

Artistic Exploration of Mental Health

By Alannah Gee

Many aspects of our everyday lives have deep influences and impacts and are seldom seen by others. Mental health is one of these critical aspects that drives not only who we are but also deeply impacts how we interact with our environments and those around us. For my honors capstone project, I decided to explore the ever-present invisibility of mental health by completing an artistic exploration of the mental illness and healing experiences of my family and myself. I completed thorough research, including scholarly research and interviews with my family, to help direct and ground this project within both the art world and the individual experiences of each member of my family. All this work led to the creation of a combined photography and poetry book aimed at telling these stories and normalizing conversations around mental health.

Once I decided to pursue this topic, I had to decide on subjects and methods. I knew that it would be impactful and direct to include personal reflections and self-portraiture since I already had poems that I wrote in the depths of my mental crises. As I thought more about this project, I realized that I also had an intimate understanding, and access, to the mental health journeys of my family. Additionally, I knew that we all had done extensive work, individually and together, to understand our mental health and work on healing, which helped add extreme depth to my project. Next, I made sure to confirm that my family was all interested and willing to participate. I decided to complete this project, from my research to the completion of the photographs, during our family road trip to Mexico over Christmas break.

The first aspect of research that I completed during this trip was working to ground my project in scholarly works reflecting on photography. I brought and started reading the books

recommended by my advisor, which included “Regarding the Pain of Others” by Susan Sontag and “Camera Lucida” by Roland Barthes. These books, other scholarly papers, and even past classes, helped me reflect on the complicated aspects of photography, specifically related to working with the stories of others and representing other people’s pain.

Sontag presents important perspectives on photography and the theory behind it. In the book I read for this project, she specifically explores the implications of war photography and captures the pain and persona of others within fixed images (Sontag, 2003). While this was not directly applicable to my project, as I was not documenting war or even physical pain, it helped inform my understanding of what it means to capture pain in images and art in general and helped caution me away from reducing my family’s pain within these images. The other photography book I read, “Camera Lucida,” is one that I have heard about from multiple other photographers as being a grounding, theoretical piece that is important for photographers to read. In this book, Barthes explores many aspects of photography including what makes photographs interesting and engaging and how they interact with and capture the world (Barthes, 1984). While this reading was much more theoretical, it helped me reflect on the power and importance of this artwork functioning within the world of photography. For this project, I also reread multiple poetry books, the main one being “Call us what we Carry” by Amanda Gorman (2022) to further understand how poetry functions in a book to tell stories. I also researched the methods of photovoice and documentary photography (Mulder, 2014, Rosler, 2005). While my project did not directly employ either method, understanding the collaboration behind photovoice was extremely helpful and guided the ways I implemented collaboration. Understanding documentary photography was critical as it helped me more accurately approach telling the stories of others.

As a result of this research, and personal feelings coming into this project, I worked to make this process as collaborative as possible to both more accurately represent everyone's stories and to give everyone more of a stake and say in the stories being told and the ultimate product. This collaboration ranged from initial interviews, to working together to decide on photoshoots and imagery, to including poems and ideas written by all of us in both my handwriting and one of my sister's. It was extremely important to me that I was telling stories that each person wanted to be telling and that I represented each of us in a way that we were comfortable with. I also wanted to place us within the book as much as possible, from the inclusion of handwriting to binding the book with some of the actual negatives from this project.

Due to my emphasis on collaboration and inclusion, one of the most important aspects of this project was the various conversations I had with my family about this project and their role in it. Throughout the entire project, I discussed different ideas and images with various members of my family. The most influential of these conversations was the semi-structured interviews I completed with each person towards the beginning of our trip. While I entered these interviews with a few general questions, they were guided by the topics and ideas that the individual I was talking to gravitated towards. My main aim in these conversations was to work to understand the perspectives of each person, both within the context of our shared family traumas that I already understood, and within individual elements relevant to them that I did not necessarily know about. Understanding the perspectives of others has always challenged me and provided such rich, beautiful understandings that I would not otherwise have. These conversations not only critically informed my project, but also gave me so much more depth, appreciation, and new understandings of these people I have known for all of my life, or all of their life. Throughout this process, I also shifted my focus from simply documenting the pain of mental illness to

working to understand mental health as a whole, from the stage of illness to healing and general mental care. This shift was critical to the development of imagery in this project as I was able to shift towards photoshoots that empowered my family and documented the positive aspects of mental health. Without this shift, I think my book would be much more difficult to engage with as this balance is critical to creating moments of reflection and reprieve within the somewhat heavy content of the poetry. After completing these interviews and photoshoots, I returned home and started working on compiling everything into my finished product.

All photography projects contain an immense amount of thought and creative decisions, and this project was no exception. One of the first major decisions I made regarding this project was to take and include photographs that were digital color images and film black and white photographs. For this, I bought my own 35 mm film camera and took and developed five rolls of film. I took and sorted through thousands of digital images as well and ended up with around 50 final images. I chose to do both styles of photography for multiple reasons. First, after taking a film class, I fell in love with the time and intentionality required for film photography. Additionally, I believe that not having the photographs instantly available forces the photographer and subject to exist in a different, more present manner that often is reflected within the film images. I decided to augment these film images with digital ones to add more depth and crispness to the product as well as a backup in case the film images did not turn out. Since I had not shot with the film camera before, even though I was assured by the person I bought it from that it was light-tight, there was no way to know it was fully functional until the film was developed when I returned home. Having the digital photos both ensured I would be able to complete the project no matter what. This ended up allowing me to add further depth and

interest to the project. While I love black and white film images, there is a certain emotion and mood that can be evoked by color images that film is not always able to do.

