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BA Documentary photography & Visual Activism

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My passion for photography has always been about capturing images of people, for me they are the most interesting images even going back in time and looking at photographers such as Diane Arbus who's work I find fascinating as she didn't look to just photograph the normal she wanted to capture those marginalised in society and ensure their representation, or Helen Levitt, Martin Parr or Robert Doisneau all street photographers recording life during their era.



Diane Arbus - untitled

Whilst researching portrait and street photographers I discovered Vivian Maier, I had never heard of her before and started reading more about who she was, finding that actually very little is known about her as she died before her work was ever discovered, she had been a nanny in Chicago and New York in the 50's and 60's and was also an avid street photographer, many of her films were never developed until after her death. The documentary about her life, Finding Vivian Maier, was fascinating in particular the fact that very little was known about her other than anecdotal stories from people she had looked after. She kept many items throughout her life including clothes, nik naks found on walks as well as all her photographs. From this an idea of who she was has been derived, but was it accurate or true?



Vivian Maier Self-Portrait, 1953

This really started me thinking about what do the items we keep as keepsakes say about us. I have always collected memorabilia of my life and have several boxes of 'stuff' ranging from baby records, school books, girl guide uniform and various items of religious artifacts that although were relevant to me at the time, as a child making her first holy communion at 7 years of age, it says

nothing of me as an atheist adult. What would people think of me after my days when going through the junk I have accumulated.

The project I wanted to focus on was creating an alternative portrait of me but without using a digital camera. I have spent years using digital cameras and spent very little time using film or alternative methods of image making such as Cyanotypes and in particular Lumen printing which I have used in my final image. In my research I found an artist called Joshua White who's lumen prints are a beautiful rich array of colours.



Joshua White – Lumen print

I initially went back to using film and inspired by the images of Vivain Maier I took several self portraits of myself in shop windows, they weren't that great! I also made several photograms in the dark room using a mix of dried plants a

and negatives. I made several cyanotype images using plants and acetates of negatives I had taken but in the end I felt that the lumen prints mixed with digital images of my 'stuff' lent itself well to this project. I feel I have learned a lot from this project by focusing on alternative methods of photography and stepping away from digital I've found a new love for Lumen Prints.

My starting point was portraiture, I wanted to find a different way of creating a portrait, I looked on line at several portrait photographers, such as Helen Levitt, Annie Leibovitz, Doretha Lang and then found Vivian Maier, her work was discovered after her death, very little is known of her other than the things she collected such as old clothes and scrap from her walks and of course her images, this has formed the idea of who she was.

I wanted to create an alternative self portrait based on the things I have kept since childhood, having mainly used digital cameras for many years I also wanted to try camera less techniques, something I've never tried before.

I started with a film camera and tried to follow in the footsteps of a street photographer, some images worked well, others not so. But I used some of the better ones as a template to create acetates for some camera less work.

I created several photograms in the dark using black and white photo paper and dried foliage, then added in some old negatives of my own. The first result was too clinical and I looked at ways to soften the images with movement during the exposure and holding items half way between the paper and light.

I then moved onto Cyanotypes, painting the chemicals Potassium ferricyanide and Ferric ammonium citrate mixed with water separately onto absorbent paper once dried I then place some foliage on to and sealed in a clip frame, it was then taken outside and exposed to the UV light for about 40 minutes. Once washed and dried I had the final image. I did this several times using negatives and the acetates I had created from my images.

Lastly I tried Lumen printing. Using black and white photopaper I placed various pieces of foliage onto glass and then the paper on top and clip it securely to the backing board, as time was short I decided to expose it under artificial light for around 2 hours, then washed everything off it and placed it straight into the scanner and digitised it.

The final images was made up of this Lumen print with photographs of my memorabilia layered and merged on top of it.

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