Intimacy, History and Dynamics

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Intimacy, History and Dynamics

In summary, my dissertation proposal is centred around the theme of documentary family photography. Inspiration comes from my own family albums, more specifically the images that represent a more candid approach as opposed to a more traditional approach. From this I look to explore alternative approaches to family photography from artists that focus on their own family or that of others. By using a system of three key words, three key artists and three key bodies of work as a springboard for further exploration I will compile research that can be developed into a potential dissertation question. The words related to the Artists are: *Intimacy*: Sian Davey, *History:* Pete Pin and *Dynamics*: Llisa Katz Rissman.

> *Family likeness often has a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties us by our heart strings to the beings that jar us at every movement.*
>
> (Eliot, 1918)

Intimacy contributes to the development of healthy relationships. It runs through interactions people share and use to grow. For example, when a baby is born endorphins are released between the mother and child, through touch and intimate moments. Intimacy can create powerful chemical reactions. Intimacy or the lack of it within the family unit can also alter the functionality of the space and is deeply personal and circumstantial.

Henri Cartier-Bresson suggested the use of a camera can act as a '…psychoanalytical couch. [or] It can be a warm kiss' (Cartier-Bresson, 1952). In combination with the complex workings of capturing family intimacy through family photography the camera can act as a reflective medium to uncover both harmony and disharmony.

The first word explored in relation to family photography is ‘Intimacy’, clearly represented throughout Sian Davey’s series: Looking for Alice.









(Figure 1, 2, 3, 4)

The series is focused around Davey's daughter Alice, who was born with a diagnosis of Down's Syndrome. The work's background subtly comments on Davey's fears and insecurities that initially threatened her relationship with her daughter:

> *…I was not prepared for how I would respond after Alice was born and diagnosed... I was fraught with anxiety that rippled through to every aspect of my relationship with her… On reflection I saw that Alice was feeling my rejection of her… the responsibility lay with me: I had to dig deep into my own prejudices. The result was that as my fear dissolved. I fell in love with my daughter. We all did.*
>
> (Davey,2014)

This attitude toward her daughter fuelled Davey to focus on Alice. Davey further produced a series surrounding her oldest daughter 'Martha' (Davey, 2016) in 2016, as an extension of her work surrounding her family.



(Figure 5)

‘Looking for Alice’ (Davey,2014) celebrates and signifies both the struggles and difficulties of having a family and raising a child with Down’s Syndrome, it combines harmony with the newfound love Davey and her family experience for Alice. These aspects occur simultaneously through her work and in turn produce sensitive and intimate imagery. Davey’s honesty and

candid approach is praised as a 'universal narrative about love' by Corey Keller, Curator at San Fransico's MOMA (2014) and as '…heartfelt and life-affirming' (Family Photography Now, Howarth and McLaren, 2016) . It relates to people on themes of acceptance, love and core family values.

From first glance at the artist statement presented alongside the work it suggests Davey's awareness creates a more honest platform for her work to follow. Davey wants the audience to understand her position. This allows both herself and her family to be vulnerable and that's where the doors of intimacy open up.

When exploring the idea further, the deconstruction of the following chosen image from the series, brought to light different aspects that show both Davey's selection of moments but her intimate style of working.



(Figure 6)

Within figure 6 subtle interactions between Alice and her brothers are occurring. All the siblings within the scene are touching, with Alice's hand tucked in her sleeve resting on her brother's leg, signifying she is both relaxed and attentive.

Davey captures and enhances this through her use of subtle focusing, yet doesn't over exaggerate the image. At first glance Alice is in perfect focus in the centre of the image and then the focus begins to shift outward. The moment itself is soft and warm. Davey applies the use of the subtle focusing

and natural lighting to create hazy edges and picks up on the warm colour pallet, complimenting the emotions and mood within the scene. Keller commented on her approach: 'I appreciated the underratedness of [Davey's] approach. In less capable hands, a similar project could have felt emotionally manipulative or even exploitive…' (Keller. C. 2014) .

The significance of the location is also relevant as the large bed where the siblings are located, poses as a place of intimacy and represents a 'safe zone' within the family's household. The family bed as a symbol has connotations relating it to family intimacy: a place of rest for parents, a place of comfort for a child waking from a nightmare, or a place for activities. The family bed can act as a shared soft space for interactions to occur.

