

*WATCHING YOU GO: EXPLORING SUBJECTIVE DOCUMENTARY METHODS IN
CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY*

by

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Photography

University of Alaska Fairbanks

May 2017

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Abstract:

“Watching you go: Exploring subjective documentary methods in contemporary photography”

This work examines the history and contemporary context of photojournalism and documentary photography through narrative imagery of the artist’s mother and family. By adapting traditional documentary practices and exploring more subjective methodologies, *Watching you go* addresses the artist’s physical and emotional limitations while experiencing her mother’s terminal illness.

Before



Untitled, Ellamarie Quimby, 2004, silver gelatin print

I first picked up a 35mm point-and-shoot film camera at summer camp, in 2004. I was 13, and I made two prints from that roll of film- they were fairly out of focus and not of anything particularly interesting, but like so many photographers before me, watching my first print emerge like magic from a blank piece of paper sparked a fire in me.

Living just outside of Washington, DC afforded me unprecedented access to some of the most important art and current events in the United States. The Smithsonian Institutions, comprising 19 museums and the National Zoo, are all free to access. The National Gallery of Art, the National Portrait Gallery, the Hirshhorn Museum of Sculpture, the Renwick Museum of Craft- these were just some of the places that I frequented with my schools and families. National news was our local news- some of the most talented and successful contemporary

photojournalists in the US are based out of DC area, and I got to grow up seeing their work on the A1 page of the Washington Post, my hometown newspaper.

I chose to attend college close to where I grew up, and in the thick of the city that had already taught me so much about art and photography. The Corcoran College of Art + Design was one of the last three museum-schools in the nation, along with the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Not only was I attending school in a city chock full of free access to the work we were studying but, in many cases, instructors could ask us to simply move our class to the Corcoran's gallery and we'd sit in front of the Cy Twombly or the John Singer Sargent that was the topic of that day's lecture. We constantly had access to the artists who were hanging special exhibitions during the year, including things like workshops with Taryn Simon and David Levinthal, or the opportunity for students to install Sol Lewitt's *Wall Drawing #65*, following his specific installation instructions. The school was very small, with roughly 400 undergraduate students and 60-80 graduate students at any time, and the programs of study were limited. But these limitations, and the tight-knit community they fostered, formed me into a photography student with a particularly well-rounded knowledge of other mediums, craft, theory, and art history.

I came into my freshman year with a practice based almost entirely in the darkroom. I spent the first year and a half of my BFA working almost exclusively in 35 and 120 mm black and white film, with a few alternative and historic processes thrown in here and there.

The Corcoran's undergraduate students were split into courses of study based initially on year, and then by medium. Every student in my incoming year, roughly 100, spent their Foundation Year mixed in with students from all of the other disciplines. As we progressed through the semesters, our classes got more media-specific. Halfway through second year, the photography program asked students to choose between Fine Art Photography and

Photojournalism as their degree program. The courses content and methods diverged more and more from each other the further the programs progressed. Because of Washington DC's situation as a huge source of national and international news, the photojournalism program was heavily slanted towards news reporting and conflict photography. So early on in my program, and with a workflow that was still heavily rooted in black and white darkroom work, I chose the Fine Art Photography track.

In 2011, my first color film darkroom course changed a lot of things for me. I'd shot some color film here and there over the course of my studies, but I'd never done much with it. Terri Weifenbach, my instructor, is a quietly accomplished photographer and a thoughtful and serious person. Terri works in large format color film, and her incredible eye for color combined with the focus plane capabilities of 4x5 cameras make for exceedingly striking images of very boring subjects. She was married for some time to John Gossage, a much better known photographer who works mostly in black and white. It's rumored that their divorce was due largely to a book they worked on together, *Snake Eyes/Lana*, after the publishing of which their editor said the book would've been better without his work in it. Terri taught me about color, and being still, and introduced me to my first photo books, which would prove to be a long-lasting love affair.



