

THE GROCERY STORE
KNOCKED HIM DOWN
S EIGHT YEARS OLD T
IN THE DESERT, ALO
WITH NO MONEY LEFT
MOTHER HER CIGARE

FAMILIAL

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My interest in family history started a few years ago after meeting my paternal grandmother for the first time. We went to visit her at her Las Vegas home the day after Thanksgiving in 2010. My dad's family was never part of my life so it was also the first time I was able to see the place where my father grew up. As always I had my camera in hand. Through my camera's lens I was able to see and capture things that went by too quickly to appreciate in real time. In our short visit, I was able to notice the little things. I saw the way she would twirl her burgundy hair around her index finger during awkward silences and I noticed how the overgrown oleander bushes outside her home seemed to engulf her as she walked through to her front door. My entire impression of who my grandmother was to me was formed hiding behind my camera that day.



My grandmother passed away a year after that meeting. In that emotional time, I found myself yearning for a fuller understanding of my family's heritage. My father went to Nevada for his mother's funeral and when he came back it seemed like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. Asking him about his experience, he told me how he reconnected with his sister and showed me the family artifacts he found while cleaning out his mother's trailer. My dad then explained his chance meeting with his own father whom he lost contact with 20 years before. Looking back, that was the first time I saw my dad as a man and not just a father.



Growing up, whenever my father would tell me about his childhood I could never quite connect. I had never met the characters he was describing and the settings were foreign to me. Creating this series was a way for me to find a point of entry to the family history I've always felt so distant from. Each time a story is retold the content shifts with perspective. The images in my integrated project represent my father's memories as I imagine them.



Since my father's family lives in Las Vegas and my main medium is photography I thought exploring my relationship with them would be impossible within the time constraints of IP. Instead, I started my exploration of familial relationships by photographing families with experiences that differed from my own. I hoped that by taking pictures of families from other walks of life and seeing how they function, it could help me see how my own familial relationships compared. Throughout my exploration I found it difficult to find a family with a story as intriguing as my own. In time, I realized I didn't need to physically go to the places my father grew up to better understand his past. In turn, I began building models of those places out of food and photographing them. The outcome was a series of landscapes that stratal the line between fantasy and fact.



Making that step was freeing for me. Most of the work I had been doing going into this year was in the realm of photojournalism, so I thought that in order to tell a story it had to be based in fact. Researching other forms of storytelling, especially oral storytelling in African cultures, helped me see that while I was telling stories about my father's past, the stories didn't have to be from his point of view to be truthful. I saw that my perspective can be just as important when representing a shared family history.

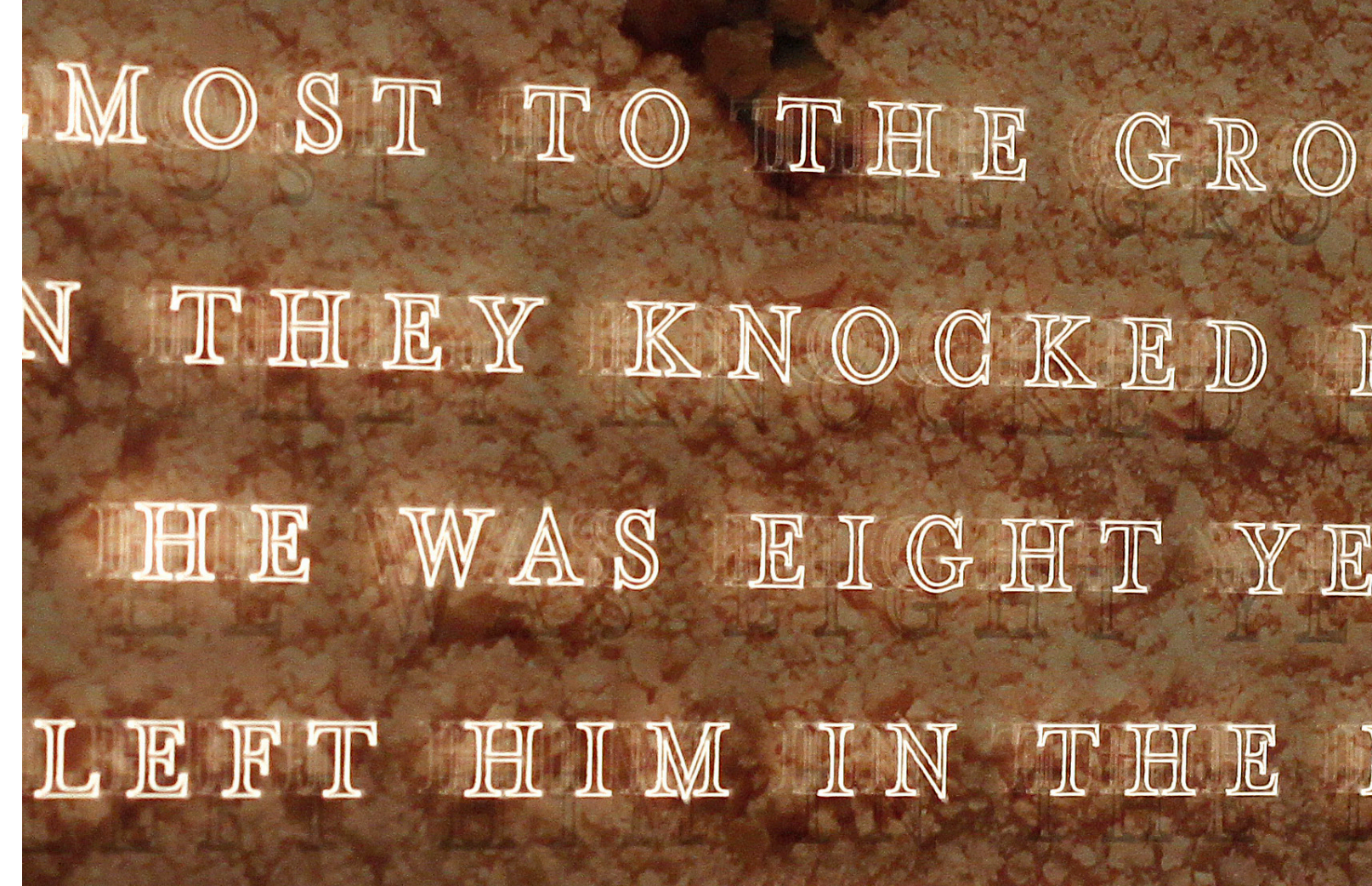
In the Mande culture of West Africa, tradition is preserved by a group of oral storytellers called bards. These "men of words" are tasked with maintaining the integrity of their language, Mande-kan. The job of a bard is to resolve the tension between tradition and innovation by looking at both with a critical eye. Their ultimate goal, as Mande historian Charles Bird puts it, is to master the essence of history "by stripping away the superficial covering, by discovering its inner and true nature, as in the poetic concept of yere-wolo (giving birth to yourself), in which a person finds his or her true self, his or her true essence." (Thompson)