Upon exploring the setting further the use of the family bed can be seen in examples throughout photography and popular fairy-tales. An example taken in 1925 by Jacques Henri Lartigue explores a similar setting. The picture shows Lartigue's family gathered in the family bed early Christmas morning.



(Figure 7)

A more modern example from Elinor Carucci also displays the intimate space of the family bed from her project ‘Mother’ (Carucci, 2010)



(Figure 8)

As well as photography the very idea of the family space is referenced in fairy tales and stories. Highlighting the importance of the space and its individuality to each family. Goldilocks and The Three Bears is an example that signifies an alternative view of a stranger entering the family space and disrupting its peace.



(Figure 9)

Through the exploration of Davey's work, the importance of the theme of intimacy and her intimate approach, initial questions have arisen: What is the importance of intimacy within photography? How do we show intimacy within photographs? Is intimacy tangible within image making? What is the significance of the family home within photography? And What external factors contribute to themes of intimacy within photography?

The exploration of family history is often chosen as a subject within family photography. Family heritage, history and upbringing can shape identity and photographs can create an historical record to further understand childhood memories and family events. The family archive, mementos and objects; embody emotions linked to a specific time in a family's history and become the evidence of a family relationship and existence.

In connection to the chosen word: 'History', Magnum photographer Pete Pin has explored this area in depth. His project 'Migrations of Memory' (Pin, 2010) is one that displays a use of family archival imagery and objects to explore the experience of both himself and his relatives during the mass genocide in Cambodia during the 1970s. This work has also resulted in an ongoing project surrounding Cambodian diaspora exploring similar themes.

Figure 10 below shows Pin's Grandmother alongside a family photograph - one of only two items taken before forcefully being moved to a Khmer Rouge work camp in 1973.





(Figure 10)

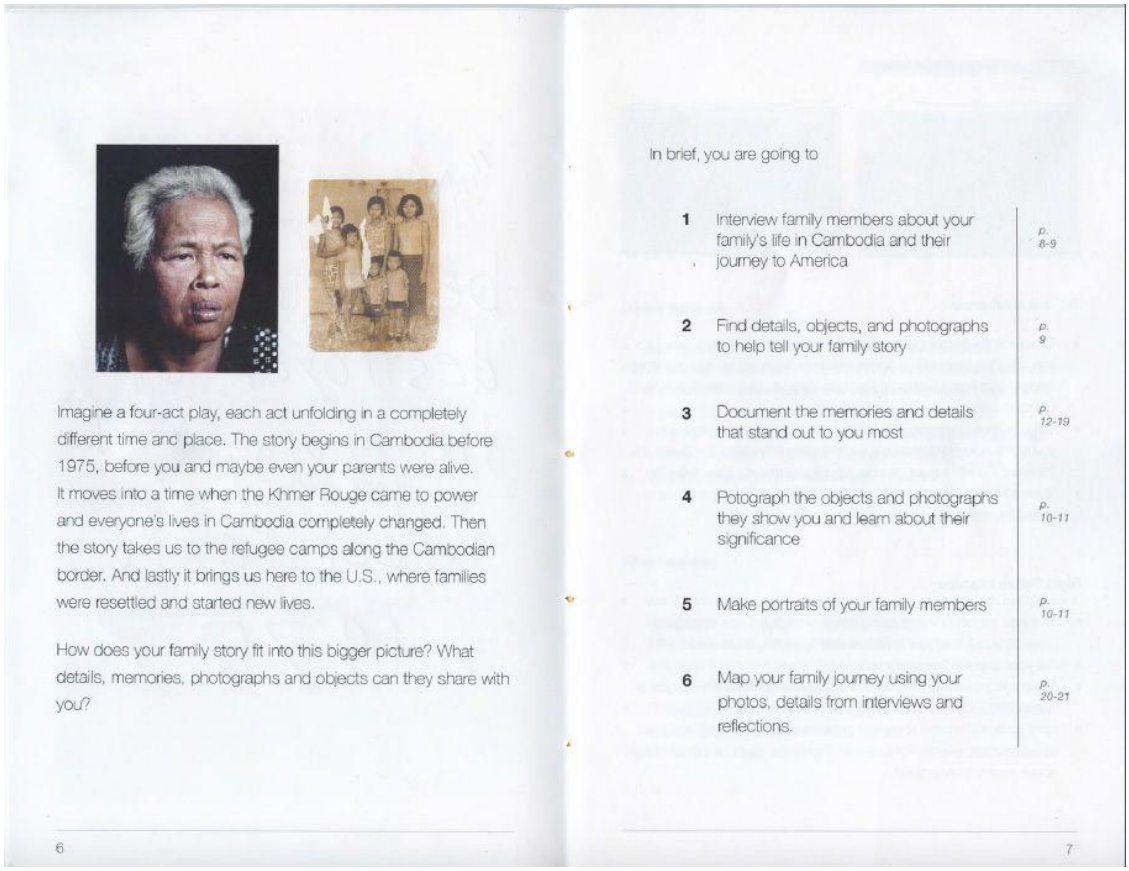
By combining both a present-day Portrait of Pin's Grandmother and an object that poses such significant value to the family, Pin is able to produce a poignant outcome. If the images were presented separately the meaning would seem more distant and less related to real experience. Pin describes the significance of the family photo as a '… tangible connection to the life my family had in Cambodia before the killing fields…' (Howarth and McLaren, 2016). This, alongside the technique chosen by Pin to photograph his grandmother in a dark space with a single light source, contributes to