from the series *jerusalem*, Ellamarie Quimby, 2011, chromogenic prints

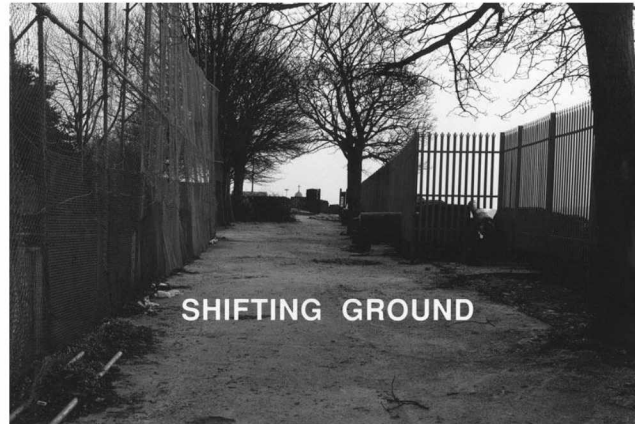
In the summer of 2011 I got the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem with a professor and a couple of classmates. Our reason for being there stemmed from a collaborative project we'd been working on with students from a photography school in the city, but it was more of a cultural experience than a studio course. We toured the city, spent time in Israeli settlements and the homes of our new friends, but spent a large portion of our time visiting with journalists and photographers working for all types of press. They spoke at length about conflict- not just the immediate, apparent conflict that kept them all employed, but also the internal, sometimes moral conflict that comes hand in hand with telling stories. No one reporter or newscast or photograph can give enough context to ever tell the whole scope of a story- so where do the choices get made, and who makes them? This course was the first opportunity that I had in two years of college to produce something that wasn't guided by a specific assignment. What I ended up compiling was much more of a question than anything else- who gets to tell the story of a place or a person? I had no historic, cultural, or religious ties to this place, and there I was, making work about it regardless. I tried to explore the divisions there, a place so significantly and aggressively contested. But in the end, was I allowed to? What did it matter what I thought about a place that wasn't and wouldn't ever be mine? What stories *could* I tell?

In high school, I had attended a boarding school in Dublin, Ireland for one year. Once in college, I jumped at the chance to go back to Ireland. In a small village in the far west of Ireland, a tiny school occupies several acres of land near the southern coast of Galway Bay, at the foot of a lush green mountain, surrounding a medieval castle tower. It was an idyllic space for any campus to occupy, and even more so for a school built for visual artists. The Burren College of Art is built specifically for undergraduate students who want to study for a semester or a year, although they do run full-time MFA and PhD studio art programs. Ultimately, I spent a year there, although I had intended to stay only one semester. I got caught up in how much I was

getting out of the program- my own studio space (a first), no travel, no distractions, no job, and no responsibilities outside of just making work. My first semester at the Burren provided the first formal photography courses that I'd taken which allowed and encouraged me to propose my own projects. I found myself quickly lost in a sea of options.



from the series *Conflicting Account*,
Paul Seawright, 2007



Shifting Ground, Willie Doherty, 1991

Having just spent part of my summer in Jerusalem, a land of struggle, political conflict weighed heavy on my mind. Although the streets of Dublin and Belfast might no longer be as overtly violent as they were in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the socio-political issues between the Northern Protestant Loyalists and the Irish Republicans still influence the daily lives of every person on that island. Paul Seawright and Willie Doherty, two Irish photographers who I was introduced to while at the Burren, address these issues and influences in differing but complementary ways. From either side of the Troubles, Seawright and Doherty both make photographs nearly devoid of actual human presence. “Actual” because in fact, the images they make examine the remnants, the left-behinds of human impact. So much of the conflict that remains in Irish society today is internal, a psychological conflict rather than a physical one. While Seawright addresses this by photographing visual fragments of the cultural narrative of the Troubles, Doherty centers surveillance and boundaries, juxtaposing provocative statements over the “empty” photographs.

I connected immediately and powerfully with both of these photographers, who were working so hard to bring to light a conflict that often gets forgotten. Using this psychological lens that I'd developed while processing Seawright and Doherty's work, I turned my eye on my own experiences in Ireland and what I could see from where I stood.



Pages 11-12 from Sa Bhaile Aris, Ellamarie Quimby, 2011, book

Sa Bhaile Aris is a book I produced as a reaction to the time that I spent in Ireland first during high school, and then college. *Sa Bhaile Aris* or *At Home Again* was an exploration of traditional Irish culture in a contemporary, globalized Ireland. Many images were paired together as compare and contrasts, and the book was peppered both with essays that I'd written about my experiences, and quotes that I'd pulled from research that I'd done. I focused on patterns, on evidence of change that faded into the background of daily life, and on cultural anomalies. This book was the first body of work that I'd produced unprompted and unrestrained, and that I feel was truly a reflection of my own eye. It was also the first completely digital body of work that I'd ever produced.

The main piece of critique that I received regarding *Sa Bhaile Aris* was that there weren't any portraits in it. I'd talked at length about the people and the country without including a single basic portrait of a person. This was largely by design- I didn't like making photographs of people. But it was feedback that I'd received, so I endeavored to improve on it.



from the series *The Kids Are Alright*, Ellamarie Quimby, 2012, archival pigment prints

The second body of work that I produced while at the Burren, *The Kids Are Alright*, looked at my peer group, and the effect of the economic boom and bust on their lives and choices. Ireland had been an economic force in the EU for much of the mid-oughties. Returning to the country in 2011, especially in the midst of their worst economic collapse in fifty years, showed me a fiercely different country than the one that I'd experienced four years earlier. The brain drain occurring was palpable- I looked at the friends that I'd known since attending school in Dublin, and I looked at the people I was meeting while living out in the country, and tried to illustrate the kinds of choices they were making about their respective futures. I returned to working in color film, although printed digitally. I wanted to give myself some comfort in the process, while the content was so out of my comfort zone. The work hung salon-style, with roughly 20 differently sized prints hanging close together to provide a mural-style effect.

