

Unclaimed Baggage

By

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To say I've been lost is an understatement.

Trying to find myself, I paint with light in the dark corners of my soul.

My camera is my paintbrush.

My camera is my flashlight.

My camera is my compass.

Joseph P. Traina, LOST+ Seattle



Unpacking is Never Easy, Karen Rivera (2018)

My senior thesis project is the result of many variables the most important one being personal. My project aims to capture a place of hurt, pain and confusion. It serves as documentation of my current mental state as I confront my past as it is distracting me in the present by keeping me inside my head, and making me fearful for what lies ahead. It exists as a way to assist me as I confront what I have kept inside for so long. It allowed the opportunity to take confusion, fear and share with the audience an intimate thinking process so that they know they are not alone. It allows viewer to engage with their internal subconscious by allowing them to associate their own with the personal nature of these images. This project also goes beyond my own personal journey as I saw it as a great opportunity to address one of the biggest social issues; mental health.

Mental health awareness has become more prominent as there are now hashtags, advertisements and one just hears more and more stories about people taking their life. It's hard to confront your demons and seek help when one does not know where to start. It can sometimes make it nearly impossible. People say "just get help", but from who or where? Therapy for as long as I remember has always carried a negative stigma about it, especially culturally. Being raised in a Latino household, all you hear is "that's for crazy people" or you glance and see relatives whisper to each other this only adds to a person's anxiety. I felt that although my work may be a little raw in nature I was able to share the beginning of my journey. Hopefully the existence of my work allowed people to immerse themselves in their own confusion to make peace with the idea that it's okay to feel confused, lost and maybe even unable to fully communicate clearly what they are going through. I feel that my images reflect the same mindset as they are able to relate to the undiscovered, the chaos, the substances abuse, to the feeling of not being able to breathe and most importantly the feeling of not knowing what lies ahead.



Overview of show, *Unclaimed Baggage*

At face value, my images as a whole do and say different things. A hand pushing through a fence towards something at the other end (Untitled 1, Appendix), a hole in the ground (Untitled 2, Appendix), a drunk driver or someone impaired (Untitled 3, Appendix), a blurry photo of myself drowning in water (Untitled 4, Appendix), fire (Untitled 5, Appendix), someone's hand in a destructive background (Untitled 6, Appendix), a tattered umbrella in a puddle (Untitled 7, Appendix), a piece of car that's been pulled out by a barricade (Untitled 8, Appendix), someone sitting staring at an empty wall (Untitled 9, Appendix), and finally, a comic reflecting unpacked trauma (see Page 2). Looking beyond what is presented at face value, I hope that the viewer can see it as the process of being accountable for one's leftover trauma. It is difficult to unpack, especially when you're close to other people. I never disclose any backstory nor give the viewer some context to the images. Instead, the viewer is left to contemplate moments of loneliness, substance abuse, control, and violence. Art is an adaptable and very power instrument. It allows one to choose from multiple mediums and discover which one best permits them to speak through visual imagery. Art has always been an escape for me, but lately it has been the only way that I have been able to synthesize all the raw emotions that have been intentionally repressed.

In the 11 years since I first picked up a camera, my image making has become something like a visual diary. Objects, places, the occasional portrait or snapshot, if it caught my attention, I went for it. I often think that the relationship I have with my camera is something like the relationship one has with their therapist. Some days I am more than willing to share what has happened, while others can be similar to a dry spell, nothing is being produced. I chose photography as it gave me the best sense of control and allowed me a voice that would otherwise go unheard. It allowed me the opportunity to take my confusion, my fear and share with the audience my intimate thinking process so that they know they are not alone. I began to reexamine the works of Jeff Wall, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Gregory Crewdson. To me, they all created images that talked about memory, experiences, narrative, and the playing idea of truth and fiction of the created image. I loved the theatrical aspect to the photos, especially the works of Gregory Crewdson, who touched a lot on the melancholic or disturbing aspects of family, suburban life, and what I perceived to be memory. But I couldn't find myself shooting in that direction, I felt like I would be lying to the viewer, and found myself not forgiving myself for doing so. When one is creating worked based off of their personal experience, one must remember to maintain a barrier of safety. This lesson was repeated to me many times this semester. But what is safety to a person who has known chaos since before she could even take her first steps or utter her first words? Chaos and instability have been my normal, and I somehow found myself working well under those conditions. Six weeks into my final semester, I stumbled upon 2 photographers who I felt that I could relate to, Nathalie Ghanem-LaTour & Joseph P. Traina.



The Six Months, Nathalie Ghanem-LaTour

Both photographers have used their camera as ways to express themselves that words otherwise fail to. Through Nathalie Ghanem-LaTour, she helped me understand ways to finally confront my past traumas. She used photography as a much needed release during a six month funk. *“I was questioning aspects of myself, slowly becoming unhinged”*(Feinstein, 2018). In her series, *The Six Months*, the photographer has described her series as *“... a photo diary of the first six months of my depression. This was a time in my life where I was forced to confront my fragility, and acknowledge the existence of my anxieties and the state of my mental health. This series, soon to be made into a photo book, is a ventilation of my stress. While the series includes written journal entries and anxiety-induced drawings, the photographs represent the brief moments where I felt free to be myself. Whether I was on the street or in the office, there was something about these situations and places that made me want to return to the medium I loved so much before my depression”*(AINT-BAD, 2018). To Nathalie, I saw that her explorations through different mediums via writings, images, or even anxiety induced illustrations gave her the freedom to just be, and a voice even when she felt like she had none.



