

ABSTRACT

I curated an exhibition, consisting of 18 newly made images, all utilizing 35mm film. I also created an installation piece, consisting of a bed, to further push the messaging with this body of work. I also created and performed a performance piece, referencing my depressions and growing up discovering my true identity. I investigated my identity, my traumas and how my hardships have contributed to my character in my 23 years of living. I created this work to be a continuation of my body of work I showed here in March, “love letters in las vegas,” a collection of work that was a love letter to the people, places and things that kept me alive, this body of work, “burning pages in las vegas,” is connecting the things that tried to kill me.

I, as a portrait photographer, am used to photographing other people or myself in drag, but now, I have flipped the camera onto myself, and reflected the vulnerability of who I am without a stitch of blush on my face. My body as a plus sized person is not what’s deemed to the world as beautiful, so pushing myself to open it to the public is terrifyingly freeing. My value is precious on the inside, why should my outside debate my value as a skeleton in this world? I found that my confidence in myself as an artist and as a person allows me to push vulnerability into the world, it’s a superpower that allows me to be able to connect with other people. Other people who connect with my story and see themselves in me.

My desire is to be exactly what I wish I saw growing up. I found that the dark is just as special as the light, for you need both in order to exist. Do I wish I could go through what I did again? Hell no. But do I regret it happening? No, because I would have no idea the person I would’ve become without it. I now am gifted the opportunity to continue to expand my work in the explorations of myself and my traumas, in ways more authentic and raw than I was doing before.

PRESENTATION

I was a child that was born into a camera lens, that didn't discover it until later in life. I remember I took a trip to San Francisco when I was 10, and my grandmother gifted me a small digital camera. It was one of my favorite parts of the trip, just clicking anything that I could get the focus to work on. 2 years after that, she gifted me my grandfather's polaroid camera that I used to this day to create work. I never got to meet my grandfather, as he died when I was 3 months old, so creating work with something that he used all the time was almost my gateway to have a relationship with him. After that, I went to high school, and fell in love with the artistic adventures photography can lead you, all because of a woman named Abby Davis. She threw me into a darkroom and shared with us the magic of film photography, and I was hooked on the fishing pole.

My father found his film camera he used when he first met my mom, and I fell in love instantly. I started using photography to tell stories. Stories of my loved ones, and anyone who placed themselves in my lens. I got to create these love letters to the people, places and things that meant the most to me. Places, people and things that I would run away to in moments of chaos. Getting to celebrate them, and create something special that shows how much I loved them. As you also can see in my life, photography was gifted to me, by the same people I try to give back to. While some are still on this planet with us, I've lost a lot of loved ones throughout my life, and getting to create work with mediums and technologies some of them have loved and used in the past fed my hunger for connection to relationships that never got to begin.

For my thesis, I created and curated a collection of images as well as a performance that connects to the chaos in my mind, noting some of the traumas I've endeavored, and the battles upon self identity. In the past, I never took the camera onto myself unless I was in drag. I didn't think I was interesting enough to be photographed, I didn't think I was attractive enough to the camera lens, similarly to how I was seen to the rest of the world. I hid behind the lens photographing others, and only exploring self portraiture when I was in drag; it was easier for me to tell a story that way. But this work is a collection about myself. This work is exploring who I am and what I have become. It's exploring how I have grown to see myself, how much more weight I hold on the ground. My feelings around my traumas, where I process them, how I sometimes have to adapt myself in order to keep going despite my sorrow with my surroundings. In death or in mistreatment of others.

The work is all prints made with 35mm film, to create a romantic, cinematic nostalgia that I crave so dearly. I want to share how nostalgia can create accessibility in creating connections with audiences and encouraging deeper investigations. Film made me fall in love with this medium. It allows me to be patient, to slow the process down and allow myself to be more specific about what I am capturing. It's more special and adds value to the image for me. Having to wait for these images to come to me, and getting to see a physical form of these special moments I got to have. I adore the grain and texture that film provides to images that collaborate with the tonality of colors to create fairy tales of compositions. You can see it in "he's wet?" The intimacy of this image would not look the same digital. It's the textures, the colors and the way it hugs the moment I captured that makes this image one of the strongest in the collection.

This body of work conceptually was meant to push me. I fell in love with colored 35mm film and how colors just melt into each other, and after being introduced to one of my biggest inspirations, Nan Goldin and her work "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency", I saw how she was able to show herself and her authenticity in ways that the medium hasn't been pushed. Her vulnerability, her community, her personal highs AND lows. Goldin turned the camera on herself to place audiences in not just her surroundings but her own experiences. She showcased authenticity in the work with her drive to show things explicitly, and that is exactly what I ran to accomplish. I also looked at installation and presentations of work more this year than I have before. Wolfgang Tilmans created dimensionally dynamic spaces, with sizes and positionings and interactions with work that further pushes the story trying to be created. Going big but also appreciating the small and intimate prints in the process. I was able to expand my skill set of framing and orientation of images, doing different angles than I have in the past. Not being afraid to be up close, and not being afraid to open up the doors of what I allow the image to capture; both metaphorically and compositionally.

