

it's been a while but i still feel the same
by
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For my Senior Project, *it's been a while, but i still feel the same*, I chose to document the landscape of my hometown of Staten Island, New York along with taking environmental portraits of my immediate family; my mother, sister, paternal grandmother and maternal grandparents. When it came to thinking about what subject I wanted to focus on for my Senior Project, deep down I knew that I wanted to do something emotional and personal, though at first I wasn't sure exactly how to approach it.

Fittingly, in late September I received a letter from my father who was at the time incarcerated. Unfortunately, this underlying situation of my father being involved in some sort of trouble has been all too familiar to me throughout my entire life. I never had that chance to have the perfect household that I saw with many of my friends in the sense of having both parents around to raise and support me. However, in my father's absence, the rest of my family stepped up to the plate while also helping my mother emotionally and financially. Growing up I was unaware of the fact that my father was a drug addict and criminal who was never on "vacation," but was rather in jail or rehab. When I received his letter, I knew at that moment my Senior Project would be tell of extensive his absence and its effect on my entire family through both the written word and the visual.

Around the time I reached age 12 I started to piece everything together. Previous to this time, my mother's struggles had gone so unnoticed to me. Looking back, as a child, I realize that I didn't make her life much easier. A feeling I still regret to this day. During many moments I look back and wish I could have been better to her because now more than ever I realize how much she has been through; raising two young kids on her own in her 20s and my terrible

excuse of a father. Yet my mother is strong and always managed to give my sister and I the best life possible while sheltering us from all that went on with my father. I can't blame my mother for telling my sister and I that my dad was "on vacation." I even recall my father once bleaching his hair when he returned from rehab exclaiming that he got the lightened-tone "from all the sunshine in Florida." Looking back, I realize how I was manipulated, but at the same time, sheltered from the truth.

My maternal grandparents Shirley and William were extremely successful in their respective careers and now they are retired. They express so much love toward not only each other, but to everyone they know. They always have outstretched arms to help anyone in need. I know without them my mother would have had a tougher time raising my sister and I. They always paid for afterschool and summer camps, vacations for my sister and I and even sometimes paid our bills. My grandparents were our rock and my mother would always say that they have helped her more than they will ever understand. I appreciate all the help they have given my mother financially and emotionally.

My Alexa was too young to even understand what was going on during our childhood. Nevertheless, my father's absence has impacted her; yet sometimes, with full candor, I feel she is more well-adjusted and that due to my being the older sibling, his absence emotionally affected to a greater extent.

My father's mother Nancy has and always will remain consistent in my life. She is constantly checking in to make sure my sister and I are happy and comfortable. My grandma Nancy is there when we need anything. My grandmother is a tough woman with strong beliefs but she is also a loving woman who doesn't let obstacles defeat her, which is what I admire

most about her. She has survived through the wreckage that her son, my father, put her and the rest of my family through and still stands strong. Yet, still she is a devoted mother and idly supports my father regardless of his bullshit. But that's what a mother does - sticks by her child no matter what.

After thinking of my childhood, my family and the trails and tribulations we went through, I knew it was my subject -- after all, it is what I know and sometimes what one knows is most apropos and authentic subject an artist can tackle. I envisioned strong portraits of strong individuals surrounded by the landscapes of my youth. It is in these landscapes that I hold onto the fondest memories of times spent with my father here. And it is the landscapes themselves that act as a placeholder for his absence both my life and in my exhibit.

The process of making the photographs was emotionally draining, because being there, I saw myself again as a child --- a feeling that was bittersweet. No matter how intense the feeling, I knew had to go back and tackle the emotional weight I have been feeling for a long time. To visit places I hadn't been in many years was a very powerful experience for me although I can't put my finger on if it was good or bad. I think in the end, it was cathartic. I've long thought to myself ---

What if things weren't the way they were?

Would I still have frequented these places to this day with my father?

Would I be where I am today?

If not for these experiences would I be an artist, for art?

Is the reason I am an artist a way for me to release the agony I have experienced throughout my life?

When it came down to doing research and looking at photographers for inspiration, I knew immediately to look at Larry Sultan's *Pictures from Home* series. I was vaguely familiar with Sultan's work but never knew the story behind it. In the series, Sultan spends time at his retired parent's home in California in hopes to photograph his father. His series is a collaboration of his portrait of his parents, pictures of old family photos and film stills, landscape shots of his parent's home and outside of the home along with some pictures of himself. His framing, lighting, and use of old family photos helped give me the idea to use old family images myself and gave me a better understanding of portrait photography. His style seems to be very intimate and personal which is inspirational to me because that is what I was trying to achieve when it came to taking my portraits. I wanted to capture my family in their own state of being or in their own comfort zone. The beach for my two grandparents, now retired snow birds who spend most of their days at the beach in Florida or their summers here at their shore house. My mother, a free spirit at the park with me. This is a woman who works so hard but never for one second forgets to set time aside to have fun and enjoy her time with her loved ones. My grandmother Nancy, sitting in a bar smoking a cigarette or Alexa, just sitting and talking with me on how her week went at her new school. In my perspective, these are some things all too familiar to them. Sultan's series *Pictures from Home* is sentimental to me. It's capturing those moments with your loved ones that inspires me. His attention to detail in the landscapes is what inspired me to only have a cropped portion of my childhood home or even the Mezuzah hanging in my grandparents' home being the only thing you can see on the wall. Sometimes less can in fact be more. It's the little details that can share an even stronger message than a whole scene sometimes.



