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Phote Essay - Behind the Lens

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The eye is a funny thing. I can never go on a trip knowing exactly what I will find or what my eye will be drawn to. It happens organically. It’s unplanned, very much contrary to my work in the classroom. There, everything is carefully mapped out. I have a back-up plan for my back-up plan. I have expectations in mind and I am sent into a panic if things do not go accordingly. My camera, then, is my escape. It represents my willingness to follow the freedom of my eye, my creative self.

My eye is drawn to what is often overlooked, to what is not usually considered beautiful. These are the unpretty things. This includes weathered brick and stone, rusted fences, graffiti, aged wood, graveyards. I often find myself walking through back alleyways, forgotten streets, and fenced-off enclosures, spaces not meant for

PHOTO ESSAY
Behind the Lens

Melissa Santos

“A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense and is thereby a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety.”

— Ansel Adams

I don’t take pictures of pretty things. I am not a photographer by profession; I am a professor of English here at BSU. Yet I take pictures. When I am in the classroom, my “writing cap” is on and I am guided by course outcomes and student success. When I am free to roam and explore spaces and landscapes with my Canon, my eye is my ultimate guide.
I used the camera to try to create beauty out of disorder; the world’s and my own.

I suffer from debilitating panic attacks, generalized anxiety disorder, PTSD, and depression. This has been my reality since I was 24. The camera has been a life-changing instrument, though, in the way I have handled, and still handle, my mental illness. When I have that camera in my hand, searching for an image, I feel a calmness I struggle
I am filled with a sense of wonder when I am in these spaces, in awe of all that I could discover and learn from what it could teach me.
myself. Ultimately, the camera forced me to understand space and how it conveyed meaning and eventually, how that connected to my own lived experiences. As Gaston Bachelard wrote: “When the image is new, the world is new.” Without realizing it, I was slowly creating a story of the world as I saw it. I have to admit that this includes darker parts of the world and the darker parts of myself. I used the camera to try to create beauty out of disorder; the world’s and my own.

In her work *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote: “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs—especially those of people, of distant landscapes and far-away cities, of the vanished past—are incitements to reverie. The sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeds directly into the erotic feelings of those whom desirability is enhanced by distance.”

I considered this quote for some time, especially because I was in the midst of writing this narrative. I forced myself to understand how it spoke to the way I viewed and approached my photos. It was an eye-opening experience for me.
It led me to truths I had never acknowledged. What struck me the most was Sontag’s idea of a “token of absence.” On the surface, these photos definitely attempt to capture the absence of human life and progress. They attempt to make that beautiful. But this “vanished past,” I struggled to admit, had real implications in my own life.

I’ve suffered through trauma of loss and abandonment. Sontag’s term evolved in my mind from how I came to embody my struggle to how to reconcile my own feelings in regard to loss and how to recreate an existence in which I could thrive despite it. Or perhaps because of it. It’s hard to say since I feel that I am still figuring it out.

Because of my loss and trauma, the present is often tiring and frightening. It’s hard to make sense of a present when I haven’t quite figured out the past. My fear of the present, perhaps, is masked by a wish to resist my life as it is for what could have been. By creating an immortal image of what once was, I can recreate or resurrect a past and reimagine my own life in that shadow.
When thinking about it in this way, it all becomes a beautiful, existential symbol. These photographs allow me to envision this “pseudo-presence” because they are necessary for me to understand my reality. They represent figments of my sense of loss and abandonment, and by attempting to make them beautiful, I can somewhat resurrect the aesthetic of my past.

I have a better understanding of the role photography has had in my struggle to conquer the past; no, not conquer, because that is impossible, but to change my perspective of it.
Reflection is powerful. And scary. When I began writing this narrative, I had never considered I would uncover these truths. However, this is where my writing and my photographs brought me. It was not an easy journey because it forced me to view my photographs as things inherently linked to my own emotional life. I had not previously acknowledged or

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recognized that possibility. I functioned from the idea that taking photos made me happy, that they gave me a sense of purpose; I wasn’t prepared to uncover the existential implications. Now that I have, I have a better understanding of the role photography has had in my struggle to conquer the past; no, not conquer, because that is impossible, but to change my perspective of it. If the camera allows me the chance to recreate how I view what has been lost and abandoned, can’t it also allow and lead me to revise my own way of remembering past trauma? Doesn’t it then allow me to take that loss and recreate something beautiful in its stead? Or perhaps it is just photos of a broken landscape. Of a past that can never be again. A soul that died long ago. I would like to believe that I have complete control over the meaning and implications of my photography. But through this process, my own analysis has been revised. No one is master. Therein lies the beauty of art.

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