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feature shoot

A FANTASTICAL SENSE OF CHILDHOOD CAPTURED OVER 6 YEARS

April 26, 2016 by Elizabeth Avila Omar

Pumpsnic State Beach

Joy Ride, Highway 1

"Most of the images I have from my own childhood are in my memories; I remember my childhood as being magical and viewed. Maybe that influenced my approach to photographing her—a desire to evoke a fantastical sense of childhood."

For the past six years, California-based photographer Gwen Coyne has been using an iPhone to capture moments of her daughter's childhood in an aptly named personal project, The Early Years. Coyne's daughter, who was adopted from Ethiopia, has Down Syndrome and limited time together, yet her existence now forms the basis for her own "My daughter was very hard to come by, she also has asthma and I never know when a mild cold will turn into an emergency."

In capturing a series of short stories detailing moments of her daughter's life and the fragility of childhood, Coyne's photographs are intimate, yet she has the ability to capture the essence of the space and time in between the intensity. "Viewing these images we realize that the classification of this series is not black and white, for it involves a collision between fantasy and documentary. Gwen hopes that over time the series will form a more comprehensive portrait of the early years, while leaving room for her imagination and memory to fill in the gaps.

Ocean Cheveux State Park

How did your daughter feel about you documenting her life for six years?
"In the early years, she wasn't particularly aware of it, the phone was simply an extension of me. As she gets older, she is more conscious of the camera and my focus on her. At times, she tells me "no more photos", which I respect. But for the most part, she seems to enjoy the attention."

Do you feel that your style evolved with time and in correspondence to your daughter's development?
"Yes, I think I've grown with her, because I'm getting restless and am ready for the next step."

Why did you choose to capture the series with your iPhone?
"The phone is convenient and allows for a less invasive, more immediate response to what's going on around me. I also see shooting on mobile as being part of something bigger. Mobile photography has reshaped what information is readily accessible, thereby more profoundly impacting how people communicate. By sharing glimpses of this tiny person's life, I feel that I'm contributing to a broader, collective story."

Do you believe others should contribute to this collective story of humanity via the medium of photography and/or other disciplines?
"Yes, I think it's a very powerful statement. Social sharing has disrupted the traditional media outlets. We are hearing from the masses, in addition to the standard channels. This supplemental storytelling helps to eliminate biases and allows for a broader understanding of the human condition."

Blinded by the light

Pumpsnic State Beach

Did you have a preconceived idea regarding the aesthetic of your images?
"I'm most interested in collecting snippets evocative of her, rather than documenting specifics. Black and white is more evocative of childhood memories of reality. Regarding composition, I let the environmental context guide me and I work within it."

You mentioned you used black and white to distinguish the photographs from reality, did you also have a private photo album to document your daughter's development?
"I have a private photo album, but I don't consider documenting her development. I use my DSLR so that she'll know what she actually looked like as a child in a private family album."

What did the process of creating the images involve?
"I look for gold outside of the weekend, as I am in a suburb environment all week. If I can get out of the house, she most usually follows. Then I switch and I wait. Sometimes nothing happens, and that's ok. I try not to force it. The biggest challenge is finding time outside of work to dedicate to photography. It involves being somewhat self absorbed. And that is the hardest part, finding time for myself and being okay with it. I'm a very spontaneous photographer of iPhone photography. With the phone, I can carry my dynamism with me, wherever I go."

Do you think your background in graphic design had any influence on your photography?
"Absolutely, with regards to composition and eliminating unnecessary elements. But I think my photography has influenced my graphic design work, as well. When I'm working on a piece of painting, the canvas starts out blank, and gains form as the artist's interpretation of an idea is impressed upon it, or reconstructed. In psychology, there is a similar concept for individual consciousness: the tabula rasa. I try to approach photography using this "blank slate" philosophy. But with photography, the subject already exists—so it's up to me to deconstruct and reinterpret it, uniquely."

What stage is the story currently at and what is next for the story?
"I'm at a point where I'm considering how I want to conclude the project. For example, the photo "Hide and seek in the park" was a result of her imagination. Ocean Cheveux Park is a wide open space: grass and sky. It would be ludicrous to attempt a game of hide and seek there. She gives me ideas. Who ever knows what will happen next? The future will tell."

Hide and seek in the park

Alcuin State Beach

Tatou Le Chat

Cowell Ranch Beach

Point Reyes

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