Reading at the Kitchen Table, Larry Sultan, 1988



Mom in doorway, Larry Sultan, 1992

Vivian Maier's *Out of the Shadows* series was another one of my influences for my senior show. I looked for other ideas on how to shoot my portraits considering portraits were never really my strength. Previous to this project I have often avoided making portraits of people, but I knew I had to step out of my comfort zone for this project. What is most interesting to me about Maier's *Out of the Shadows* series is that her photographs reveal the world she remembered from her childhood.



Undated, Vivian Maier



September 29, 1959, Vivian Maier

In a sense, what Maier was doing is what I wanted to do as well. Vivian Maier has tremendously influenced me because like her own work and the environment in which she primarily photographed, my Senior Project contains of both portraits and landscapes of my own hometown. Maier's portraits are very intimate, up-close and formal, lending a personal perspective on how I would successfully make images for my own project. Like Larry Sultan, Vivian Maier's work gave me ideas on how I should frame my subjects and the type of lighting to use to achieve a great photo, which was primarily natural light. Another idea, one that arrived during the early stages of this project was that I needed to dig deep and find story I wanted to tell regarding the people in the portraits and locations and meanings of the landscapes I chose to photograph on Staten Island.

I didn't want to strictly look at photographers and photography books in hopes of gaining further insight and ideas, I spent time with a book entitled *The Lure of the Local* by Lucy R. Lippard. In the book, Lippard strings together notions of culture, history, geography and art to examine the numerous facets of the notion of place itself. In chapter two there is a quote by the artist Marlene Creates that states:

"The land is important to me, but even more important is the idea that it becomes a "place" because someone has been there."

The statement by Marlene Creates impacted me on a significantly higher level when I began to go back to all places I frequented with my father as a child – the neighborhood park, the deli and the junk yard. I soon realized the photographs I was making were not solely about landscape, but rather these places held a symbolic meaning for me. The park, the deli and the junkyard are all places I vividly recall my father taking me. These are the locations that I have

fondest memories with him. While he is obviously absent from the photographs I have made, I hold onto the memory of his presence in these spaces and know I will do so for the rest of my life.

The place itself is no longer is just a park, a deli, or a junkyard. I see these landscapes different than the ordinary person who frequents them on a daily basis for leisure, food or spare car parts. These mundane, everyday locales contain a part of me. It is almost as if the younger me still energetically, or even spiritually lingers around these places. It is likely the reason that I see glimpses of her when I go there.

It can be stated and obvious that a brightly colored photograph will draw a viewer's attention more than others. Furthermore, a cropped photo, as opposed to a long-shot, will draw a viewer in as well. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard also states, "*Landscape photography is conventionally used to seduce and entertain.*" With this in mind, my goal became to capture the most colorful landscape shots I could of these places. The idea was to invite the viewer into the photograph more.

In Miwon Kwon's book *One Place After Another*, I came across this part in the book talking about finding grounded identity through a place. When I came across this reading, I thought of when I have visited the landscapes for shooting my show and even my hometown overall. I consider it to be my place of comfort, a place of memory. I feel as if visiting these places have taken me to this place of nostalgia. I hold a great part of me back home. Even when I am away, my mind is always drawn back. Maybe because it is a place that is all I know though. I haven't really seen the world through my own eyes yet or had any experiences other than being at school, but I am rooted there, I share a lot of emotions there.

“Often we are comforted by the thought that a place is ours, that we belong to it, even come from it, and therefore are tied to it in some fundamental way. Such places (“right” places?) are thought to reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us in an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity.” (Kwon, One Place After Another)

I was influenced by this not in a way of shooting but in a sense of feeling. I felt though so relatable, I was more conscious of the spaces I was in while photographing. I claimed these spaces. I tried to photograph them in the best way possible and tell a narrative even further, (like the swings at the park I would sit on my dad’s lap as he swung us.)

I have come across an editorial article in Photography and Culture titled *Seeing Family* that stood out to me when talking about how photography plays a roll in people’s lives and on screen.

“Today it may seem that we are constantly “seeing family” in our lived and virtual lives. Photography continues to play a significant role in family life as it is increasingly produced and shared with the help of new technologies, digital platforms, networks and cultural practices.”