While I was living in Ireland, a former partner of mine, who'd been both physically and emotionally abusive towards me, took his own life.

When I returned home to Washington DC the following May, I realized right away that I had not spent enough time processing or healing after his passing. I had little to no interest in the types of topics that I'd been invested in for the last few years. I was struggling through

intermittent bouts of depression and anxiety and focusing all of my energy on just making in through the day to day. I spent a lot of time alone, in quiet, natural spaces. Back in a program that asked me to focus on Fine Art work rather than the more documentary slant I'd taken for the last year, I really struggled to put my finger on anything that I was interested in focusing on for my thesis work.

Eventually, I allowed myself to look inward. I hadn't really ever done that before, or at least not in such a serious and raw way. The work that I ended up focusing on was a type of documentary work in and of itself- I returned to my love for film and darkroom processes, and acquired an 8x10 large format camera. I brought the camera out with me when I needed to be alone, and photographed the spaces that I occupied. These were often national parks, or trails, or lakeshores- devoid of other people, the space and the process not asking me for anything in return. My methodology became my coping mechanism- the complicated, fiddly nature of shooting with such a large, unwieldy camera, especially out in the field, allowed me to focus on tasks, rather than just being alone with my thoughts.



from the series *witness*, Ellamarie Quimby, 2013, archival pigment prints

Making photographs with a large format camera is nothing like making photographs with the cameras of today. 8x10 cameras are huge, weighty, cumbersome beasts that make no part of the process of photography easy. Every step is a purposeful, physical act. I viewed the landscapes that I was photographing and spending time in as blank canvases- open psychological spaces, allowing for projections and reflections while I performed the physical tasks required of photographing. The pictures that I made became illustrations of those emotional spaces- the tilt and shift of the camera's planes skewing the focus and warping the perspective of each landscape. The body of work became evidence, the physical result of my mourning and coping process, rather than illustrations of the process itself.

After my bachelor's degree, I took a 5th year at the Corcoran to finish my Master of Teaching in Art Education. Because I'd completed all of my studio course requirements during my undergraduate, all of the classes I was taking were lecture-and-discussion academic courses. I didn't have anyone to answer to in regards to my photographic work for the first time in almost eight years, but that also meant that I had no studio space, and no external motivation to make work at all. It was a year of stumbling over time management, internal motivation, and finding my way in my studio practice outside of the classroom.

After

In finding my way during my year off from studio courses, I applied to and was accepted at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Master of Fine Arts program. I was interested in pushing myself to experience a completely new environment and to develop both personally and artistically. Some of my particular interest in the program here lay in the fact that the photography portion of the program grew out of the Journalism department- a direction that I saw my work moving more and more towards. Although many of the recent graduates in

Photography hadn't necessarily done documentary or photojournalistic work, the grounding of the program in that tradition still existed and I would still have access to all the benefits of being part of the Journalism department.

The first, most tangible effect that living in Fairbanks had on my practice was the logistics of making photographs. At the time, there was one place in town that could process and print color negatives in-house. I worked there for the first three months that I lived here, and having firsthand knowledge of how they handled film, I wasn't interested in letting them process mine. I tried to continue to work in color film, this time medium format, for roughly the first six months of my program. The project, *About Light*, was work that helped me transition into living here. Everyone had tried to prepare me for the cold, but no one had ever told me how effected I'd be by the light here. I chased the fading sunlight for the first three months, and followed its return again that spring. This series wasn't work that meant a lot to me, or that I felt passionate about, necessarily, but it was important in helping me settle in this new and difficult place. In the end, working in film was not practical or cost-effective, and the work ran its course.

I had been working concurrently on two other projects, both digital, and both projects that I'd begun before moving to Fairbanks. One documented immigrants from various Pacific Islands, and depicted their lives and connections to their cultures while living in the United States. The other project focused on my mother's recent diagnosis with a terminal illness. This was the first time that I was making significant work in digital, and by extension the first time that I had to really examine my approach to that process and workflow. Digital photography can often feel very disconnected from the grand tradition of darkroom and film work, and so I spent much of my second semester here developing a system over which I felt I had ownership. By the end of that first academic year in Fairbanks, I had settled on making the work about my mother the work that I would focus on for my Master's thesis.

The documentary photographs that I gravitate toward tend to fall outside the realm of traditional news reportage. I prefer bodies of photography in which the documentarian is invested in the community they're making work about, either by virtue of their culture, religion or geography, or because something about that community struck them, and they stayed. The comments made by those reporters in Jerusalem regarding news bias and journalistic slant have stuck with me, and have ultimately made it more difficult for me to digest documentary work that professes itself to be The Truth. I struggled for months after my decision to focus on my mother's life over what to call what I was doing, and where it fit in the grand scheme of the documentary genre.