the historical seriousness and experience of the family's past. Through a clean and simple layout Pin utilises his family's archival imagery and his family's experience to create a resilient hue surrounding their story and the clear divide between past and present.

Although the images speak true to his Grandmother's experience the very act of taking this image allowed Pin to become more open with his grandmother and created an intimate space to share some of the things she experienced. In a short documentary exploring Pin's work he discusses how... ' in [his] household no one ever spoke about the past… [and] people don't have a means of even communicating with their elders' (Vice TV, 2018) Pin then translates how this impacts on the younger generations: 'Traumas from the killing Fields were passed down generations' (Vice TV, 2018) This link to younger generations opens his work to broader themes around the treatment and representation of refugees and how this has impacted on their history and identity. The work represents not just his Grandmother's story but also a sense of shared suffering for a generation. Pin recognises the importance of exploring refugee history not just in terms of his own family but the experiences of refugees all over the world today.

Following this body of work Pin formed a therapeutic medium that encouraged the old and new generations of Cambodian families to complete a series of objectives (Figure 11), creating new historical information and material, redefining people's experiences. Through Pins' exploration of his

own family he recognised the struggles of others and came up with a solution. The work was then presented as an installation piece where the community was able to clip up photographs and text collectively and map out the physical journeys taken by different families.



Imagine a four-act play, each act unfolding in a completely different time and place. The story begins in Cambodia before 1975, before you and maybe even your parents were alive. It moves into a time when the Khmer Rouge came to power and everyone's lives in Cambodia completely changed. Then the story takes us to the refugee camps along the Cambodian border. And lastly it brings us here to the U.S., where families were resettled and started new lives.

How does your family story fit into this bigger picture? What details, memories, photographs and objects can they share with you?

