When Did I Stop Being Invincible?

Amy M. Fleming

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DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

BY

AMY FLEMING

DEKALB, IL

MAY, 2021
CATALOG

One-Person Exhibition

By

Amy Fleming

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between July 2020 and January 2021. It was presented in an exhibition from April 11 to April 17, 2021 in Anette and Jerry Johns Galley, DeKalb, Illinois.

List of Works

1. *Toenail Night Stand*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 33x50”, 2020

2. *And I Have a Question…*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 33x50”, 2020

3. *...Are You Also Frightened?*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 40x60”, 2020

4. *Tell Psychiatrist About This Day*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 8x12”, 2020

5. *Notes From My Former Therapist*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 43x28”, 2020

6. *Purple Cheeks*, archival pigment print on gator board with a matte laminate, 33x50”, 2020
7. *You, Me, and My Edible Induced Panic Attack*, Video, Duration: 1:45, 2020
   
   [https://vimeo.com/489934497](https://vimeo.com/489934497)

8. *This Is Not Real*, archival pigment print on gator board with a matte laminate, 44x65”, 2020

9. *Imposter Syndrome*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 20x30”, 2020

10. *Tilt Your Head Back*, archival pigment print on adhesive photographic paper, 20x30”, 2020

11. *My Friend Lexi*, archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate, 44x65”, 2021

12. *Aunt Amy, Why Did You Take a Picture of a Dead Deer?*, archival pigment print, 33x50”, 2020
This paper fulfills the requirements to fully document my one-person solo exhibition.

*When Did I Stop Being Invincible?*

**Intentions:**

While exploring themes of truth, reality, and the need for human connection, I often turn to my camera as a way to cope. Reflecting on past trauma and attempting to navigate my life with mental illness, I am capturing small moments of time passing through video, documenting myself and my mundane surroundings in photographic form. Living with panic disorder, I am often questioning my day to day reality with questions like: “Did that actually happen, or did I dream that?”, “Am I a real person?”, “Am I having a panic attack, or is this how I’m supposed to feel?” Through manipulation, I am showing the viewer how I experience my daily reality.

*When Did I Stop Being Invincible?* is an exploration of living life with a newfound anxiety disorder. I am often comparing my past reality with my current reality to try and make sense of the way that I feel in the moment and how I’ve felt in the past. In moments of panic and anxiety, I write down words or phrases that mean something to me, but seem comical and confusing when I read them later. Drawing inspiration from those phrases, I create imagery to try and make sense of what my mind was trying to tell me in that anxiety induced moment.

My work is about trying to navigate my life living with mental illness, questioning my daily reality because of my panic disorder, and reflecting on past trauma to make sense of my perception of my own reality. While living with this mental illness, I am often questioning my reality and how the physical symptoms of this disorder are making me feel. Everyday I worry about whether or not my heart is beating too fast or too slow, is it shortness of breath from
anxiety or COVID-19, if I actually have panic disorder or am I just being dramatic, etc. Through my photography, I am exploring my own reality and how it differs from “normal” reality. Sometimes I have trouble knowing what “normal” reality is, but since my panic disorder diagnosis is so new, I remember what my reality felt like before I was diagnosed, so I often compare the two.

I’m starting to piece my life back together knowing what is wrong with me now. I always joke that I’m prone to passing out because I’ve had multiple fainting spells during my adolescence, a couple which have landed me in the hospital. When I was in first grade, I passed out at school and had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital. They couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me, or so I’m told. I realize now, as an adult, that I most likely was suffering from these spells because of anxiety. A huge physical symptom of my panic disorder is feeling like I’m going to pass out and while I’m having these physical symptoms, nothing feels real. I came up with the “this is not real” mantra to repeat in my head while having a panic attack to remind myself that it will pass and this panic attack is not a real thing that is going to harm or kill me. “This is not real” has tied back into the themes of reality throughout my work.

**Historical Influences:**

In my thesis work, I have been thinking about Rene Magritte’s painting *This is Not a Pipe* in relation to my photograph *This Is Not Real*. Although Magritte’s painting is quite literal, it’s not a pipe it’s just a painting of a pipe, my photograph is forcing the viewer to question the authenticity of what they are looking at. Is this a real photograph or just a digital manipulation of this scene? Is the moment real or made up? I’ve also been thinking a lot about how to display my images and their relationship to the viewer. Joseph Kosuth’s piece *One and Three Chairs* has
been on my mind. I have been thinking about what it means to bring physical objects into the gallery that are also featured in my photographs. For my image Toenail Nightstand, I have been playing with the idea of bringing in the actual nightstand that is featured in the photograph to act as a pedestal in the gallery. I wonder what it means to rest the photograph on the nightstand as to say “here is the thing and here is the photo of the thing” just like Kosuth’s piece.

I have been inspired by contemporary photographers such as Kyle Berger who cleverly manipulates his photographs to make it seem like the entire scene that he has captured is real. At first glance, you assume that the scene is real but if you look closely, you can see that Berger has digitally manipulated his photographs. I am tricking the viewer in my piece Aunt Amy, Why Did You Take a Photo of a Dead Deer? by combining two scenes to create this new reality. Juxtaposing a bright sunny photograph that features a dead deer with a dreary, overcast, foggy day I am forcing the viewer to think “What am I looking at?” because these two scenes would never exist at the same time.