Photography considered "documentary" could be found as early as the 1850s, in the work of nineteenth-century archaeologists making daguerreotypes of Egypt and the near east. These photographs captured accurate images of distant lands that most people in the West would never have the opportunity to see, other than in a photograph.¹ If we take the term "documentary" slightly less literally, and see it more from the viewpoint of "images that tell a story that is true", rather than just a single photograph that depicts reality, we start to see the photojournalist tradition emerge in the Civil War photographs of Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan.² As photographic and reproductive technology rapidly advanced, documentary imagery shifted from static, after-the-fact imagery to the city streets. Jacob Riis's *Children of the Slums* paved the way for the socially-impassioned work of photographers like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, cementing the place of social change as a driving factor for many documentary bodies of work.

¹ Department of Photographs. "Early Documentary Photography." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004. Accessed March 10, 2017. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edph/hd_edph.htm (October 2004)

² Hernandez, Ciel. "A Rundown of the History of Documentary Photography." *Lomography*. May 03, 2016. Accessed March 10, 2017. <https://www.lomography.com/magazine/320521-a-rundown-of-the-history-of-documentary-photography>.

Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" spoke to the beat reporters like Weegee, listening to his police radio to beat investigators to the crime scenes and developing his photographs in his car-trunk darkroom. As photojournalism ate up the genre of photography previously considered "documentary", Robert Frank's quiet, consuming look at American society emerged as the foundation for less strict, more subjective types of documentation.

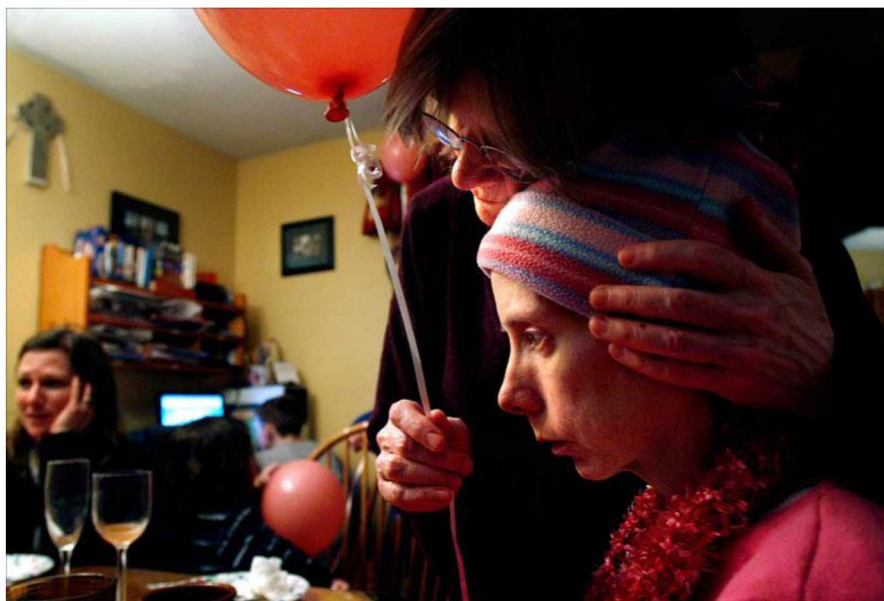
In more contemporary photographic practice, work under the documentary umbrella continues to be sub-categorized further and further. Photojournalism may be divided even more into conflict photography, news reportage, feature photography, and so on. Street work emulating Robert Frank may not even fall under that larger umbrella any more, depending on its' angle and presentation. Like styles of painting and ceramics, genres and definitions shift and change with new technology, new methods of disseminating images to the public, and new methods of visual media consumption. Steve McCurry, one of the most celebrated and well-known contemporary National Geographic photographers, has come under heavy fire in recent years for doctoring his photographs, after which he rebranded himself a "visual storyteller", rather than photojournalist.³ Ben Huff, a former student in the MFA program here at UAF, spent five years traveling the Dalton Highway, making large format color photographs of the people and spaces he encountered along the way. He typifies this work, which was presented ultimately as a book, as an exploration of the road that "serves as the physical and psychological line between wilderness and oil."⁴ Huff's book feels like Robert Frank, in color, and in the Arctic. His images illustrate the land, and the people, and the journey itself, without making a point about any of it. If you didn't live in Fairbanks, or work on the North Slope, you wouldn't know anything about any of the photos in his book. Is it photojournalism? I'd argue not, based mostly on the lack of any

³ Laurent, Olivier. "Steve McCurry: I'm Not a Photojournalist." Time Lightbox. May 30, 2016. Accessed March 10, 2017. <http://time.com/4351725/steve-mccurry-not-photojournalist/>.

⁴ Ben Huff. "The Last Road North." Ben Huff. Accessed March 10, 2017. <http://www.huffphoto.com/road/>.

concrete information other than the photographs themselves. But Huff documents a lifestyle, the seasons, the landscape, and his own desire to look. His book becomes a subjective documentary- a delicately produced, very particular look at a reality that only he has ever experienced.