One of the next critical choices that I made was to include the poetry portion of the project on transparencies, which are thin plastic sheets, that overlaid the images. Throughout my photographic career, I have been continuously drawn to the interaction of text and image and have grappled with different ways to explore this interaction. While many of my past works in this area have been successful, I think the use of transparencies was not only critical for the conceptual resonance of this project but also made it my most successful exploration of text and image interaction. By placing the poems related to the unseen inner struggles of mental health on a separate transparency, the book can exist as a layered product, representing both the imagery of mental health and healing and also exposing the internal struggles behind these images. The connection yet separation of these words and images open the door for further interactions and impacts of each on the other, while still allowing the reader to interact with each element separately if they so desire.

My final critical decisions were largely completed within the construction of the book. First, I feel like it is critical to discuss why this work exists as a book rather than a digital collection of photographs or a gallery show. While I had never made a photo or poetry book before this project, it had always been a dream of mine, so I used this project as an opportunity and challenge to explore this more material, everyday side of displaying art. I also thought that it was critical for such a personal project focused on everyday issues to exist within the same realm. Allowing this work to exist within the tactical realm allowed for more opportunities for layering and complexity as well. When creating the book, I decided to print all of the images on sketchbook paper using my beat-up printer that is barely holding on after two moves and four

years of helping me through college. Using a nontraditional paper and a dying printer resulted in a few printed errors that I resisted at first but eventually grew to love as they further complemented and complicated the images. One major challenge and strength of this project was the lived-in errors that resulted from this work existing in my space over a few months and through various complications of the crafting process. These errors often reflect the content of the book as they show the ever-presence of slight errors and struggles. The book has been unintentionally beaten up in a manner similar to the subjects contained within its imperfect cover.

Since this book is a product of hours of crafting, it will likely never be mass printed and distributed, but I still hope it can have an impact on anyone that is able to interact with it. I plan to make at least four more books, one for each of my sisters and my mother to thank them for their vulnerability and participation in this project as well as to give them their own personal artifact of this beautiful, shared moment in our lives. I hope that these books can inspire them, and anyone that does come into contact with this project; for them to explore and discuss their journeys with mental health to help normalize this subject that is often considered taboo.

I do know that this project has already had a massive impact on my personal life and my art career. I have had quite a few intense personal moments with mental health recently and this project forced me to confront and begin to work through these issues. At times, this made it difficult for me to work on the project at all as it was so painful but as the process and project progressed, I found myself being eternally grateful for the push and the safe space that this project offered for me to exist within and explore these indescribable, painful experiences. While I have large amounts of work left to do, this project both opened the doors of healing and gave me somewhat of a roadmap to use in my continuing explorations of mental health and my

personal traumas. Finally, since art does not come naturally to me and I have not been doing it for long, I often have feelings of imposter syndrome and even was not confident calling myself an artist until now. This project gave me some much-needed confidence and reassurance that there is a place for me in the art world and that the work I create can be deeply important and impactful. So, even if this project is never seen by anyone outside of my family, the opportunity it gave us, and specifically me, has been an invaluable experience that I am eternally grateful for.

Annotated Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. (1984). *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*. Flamingo.

In this book, Barthes reflects on the medium of photography and specifically on the impacts that photography can have on the spectator and the subject being photographed. Reading and engaging with past theories on photography will help me be aware of my role as a photographer. In past classes, I have learned about how photography has historically been used as an extension of colonialism and took rather than gave to the subject. Because of histories like this one and theories discussed by Barthes, I will be intentionally aware of my role as a photograph and seek as many ways as possible to involve and give back to my subjects.

Gorman, Amanda. (2022). *Call us what we carry*. Random House Large Printing.

While this source is non-academic, it is an example of a poetry book dealing with navigating modern challenges. It will inform my project as it gave me an example of what a poetry book looks like and the power it can hold. It helps me understand the power of words and how different formats can aid in the reading of a poem. While my project will have many other elements, understanding the potential functioning of words in the project will help my book be much more effective.

Mulder, C., & Dull, A. (2014). Facilitating Self-Reflection: The Integration of Photovoice in Graduate Social Work Education. *Social Work Education*, 33(8), 1017–1036.

This article provides an example of the methodology and impact of the photovoice methodology. While my project is not a strict photovoice project, it does incorporate aspects of reflexive artmaking from interviewing participants at the beginning of the project, to ongoing involvement throughout the creation of the book, and also through incorporating art and writing and photographs made by the participants. This article helped me understand the potential positive impacts of implementing photovoice methodology for both participants and the project in general.

Rosler, Martha (2005). "In, Around, and Afterthoughts, on Documentary Photography." *Basic critical theory for photographers*. Taylor & Francis Group.

In this article, Rosler discusses many different aspects and functions of photography and specifically of documentary photography. She discusses the limits and approaches of photography as well as illustrates the potential power the medium can hold. While my project is not strict documentary in nature and rather is more based around an artistic practice, I am still documenting personal stories. It is critical that in this process I understand the power and implications that my work can have for myself, my subjects, and my audience. This reading helps me further dig into and understand these

relationships.

Sontag, Susan. (2003). *Regarding the pain of others*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

This book is largely about war photography and how pain has been used within these photographs. So, while it is not immediately relevant to my project, reading this book helped me understand the power photographs can have and the responsibility that the photographer has when portraying painful issues. It helped me understand that there are wide implications for both the subject and the audience of the work when emotions are being explored and portrayed. Additionally, throughout the book Sontag reflects on photography in general, and similar to most of her work that I have read, it forces me to understand and foreground my role as the photographer within a project rather than hiding behind the camera and avoiding the responsibilities of creating.