6

In brief, you are going to

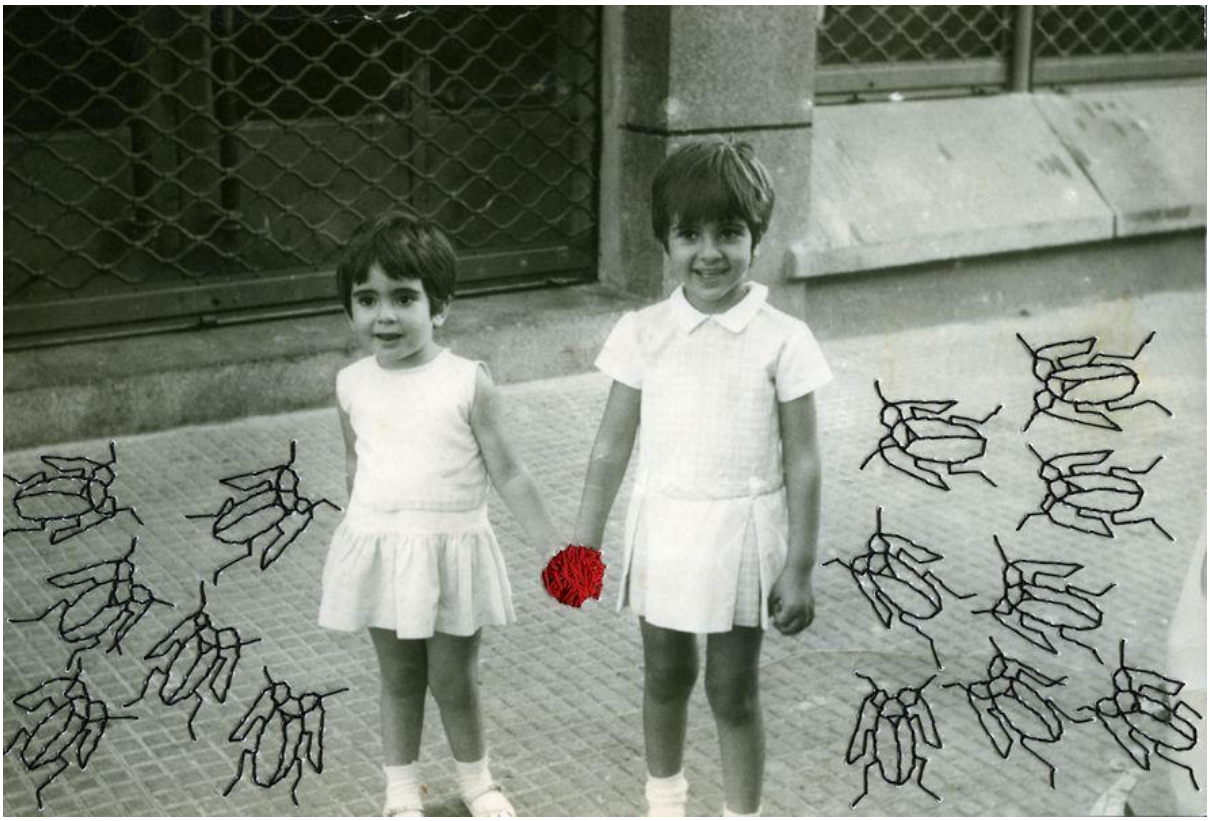
1	Interview family members about your family's life in Cambodia and their journey to America	p. 8-9
2	Find details, objects, and photographs to help tell your family story	p. 9
3	Document the memories and details that stand out to you most	p. 12-19
4	Potograph the objects and photographs they show you and learn about their significance	p. 10-11
5	Make portraits of your family members	p. 10-11
6	Map your family journey using your photos, details from interviews and reflections.	p. 20-21

7

(Figure 11)


(Figure 12)

There are many artists and organisations that explore the significance of family history. The work of Carolle Benitah in the photobook 'Photo-Souvenirs' (Benitah, 2016) features family archival photographs that have been altered using beads and thread. When flicking through her family albums Benitah felt it 'Reawakened an anguish of something both familiar and totally unknown' (Benitah, 2016). Benitah used this form of embroidery to '…explore the memories of her childhood, and as a way to help her understand her current identity' (LensCulture, 2016) Benitah was able to form new memories from the photographs and explore how she sees herself now.



(Figure 13)



(Figure 14)

An example of a charity organisation who also recognises the importance of family albums and photos is Operation Photo Rescue. The charity was set up during 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans and surrounding areas. The organisation recognised the importance of family memories and they continue to complete restorations of photographs that have been damaged through natural disasters.



(Figure 15)

Huang Qingjun is an example of a photographer who finds significance in the belongings of families. He photographs particularly poorer or rural chinese families alongside their belongings from the household. The project 'Family Stuff' (Qingjun, 2007) produces contrasts between the rapidly fast development of China and the traditional Chinese families. The items from

the households pose significance in representing the present and future history of their families and in turn the country.



(Figure 16)

The next word, ‘Dynamics’ is closely linked to the previous words ‘Intimacy’ and ‘History’. Family dynamics are used within family photography to suggest and explore the inner workings of the family. Much like ‘intimacy’ it enables access from an outside perspective but explores from the inside out. Like the word ‘history’, it can reveal how certain relationships were formed. The photographer Llisa Katz Rissman explored this area of family dynamics in her project ‘Significant Others’.