When a parent falls ill, it seems like photographers either pick up their camera immediately, or shelve it indefinitely, with no in-between. It's no surprise that the majority of sick-family-member narratives that exist are ones revolving around cancer- the disease takes 171 out of every 100,000 lives, making it the second leading cause of death in the United States⁵, While these works are highly influential at this time in my career, none of them ever quite get at what I was interested in saying.



from the series *Remember Me*, Preston Gannaway, 2008

In 2008, Preston Gannaway, then-photojournalist for the Concord Monitor in New Hampshire, won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for a body of work titled *Remember*

⁵ Blodget, Henry. "WHAT KILLS US: The Leading Causes Of Death From 1900-2010." Business Insider. June 24, 2012. Accessed February 26, 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/leading-causes-of-death-from-1900-2010-2012-6>.

Me. I saw it while it was on display at her alma mater, Virginia Intermont College, and it was the first significant photographic documentary work that I remember being exposed to. The work chronicles the diagnosis and death of a woman with liver cancer, and her family's life after her passing. I remember being immediately struck by the intimacy of the images- I wondered how this family could let someone in to such a heartbreaking and difficult time in their life. Carolynne St. Pierre, and her husband Rich, invited Gannaway into their home and to follow their lives for over a year. Gannaway's images are unflinching, but uncomfortably voyeuristic. Experiencing her photographs is both metaphorically and literally like standing directly in the doorway of someone else's life. Gannaway accompanies the St. Pierres to doctors appointments, to family outings, to the funeral director's, and after Carolynne's death, she follows widower husband Rich around while he tries to help his children process their mother's passing. Her subject's gazes never meet the viewers, while sinks and chairs and other people obscure portions of the frame. Gannaway's short time with the family, on top of her position as an outsider, constructs a palpable emotional wall in each frame, and the audience is left with the unnerving feeling that they've witnessed something that they shouldn't have, a moment in a life that wasn't meant to be public. Gannaway's approach is very apparent in the early stages of my work with my mother. We are both visibly uncomfortable addressing the physical and emotional toll that ALS has taken on our family- she does not make eye contact with the camera, and I shield the lens from her view behind doorways and by photographing in mirrors. I make an effort to keep her from feeling like a zoo animal, on display and existing just to be looked at. While the quality of the images produced in the early stages of this work may suffer for it, it was for the benefit of her emotional health, and our relationship.



from the series *Cancer Family*, Nancy Borowick, 2013

Nancy Borowick chronicled her mother and father as they underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatments together, her mother for her second bout of breast cancer and her father for his first with liver cancer, in a body of work titled *Cancer Family*. Borowick's unadorned black and white images capture the day-to-day as both of her parents are diagnosed, treated for, and eventually die of their diagnoses. *Cancer Family* is extensive- the work has been ongoing for years, even now after their deaths, and no part of her experience goes untouched. It is the most comprehensive body of work on a sick parent and that situation's effect on a family that I have seen. While Gannaway's look was unflinching due to her position as stark observer, Borowick's work is unflinching due to her personal investment in the narrative. Borowick has also published a book based on *Cancer Family*, titled *The Family Imprint*. The book is a collection of Borowick's photographs, decades of her parent's love letters, family keepsakes and other evidence of the Borowicks' lives, expanding on the story which their daughter had begun to tell years earlier. Spending time considering *Cancer Family* when I began *Watching you go* allowed

me to see the value in preserving this time for our family. Although my active role in my nuclear family has changed dramatically since my move across the continent, I can still contribute as an archivist. Roughly halfway through the early part of my work, I started making an effort to be more present with my mother while at home with her. The number of photographs I made may have gone down, but their quality and the quality of the moments captured improved dramatically. As we settled into more comfort surrounding the work, the work itself became more comfortable, more honest, and more raw.

I asked my father to look in the mirror, while I took his photograph.

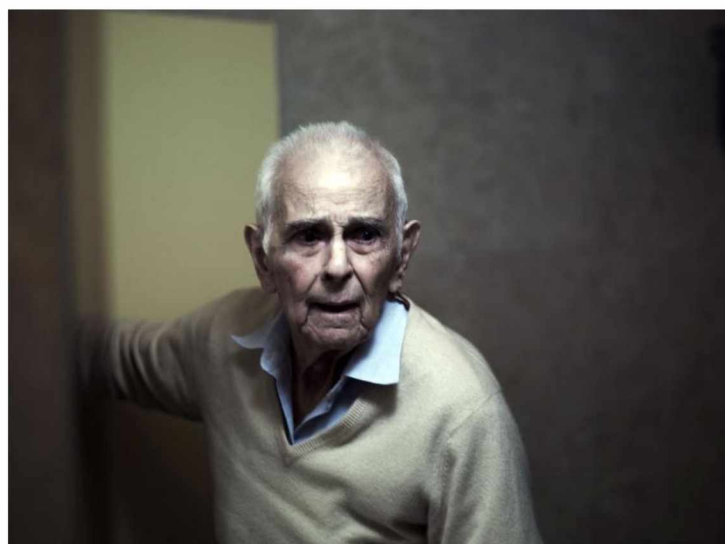
Now, you have to realize my dad was very handsome when he was young. When people talk about 'film star handsome', well, that was my dad. In fact, he WAS a film star (of sorts), in Hollywood, during the 1930's.

