 5. “fingertips can’t fight the inevitable”



FIGURE 6. “water stains and weakness”



FIGURE 7. “why don’t you stay awhile”