(Figure 17,18,19)

The project was inspired by Rissman's personal experiences within her own family. It's described as 'not only an exploration of the private lives of others but also an exploration of self' (Dan Ginn, 2019). The 'exploration of self' in a more historical context also threads through Pin's work with the potential to embody and explore parts of his identity. Rissman's approach was to capture an 'idealized version of a healthy 'normal' family life that was very much in-flux' (Rissman, 2019) . This impacted the way she approached her subject matter, wanting to direct/stage photographs in family homes to explore it's inner workings as well as create a 'fictional narrative imbued with a sense of realism' (Rissman, 2019) encouraging her audience to draw their own conclusions about the family dynamics within the photographs.



(Figure 20)

When deconstructing figure 20, physical compositions Rissman allows relationship interconnections to appear. The image displays a family of four whose central subject is a young girl wearing devil horns. The mother of the scene is seated across from the father and a younger child. Three of the subjects look directly at the camera and the mother glances off away from the lens.

The structure created by the bodies of the subject suggests a realm of possible narratives/complex relationships between one family. The audience can draw both comical and lighthearted scenarios from this or more sinister and emotional ones.

Dita Pepe is also a photographer who crafts staged family portraits. Her work involves presenting herself physically within the portraits among the family. Often Pepe dresses herself in clothing belonging to a female within the family and studies facial expressions and body language to help fit herself within the scene. Pepe uses the family dynamic to question how lives differ from family to family and to deconstruct family photography itself by encouraging the audience to think how they judge the family dynamic from a distance.







(Figure 21, 22, 23)

Both Rissman and Pepe use eye contact within their photographs as a mechanism that could expose or mislead in relation to family dynamics. Photographer David Steward uses similar techniques to explore the possible dynamics of his daughters' friendships. Figure 24 below titled ‘Five Girls’(Steward, 2014) encapsulates how closely linked eye contact and capturing dynamics can become. All five girls are looking in slightly different directions causing the main focal point of the image to disperse and potentially make it harder for the audience to fully understand the different dynamics amongst the group.



(Figure 24)

Exploring dynamics and complicated relationships can pose significant challenges for the photographer. Photographer Jonathan Torgovnik explored the relationships between Mothers who had been raped during the Rwandan genocide and the children born from the sexual violence in his project ‘Disclosure- Rwanda’ (Torgovnik, 2006).

On the surface some of the images without any historical context could potentially mislead the audience in respect of the relationships between mother and child. But once learning the history behind the significance of the relationships the images become more uncomfortable for the audience evoking a sense of conflict or unreliable narration.



(Figure 25)



(Figure 26)

Through the study of family photography areas relating to the themes of *Intimacy*, *History* and *Dynamics* were explored, through the work of different specific photographers and artists. Davey being one of the first photographers referenced, allowed the audience access to the intimacy of her family and her vulnerability to the subject matter. By capturing her family with a soft tone Davey merged fear, prejudice, acceptance and love which surrounded her relationship with her daughter Alice.

Pin references historical family experiences and the impact of history on future generations exploring a space to bring together the past, present and future. Whilst the focus on history is evident in Pin's work strong connections are also present in relation to potential family intimacy created by connecting historical gaps. Capturing family dynamics, as seen through the work of Rissman and others, is fraught with unreliable narration which often needs historical context to uncover the essence of the family dynamic. Further to this the staging of the family photographs allows the photographer the potential to manipulate and distort the family dynamic.

The exploration of intimacy, history and dynamics within family photography created a dense maze of unreliability and uncertainty, smoke screens and manipulation. It uncovered a number of associated themes, potential further areas of research and raised further questions around the following areas: identity: 'Is family photography an opportunity for the photographer to learn more about their own identity? Family possessions:

‘How does the photographing of a family’s possessions impact on the representation of family in the context of social standing? The study of self: ‘Is family photography an excuse for the photographer to conduct a study on themselves? Bias: ‘Does the photographer’s own family bias obscure their ability to capture an honest representation of the family unit?’ Nature versus nurture: ‘What is the role of the photographer in exposing more sinister family dynamics?’ Family fraud: ‘Is family photography an honest representation of family life?’ Manipulation and staging: ‘How does family photography manipulate imagery and staging to suggest alternative narratives?’

By exploring the questions raised alongside different themes, the use of different photographic techniques and the motivation of photographers allows for extensive scoping and research in relation to exploring potential dissertation questions around the genre of family photography.

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