So when he looks in the mirror, he sees a man ravaged, a man no longer beautiful, and that upsets him deeply.

You see, he's still vain at 98. In fact, his vanity can be quite extraordinary.

I tried to take him to the doctor a few months ago, but on the way out, he caught a glimpse of himself in the hall mirror.

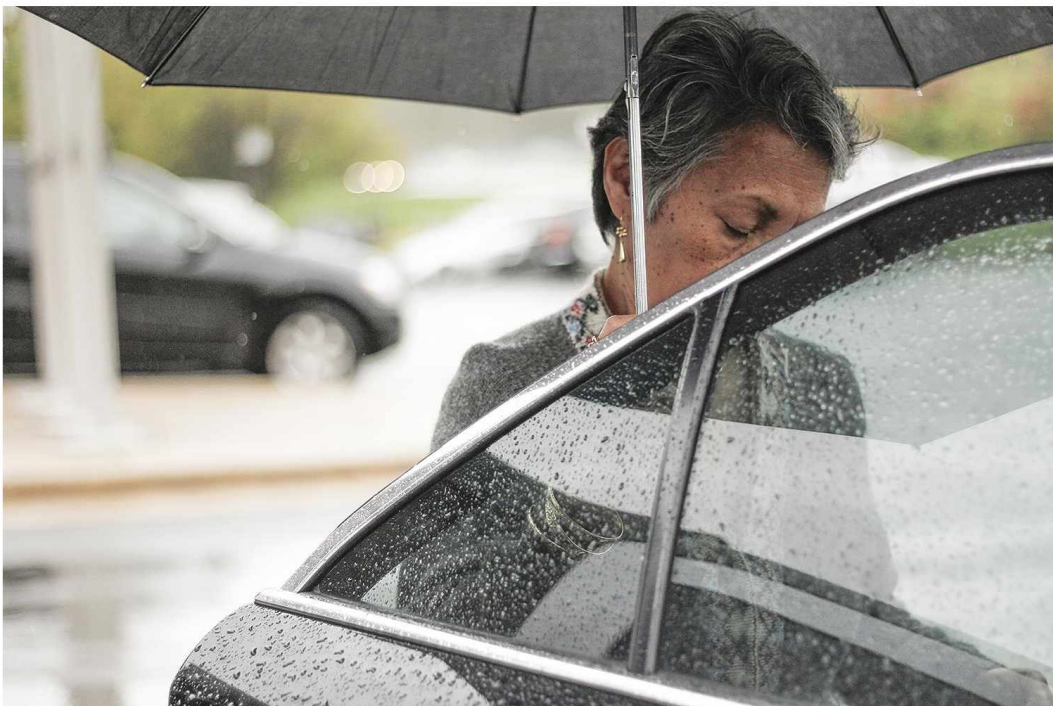
He was so horrified with his appearance, that he refused to leave the house until I found a 'black pencil' to dye his white hair with.



from the series *Days With My Father*, Phillip Toledano, 2010

After the death of his mother, photographer Phillip Toledano spent three years recording the last part of his father's life. In the resulting book, *Days With My Father*, Toledano documents the final chapters of his father's life while also capturing his own struggle as a son watching his father's decline. Toledano notes in the opening paragraphs of the book that only after his mother's passing did he realize how much she had shielded him from his father's struggles with dementia. The book is peppered with notes and commentary from Toledano- some of it humorous, some of it factual, some of it heartbreaking, but all of it sincere. The images mostly

feature very shallow depth of field, toned by the muted greens and yellows of old fluorescent lighting. When Toledano's father is pictured, which is the majority of the images, he is mostly in the center of the frame, pictured from his chest up and taking up most of the photograph. Interspersed through the book are images without any people in them, but illustrating spaces that Toledano's father has occupied or left his mark on- the indent left by his body in his favorite chair, notes written to himself, a birthday balloon floating forlornly behind a hospital-issue wheelchair. Toledano's photographs and frank commentary deliver insight into the thought process of the caregivers, the children, and the ones left behind. Every photograph is poignant and sad and a little bit desolate, but the additional writings by Toledano imbue each image with the complexity of his multi-faceted experience. The book is as much about Toledano as it is about his father. This work features my mother and my family, but it isn't actually about them. *Watching you go* is the narrative of my experience of this situation, rather than a straight depiction of my mother's life.



(1/3) *When we thought it was cancer (I wish it was cancer)*, May 2014, from the series *Watching You Go*, Ellamarie Quimby, 2017, archival pigment print

Watching you go

“My mother was the earth-ripe tomatoes and fennel and cut grass and fertilizer. She was a wide-brimmed straw hat, streaked with dirt, fraying slightly at the edges from the sun. Her hands gave life to string beans and cucumbers and bell peppers and me. Everything she touched was green.