You can see that specifically in my self portraits. I decided to keep most of them on a smaller scale, as they hold moments of intimacy and vulnerability. I want you to be forced to come close and explore. In this body of work, I explored the presentation of larger scale images. I don't usually print larger scales, mainly due to cost but also I find they are difficult to keep the vulnerability of work. I'm glad I bit the bullet though, as I grew to appreciate the presence that it holds. It commands attention, and I think as I continue to expand on my theory, and with the

state of the world and my identity becoming political, it's going to be something I get comfortable with. You can see that specifically in "she is synthetic," as it is the largest piece, but also one of the most up close and detail oriented. I also was able to show my love for both landscape AND portraiture, and being able to incorporate both to place audiences in my story. For those who are unfamiliar with me, you might not know of two of my favorite places in the world, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Astoria, Oregon. In 2018, my childhood best friend Justice and his father were killed in a car accident caused by a cross-faded driver that August. Before I found out about his death, I was exploring for the first time the bright city of Las Vegas. Vegas was magical to me. It's a city of dreams and grit, with such vivid lights and history that kept me engaged. When Justice died, everything in my life had changed. It had flipped upside down, almost as a piece of me died with him. I revisited Las Vegas that February, and when I went back, I had peace again. It became my escape, my home away from home, which is odd for me when I don't consider myself a party animal; especially being sober. I kept making work every time I traveled back there, and even took the name "Vegas" as my own when I perform in drag; to bring the love the city births back into me into my artwork.

Astoria, Oregon holds another special place in my heart. It became my favorite place to go with my grandmother and little brother. I grew up visiting her trailer in Long Beach, and would always be excited to explore Astoria on the way up there, especially hitting the Purple Cow toy store, where I would beg her for another wooden Thomas the Tank Engine train to add to my extensive collection. As I got older, Astoria also became a form of peace for me. The smell of the ocean, the wind caressing me, walking the same streets as "The Goonies," and the smell of pizza and clam chowder brought me to joyful memories of my childhood. After all, it was the place I went to after Justice's passing. When he was killed, it was when his family were going on a beach trip. Every time I get to see a beach, I think of him; almost as a way of continuing to connect to him. To live my life to the fullest because he never got the opportunity to do it for himself. These are both places that I can surround myself with love and light, but my mind doesn't reflect what's around me sometimes.

This body of work really is me turning the camera onto myself this time, both a less glamorous display of myself in drag, but also myself out of drag. Showing myself in vulnerable spaces and thought processes, allowing myself to be more open to people. Hiding behind a pretty painting doesn't hide the pain the painter would have felt making the picture. It was a way to be

more honest with myself, and a way to give people the opportunity to see that whatever their feeling isn't uncommon. Life is meant to be a balance of the good and also the bad, and figuring out how they can exist together.

I also introduced myself as a performance artist to you all, which is something that I never got to cross paths with while being here, and I thought to myself that part of my mission is to bring drag into fine art practices in different ways that we've seen in the past. The performance consisted of myself in a large ball gown, with a projection played on top of me. The projections featured images of me as a child, movies like "Alice In Wonderland," "The Perks of Being a Wallflower," clips of Marilyn Monroe, as well as queer nightlife in New York City filmed in the 1980s. Two of my big inspirations that utilize this kind of presentation for drag performance, Carla Rossi (also known as Anthony Hudson) who was a 2013 graduate of PNCA, and Sasha Velour are incredible examples of doing so. I use drag as a physical presence of the creativity inside of my head, a celebration of parts of myself that is usually criticized from the outside world. I use it just like I use photography, to tell a story.

The song playing during the performance was Messy by Lola Young is a song about processing mistreatment from other people. How we manage depression, how our traumas impact our routines. I used media that consists of myself growing up as a child, and media that I also connected with as a child, whether it's the direct media itself or connections to it to help build the story in the piece. I wanted the photographs to fit into a performance themselves, which explains the destroyed bed, resembling my mind when it hits states of depression, or suicidal ideation. Using a visual piece to elevate what a drag performance could look like isn't something I am unfamiliar with, after collaborating with PrideNorthwest for a year to bring drag to an elevated standard for all ages audiences in theaters with an all ages cast.

Drag is magic. Drag has been a transformer, a storyteller, a survival since the dawn of Shakespeare. This art form has gifted me the opportunity to celebrate myself and celebrate a community that gave so much to me, and I hunger to bring this to more spaces that necessarily haven't seen it in a context outside of a beer soaked carpet covered bar in the middle of nowhere with a 75% chance your car is going to get broken into. Bringing drag and the outward expression of queerness into fine art spaces has something I have been incredibly passionate about since starting my exploration of it. Queer people have built the world in places we continue to ignore, and sometimes, the stage needs to be pushed in front of people in order for

them to attend the show. I think people sometimes go into these spaces scrambling, trying to find something to connect to, something that pulls them into themselves and creates comfort. I want people to find themselves in what I do, I want my work to become a home for the child that I was waiting for someone like me to hold space.

I also want my work to be a love letter to my family, chosen and blood. I would not be here without them. It's because of them grabbing my hand and guiding me out of the darkness I am able to make work, able to explore what my life is going to become, and for that my work will forever be dedicated to them. I want people to remember that vulnerability is power. It's strength in yourself to show it. It's confidence in who you are that holds it. It's opening yourself for people to connect to you, for people to love you. My work is meant to have pockets of this to ensure its ability to reach broader audiences. You being here today has shown me that it's worked.

I don't know where the world will take me, but what I do know is that my work isn't going anywhere. I have so many more stories to tell. I have many more galleries to hold space in. I have more theatres that need to see the rhinestones under my eyes so you can see exactly what I am telling you. I want my work to be everywhere. On a shelf at a record shop. On a billboard. On the walls above your couch. The world needs to see me, the people who I photograph, the places that we exist in. My art has always been my escape, and I want it to become yours too, no matter where you find it.