This was intriguing to me because in my perspective, people have two personalities... one on screen, like a façade they show to the world and one in real life. Maybe even three if you consider their behaviors towards family and friends or strangers. We are living in an era of technology and sharing. I get to personally see my family as their true selves and photograph them, showing them to my peers in the show how they truly are. I was able to show their vulnerabilities and the flaws they possibly try ever so hard to hide online or to strangers. It became very personal and intimate not only to myself, but to other viewers as well.

My project was an emotional challenge to me. It's a sensitive subject to document someone's absence in your life... especially a parent's absence and even more, the reasoning behind his absence. I have turned my father's absence into my own burden after all these years of him being gone as if it was my fault or something and this project has helped tackle those feelings I have had bottled up inside and now that the show is over and done it's like a weight lifting off my shoulder. I was able to give myself and my feelings a voice, which I don't ever feel I get much of an opportunity to do. *it's been a while, but i still feel the same* acted as a journal to me. The writing I included about the photographs of my family we're very personal. I wrote about my feelings towards them and views on them and sharing that along was a little nerve wracking to me, but the idea was to get as personal as I can. Including old family photos of my young self with the family members that were included in the show and photos of my father and I way back when along with the redacted letter my father sent to me from prison helped add extra emotion that I was trying to portray to everyone viewing.

Since the show was about my childhood more or less... as a memento for the guests who have visited I included a bowl of party favor toys of the early 00's like yo-yo's, bouncy balls, snappers, mini skateboards, paddle balls and slinkys. I was proud of the hard work I have achieved in this show. I was proud to share a message. I know not everyone has a perfect life so I was hoping to show my fellow peers that you can take a situation and strive from it. There is no shame in the negative. There are ways you can send across a message and I feel as an artist there's no better way to express your emotions other than creating. I am still learning how to embrace hardships I have and express it through my art.



Lori, Old Town Playground, Staten Island, NY, 2019



Alexa, SUNY Purchase, Purchase, NY, 2019



33 Union Avenue (My childhood home), Staten Island, NY, 2019



Edkins Auto Sales, 2239 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island, NY, 2019



Nancy, American Legion Cichon Post, Staten Island, NY, 2019



Eden Deli, 2894 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island, NY, 2019



Mezuzah, Coral Lakes, Boyton Beach, FL, 2019



Shirley, Del Ray Beach, FL, 2019



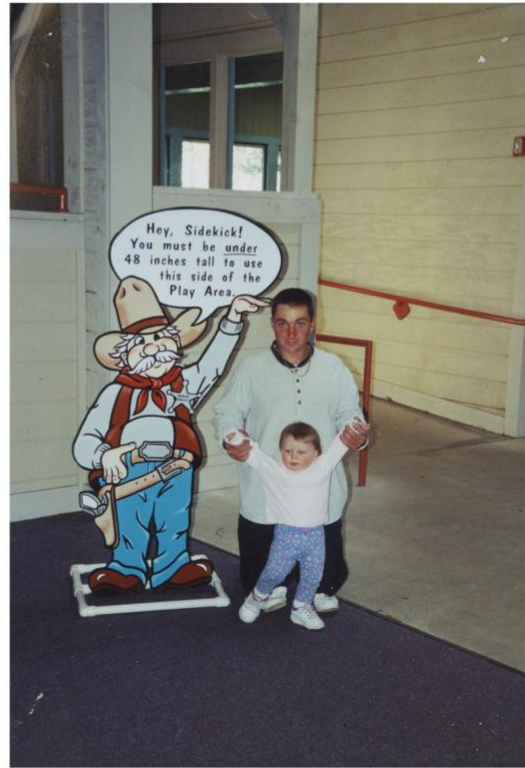
William, Del Ray Beach, FL, 2019



Brandt Beach, Long Beach Island, NJ, 2019



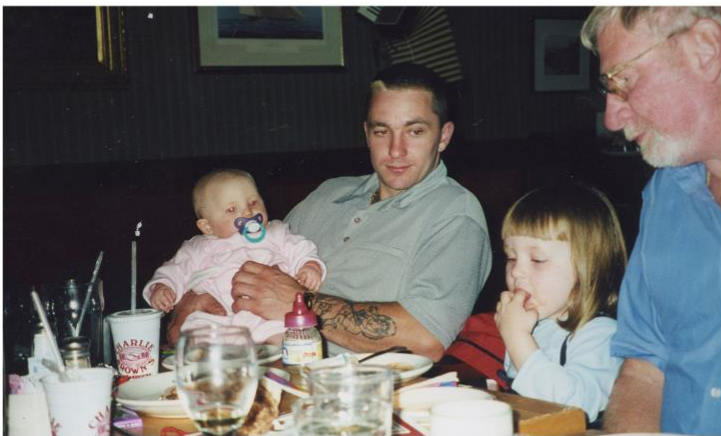
The Swing, Faber Park, Staten Island, NY, 2019



Family archives



Family archives (cont.)



Family archives (cont.)

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