In August of 2014, Evelyn Quimby was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis- more commonly known as ALS, or Lou Gherig’s disease. ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder, attacking the cells in the brain and spinal cord that control voluntary muscle movement. Early signs of the disease include difficulty speaking and swallowing, and progressive weakness in the hands, legs, and feet. ALS does not effect cognition or brain function. Doctors do not know what causes ALS or why people develop it. Most people with ALS survive only 2-5 years after their first symptoms develop- less than 10% will live more than 10 years. There are no treatments, no cures, and no recovery.⁶

She can’t lift her arms to shake cherries from her fruit trees, anymore. She cannot harvest the last of the season’s squash. She sits nearby while my father turns the soil for her. She shows her aides which plants to move inside to save from the frost. My sister and I empty the pots of dried soil and dead roots. We watch her wilt.

I moved across the continent from my family within two months of my mother’s diagnosis. I do not know her doctors and I interact with her aides only a few times a year. My sister is listed on my mother’s Power of Attorney forms, but I am not. I experience my family’s life in chapters, in episodes, in sentences. I am a casual participant in the lives of the most important people in mine.

My mother watches the weather channel from her hospital bed in the living room. I ask her why- she replies that she’s waiting for a storm.

I tell her: the storm is here.” Statement, *Watching you go*, Ellamarie Quimby, 2017

This work is non-fiction, but does that make it photojournalism? Whose truth am I illustrating? I think it’s very easy for a photographer to say, “I’m a straight photographer- I don’t make edits, I don’t photoshop, I only shoot in available light. This work is photojournalism, this is a documentary.” But I rarely hear people who make images like this stop to examine the angle from which they are making these pictures. This is the reminder, on repeat, every time I pick up

⁶ “What is ALS?” ALSA.org. Accessed April 05, 2017. <http://www.alsa.org/about-als/what-is-als.html>.

a newspaper- there's always something just outside the frame telling more of the story, or a different story entirely. There's always a bias, and it needs acknowledging.

This idea of the “soft” documentary, of subjective reality, is what I've been most drawn to producing in my own work. In the tradition of journalism and in storytelling, there is often an emphasis on facts and details and extensive description in photographs. I'm not interested in conveying facts; I'm interested in constructing a window into my personal reality. There is a gross misconception in the general population's digestion of documentary photography that images under this label exist without bias, and that any “documentary” image is going to be representative of anyone else in that particular situation- every cancer story looks the same, every victim of war has experience the same atrocities, every terrorist attack is perpetrated by people that look a certain way. No image exists without bias, and any postmodern photographer will tell you that no image has ever been, or will ever be the hard truth.



The shape of this house is different now, August 2016, from the series Watching You Go, Ellamarie Quimby, 2017, archival pigment print

Watching you go is the first body of work that I've ever made about my family. I've included them in photographs that I've made before, but only ever as peripheral characters. This work is the first time that they've been my subject, observed and recorded as the central theme of the work that I'm doing. Because of the nature of the work, every photograph I've made has been a choice. I am not my mother's caregiver, but that doesn't mean that I shouldn't or don't have a hand in her care. However, when I put the camera between us, I create that screen and shift from participant to observer, I'm removing the option to be a caregiver for those moments.

Instead of experiencing a period of time in my mother's day, I document it. And while the documentation is important, and necessary, and one of the main things that I can do for my family in my position, it creates both a physical and emotional barrier. My mother has always been a proud woman, and a doggedly private one at that. We are not a family that spends a lot of time discussing our feelings- so making such an intimate portrait of arguably the most difficult time in our shared life has not been without it's struggles. They understand what I'm doing and why I need to do it, but for most of this work so far, have not elected not to be active participants. In three years of work, I have one authentic photograph of my mother acknowledging the presence of my camera.

Working so strictly in digital photography can often look and feel like a very abstract process. Digital files don't exist physically, in any tangible way, so it's difficult for people to be aware of how much handwork still goes into producing prints and a show from data and binary code. Coming from a largely film and darkroom background, it took years for me to feel like the images and objects I produced digital were equally as valuable and authentic as any print that I'd made using an enlarger. The editing and culling down and test printing are all still part of the process- with significantly less strange smells and chemical stains, but equally as much trial and

error and frustration. Developing a strong and consistent workflow for my digital projects was the first step.



January 2016

When working with hundreds of digital files at a time, the editing comes in waves. Initially, every frame I've made in a day gets a glance, though only the ones that hold my attention for longer than a few seconds make it to the next round. Often, the choices get made based initially on content and technical qualities like exposure and sharpness. Other times, even if an image isn't strong in its content, a piece of light will have fallen in just the right spot, or the photo offers a quiet moment to insert between some of the more dramatic images.