Truth and reality have always had a role in my work, even if I didn’t know it at the time (ie, space, aliens, etc). I was always interested in “tricking” the viewer and making them question what they are looking at. My thesis work still has these components of truth, reality, and tricking the viewer. By printing my photographs so large that the object photographed becomes 3-4x the actual size, the audience is given the opportunity to decide if what they are looking at is real or question how it was made. One of my favorite photographs in this series is ...Are You Also Frightened? because of how absurdly large the bee is. I snapped an image on my phone of that photograph with my hand resting next to the bee for scale and uploaded it to one of my social media accounts. A friend asked me if it was real and when I explained that it was just a blown up photograph she said, “Thank, God. I almost cried.” I have always loved getting that reaction
from my audience because it makes me realize that I can trick people into seeing what I want them to see. Artists have been tricking the audience with photography since the 20th century. Sometimes I refer back to “occult photography” to get some inspiration on how to trick the viewer. The seance photographs have always been some of my favorites to look at and refer back to. Since the technology of using a camera was so new, most people believed that the photographs of these seances were real even though they were just cleverly staged photographs to trick the viewer into thinking these mediums were actually making contact with spirits. Although we are now in the 21st century and our technology has advanced beyond what we could even imagine, I love that I am still able to trick my viewers into thinking that a giant bee actually exists.

**Materials and Process:**

The materials I use in my photographs are mostly things that I have found or stumbled upon (dead bee, dead mouse, dead deer, etc). Some of my photos are constructed for the camera and some of my photos are things that I have seen out in the world. I like to construct things for the camera when I’m finding it difficult to make a photograph that I can just find out in the world. *Toenail Night Stand* features my real toenail clippings that I cut and placed on my nightstand specifically for the photo. Whereas *Imposter Syndrome* features a group of ladybugs on the outside of my door frame that just naturally appeared and I did not have to set anything up for that photograph. In the photograph *This Is Not Real*, I cut out and hand strung each letter onto a fishing line and then attached it to my walls to make it appear like it was floating in space.

A few of my photographs are composited in Photoshop to trick the viewer into thinking what they are seeing is real. *My Friend Lexi* is two composited images of myself. The two photos
have a slight difference in them which makes the viewer question if they are looking at two different people, especially if the viewer doesn’t know me personally or knows what I look like. *Purple Cheeks* combines two almost identical photos. These photographs were taken in my parents’ backyard during sunset. I photographed the landscape a few minutes apart so that when I combine the two images in Photoshop, the double moon appears. *Aunt Amy, Why Did You Take a Picture of a Dead Deer?* is my most successful image when it comes to tricking the viewer. The top half of the image was taken on a gloomy, overcast, foggy winter day and the bottom half that features the deer was taken on a bright, sunny winter day. By combining these two images together, the viewer doesn’t notice that they aren’t the same image at first, but once they further inspect it, they realize those two images could never exist at the same time.

I shoot all of my photographs on a Nikon D810 DSLR camera with a 35mm lens, 85mm lens, and a 50mm lens. The lighting I use in my photographs is all natural lighting.

*Philosophical and Aesthetic Concepts:*

*Documentary*

My photographs are a documentation of what my life is like living with panic disorder. I have always been interested in documenting my life and what was going on around me since I was a teenager with a point and shoot digital camera. It does not surprise or shock me that I am making such personal and documentary work now. Although I am manipulating some of my photos so they are not true documentary style photographs, I feel as though they are a marking point in my life and in my journey as someone who is suffering from this disorder.
The Mundane

I am often photographing my mundane life around me. Being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder in the middle of a pandemic, didn’t really give me many opportunities to leave my apartment so I started to photograph things around me, which are pretty mundane. I often see beauty in things that most people would look past. Since I was constantly in a state of heightened anxiety, I was able to really hone in and focus on things to distract me from what was physically and mentally happening to me. I would often try and look for things around my apartment or outside in the surrounding area (ex: the dead mouse was found on the sidewalk down the street).

Self portrait

Since my thesis work is about myself and the anxiety that I experience, I began to turn the camera onto myself. Making self portraits really helped me be present in the moment. I felt like I had to prove to myself and to the world that I existed in that moment and what I was experiencing was very real. Even though only one of my self portraits made it into my thesis show, I have so many to look back on and realize how important it was for myself to get behind the camera and focus on making a photograph of myself in such a vulnerable time. I was really inspired by Francesca Woodman’s self portraits during this time and I felt that we both had a lot in common even if my photographs don’t exactly look like her’s.
When Did I Stop Being Invincible?

Amy Fleming
MFA Thesis Exhibition
April 11-17, 2021

Northern Illinois University
Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery
330 Gilbert Drive, DeKalb, IL, 60115
Gallery Hours M-F 9AM-5PM
When Did I Stop Being Invincible?

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Toenail Night Stand

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

33x50”

2020
And I Have a Question…

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

33x50”

2020
...Are You Also Frightened?

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

40x60”

2020
Tell Psychiatrist About This Day

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

8x12”

Archival pigment print on Adhesive Photographic Paper (wallpaper mural)

2020
Notes From My Former Therapist

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

43x28”

2020
Purple Cheeks

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

33x50"

2020
You, Me, and My Edible Induced Panic Attack

Video Still

https://vimeo.com/489934497

2020
This Is Not Real

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

44x65”

2020
Imposter Syndrome

Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

20x30”

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Archival pigment print mounted on gator board with a matte laminate

44x65”

2021
Aunt Amy, Why Did You Take a Picture of a Dead Deer?

Archival pigment print

33x50”

2020
Installation view of *When Did I Stop Being Invincible?*

Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, DeKalb, IL
WHEN DID I STOP BEING INVINCIBLE?

AMY FLEMING
Daily journal

- Activities
- Coping skills
- Writing
- Sleep
- Physical activity
- Time with family
- Day
This is not real