LOST+ Seattle, Joseph P. Traina

Through the images of Joseph P. Traina, I relearned to an extent that one had control when creating images. I also learned that when executed correctly, one can unpack all the chaos and instability from their world when words failed them. In an article written by Vice, Joseph's portraits are described as "*reenactments created during Traina's lowest points—are a means to step back, self-reflect, and process it all*" (Feinstein, 2018) I drew some inspiration from his portraits into my portraits, but failed to realize that I too should have taken a step back to reflect and process not only the image, but my project overall.

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives (Trauma and Shock). But the novelist, Junot Diaz, best described trauma as *a time traveller, an ouroboros that reaches back and devours everything that came before. Only fragments remain.* (Díaz 2018) Some events are easier to recollect than others, while others slowly resurface years later. Sometimes it is just a select few that replay in my head with no end. Moments such as the sound of silence scares me, specifically the silence between people. The silence that comes from not receiving a phone call or text from friends and loved ones, the awkward lulls between conversations. I can retrace this fear back to my childhood.

It seemed as though my parents had a quota of three intense arguments per week. I had become accustomed to these arguments. They began as small disagreements, but over the years, the intensity grew to be equivalent to the dramatics you find in a Spanish telenovela. Over the years, I would be pulled into their arguments as some sort of savior to help remedy the situation, but on one autumn day in 2004, I had enough. Their argument had escalated so I tried to drown them out with my usual methods: music, art or playing *The Sims*. Unfortunately, my escape tactics were not successful. My parents decided to move their argument from the kitchen to the

front porch of our home. When I heard my mom yelling at the top of her lungs, I stormed to my room and screamed. The screaming eventually led to me falling to my knees and bawling in the fetal position. I couldn't handle the fighting anymore. Soon after I began crying, my mother came into my room to check up on me. While the next few moments are still a blur to this day, I can recall my mother telling me, "*You can't be crying all the time Karen. You have to be stronger than that*". Years later, sitting in my therapist's office, I found myself realizing that that was the best advice to give yourself, not your kid.

I left feeling rather confused during my final critique. To some degree, I was happy to hear that I was playing around with the viewers expectations from frame choices to image orientation. But with this body of work, I have become aware that I am the missing piece of the puzzle. If I am not present, everything becomes a blur. This project is not a finished product as this is an ongoing project not only with future images I produce, but on-going work within myself. I only look forward to when I can finally let go and just produce without fear or hesitations of other aspects of myself that I look forward to explore. This is the project that finally gave me a voice.

APPENDIX

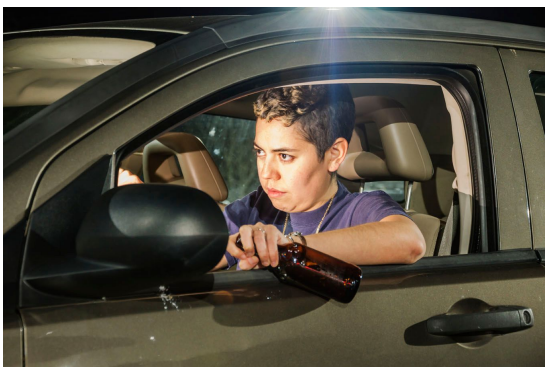
All images shot by Karen Rivera



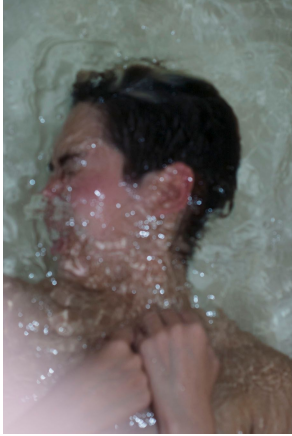
Untitled 1, 2018



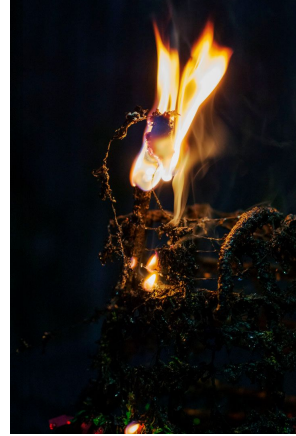
Untitled 2, 2018



Untitled 3, 2018



Untitled 4, 2018



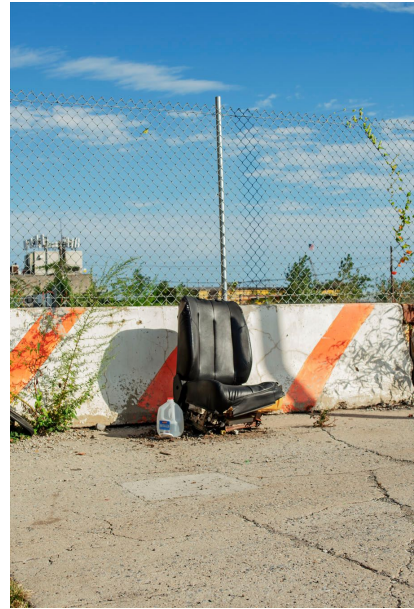
Untitled 5, 2018



Untitled 6, 2018



Untitled 7, 2018



Untitled 8, 2018



Untitled 9, 2018

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