Once I've made some initial choices, I may have ten or twenty or thirty photos from several hours of photographing. Every image gets made into a physical 5x7 work print, a habit retained from darkroom work that I doubt I'll ever let go of. The work prints, with minimal or no retouching other than color balance and brightness, get stuck to my studio wall, where I stare at them. I stare, and I stare, and I stare. I leave, and then come back, and stare at them some more. As I grow tired of an image, I take it down. If I miss it, it'll go back up, but it almost never does. I take the remaining work prints down, I take them to classes and critiques, other people mark their preferences, and I eliminate one or two more. I put the rest back up on my wall, and I stare

some more. Once I have fewer than ten or fifteen, I'll make 8x10 versions, slightly more retouched than the smaller work prints. The 5x7s come down from the wall and the new, larger prints go up. I eliminate one or two whose failings are more apparent at this size, and the process repeats itself.



When we thought it was cancer (I wish it was cancer), May 2014, from the series Watching you go, Ellamarie Quimby, 2017, archival pigment prints

Watching you go exists in a generally chronologic order. This element of the organization is significant because it allows for the audience to observe the passing of time; to watch my mother's body deteriorate at the same rate that I have. The physical distance between me and my family also dictates that the work so far has been produced in chapters, in episodes- mostly when I have a break from school, although occasionally during other parts of the year as well. Some of the photographs in the show hang closer together for this reason. This way of experiencing someone's life is odd to me- I stayed near my family for my bachelor's and first master's program, so although many of my peers were used to the ebb and flow of family relationships throughout an academic year, I was not. It was important for me to address this in the presentation of the work in an effort to be authentic about my lived experience. I'm not there every day; I don't get to be eased into my mother's decline. Before I moved to Alaska, she was only just starting to appear sick, despite showing symptoms for nearly six months before her diagnosis. When I returned to Virginia that December on break from school, she had lost twenty

pounds and had begun to use a walking stick. Time seemed to have passed immeasurably fast, a feeling anyone with family outside of Alaska might recognize.



(3/3) *You decided not to live like this forever*, March 2015, from the series *Watching You Go*, Ellamarie Quimby, 2017, archival pigment print

While these photographs that I had begun to make documented the passing of time since her diagnosis, I struggled with how to illustrate the Before. Eventually, I decided to hang a set of family photos as an introduction to the rest of the work, but this decision ultimately came more from a place of desiring clarity than from anywhere else. About two years into the work, I hung three photographs with titles in an MFA Works-in-progress show in the University gallery. After the fact, an essay was left in my mailbox that concerned one image in particular. The author's name and course title were ripped off of the paper to protect anonymity, but based on the style of writing and discussing the photograph it seemed to be from a student in an introductory art appreciation course. The author discussed a particular photograph, at the time titled *The day you chose how to die*, now titled *You decided not to live like this forever*. In the paper, they identified the man reflected in the mirror as a hospital employee. He was aiding my mother in completing

the paperwork that indicates that she does not want to be hooked up to machines in order to prolong her life. I do not remember anything else the author wrote about this photograph, except for the fact that they misidentified this man, my father, and changed the entire story of this photograph. For several reasons, I needed to ensure that the same misinterpretation would not happen again. The family photographs serve both to establish an earlier timeline of my mother's health, and to introduce the characters in this story.

The physical and emotional distance between my family and me is already apparent in these photographs. When I began to consider how best to finish and present them, the idea of placing them behind a pane of glass did not sit well. Like Borowick, and Toledano, I have a stake in these images. They're participatory, and placing them behind a layer of glass, under a matt, inside a frame, makes them voyeuristic. The frame instead becomes a window, and the audience becomes watchers, rather than investors and contributors. A pane of glass places even more space between the work and experiencing the images. Large, unframed, encompassing images place the viewer in the space, in my family's life. Brought to my attention by Art Department Chair Da-ka-xeen Mehner, the preservative nature of traditional framing would have been inappropriate for this work- my mother isn't dead yet. This work isn't over, and it likely won't be for a long time after her passing. Placing these images in boxes, under glass, keeping this particular edit forever, like a monument- it doesn't make sense. There's no need to be archival before the end of the work. The immediate accessibility and somewhat crumbly nature of the choices I've made provide another cultural insight; in the Pacific, when someone gifts you a lei as a symbol of love or joy, they're not meant to last forever. The gift and the symbol get returned to the Earth. The work can return to the Earth. My mother will return to the Earth.



(3/3) *Give and take*, March 2017, from the series *Watching You Go*,
Ellamarie Quimby, 2017, archival pigment print

Until then, at least, this work is ongoing. It won't end with my mother's passing, and it likely won't end with my father's. This work has become, and will continue to be, a much larger examination of our family, and my role within it, wherever I may end up. Like Borowick and Toledano, a book may be the end result- a collection of us, the narrative of my adult life, the tracking of the waves this diagnosis has spread through my family. But for now, it exists as a process: a mechanism for understanding what our lives are now, a way to hold onto what's drifting away.

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