To achieve that kind of clarity, bards must recognize the inevitable shift in context that happens with the passing of time. Each time a story is retold, bards will add and subtract elements and change or omit details to better fit whatever issues are facing the people of that time. That kind of inaccuracy could be perceived as dishonest, but to the Mande people, it would be false to ignore the role individual perspectives play in their understanding of history and tradition (Thompson, p. 196).

There is no way I can accurately recount all of the details of my father's past in a photograph since I wasn't there. Representing these memories with food was a way for me to embrace that distance, much like the bards of West Africa do.

While the stories are all based in fact, or at least what my father recalls as fact, they are intentionally biased. Each image was more my impression of my father's history than a true illustration of what he went through as a child. My photographic process supported that. Instead of going to the spaces my father described and experiencing them first hand or making a photo composite, I built each landscape myself. The process of translating these stories from my father into real life dioramas created out of food was a way for me to make these unfamiliar places and experiences edible in a way.

Using food was a way to abstract the landscapes even further. Spending time physically manipulating different foods to create these spaces allowed me to really consider my own relationship with the places that influenced my father's past and to further blur the line between what is real and what is imagined in the storytelling process. Upon first glance the images are intended to look somewhat real to viewers, however, time with the work allows viewers notice all of the details lost and added in my interpretation.



Photographing the built landscapes instead of presenting them as sculptures was a way to play with the concept of truth even further. Photographs are intended document reality, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are true to life. Using my camera I was able to shift scale and manipulate perspective in ways that defied reality while simultaneously representing it. This created yet another way to convey the distance between my father's memories and my translations of them.

My project didn't begin and end with the images, however, text also played a huge role in the work. In order to understand the context of the food landscapes I thought it was important that my audience knew the stories that inspired them. I wrote each story from my perspective as a poem which I laser-etched into plexiglass. Layering the plexiglass on top of the images and shining light from overhead made the text readable from some angles and not others.

The effect was intended to create a push and pull between text and image. From afar the stories would be blurred, hard to interpret, but upon closer investigation viewers could glean more and more about what each story was about and how they related to the images I made. The stories were meant to explain just enough to give the images meaning while still giving viewers the chance to make their own conclusions about the work.

The work culminated in three pieces, each illustrating a different story.

The first was based on my father's experience as a child taking in not one but two stray black pomeranian puppies with his family at Lake Mead. I used melted gummy candy to represent the lake and crushed cereal to create the rocky beach surrounding it. The text that accompanied it read,

*They were at their spot.
Nothing for miles. Just quiet.
Beyond the "No Trespassing" sign
They heard a familiar bark,
But it wasn't Fluffy.
Another wandering black pomeranian found a home.*

The next was a more somber piece detailing my father's memory of getting mugged as a young boy. The desert landscape was made from brown sugar and crushed graham cracker with a structure built from chocolate and greenery created with asparagus. The etched-plexiglass overlay said:

*He was almost to the grocery store
When they knocked him down.
He was eight years old.
They left him in the desert, alone,
With no money to buy
His mother her cigarettes.*

Lastly I recreated a story my father told me about a fight he had in a cornfield with his cousin Brandon Cruz who played Eddie in the television program The Courtship of Eddie's Father in the early 70's. This was the most complex landscape I had to build. The corn stalks were made from lemongrass and held together with peanut butter, the soil was crushed oreo cookies and the gate was built from pretzel sticks. The story read:

*Jealousy made him throw the first punch.
Amid the stalks of corn,
He tried to knock him off his pedestal.
That night he iced his black eye in front of the TV set
Watching his cousin on screen, face unscathed.*



1.



Creating these images hasn't been without challenges, however. I found it difficult to photograph the food in a way that was realistic enough to make them look like sincere visions of the past, and not campy manipulations of food. In order to achieve that delicate balance it was important to ground the images using straight forward compositions with close attention paid to light and perspective.

2.



I spent a lot of time looking at experimental product and food photographers for inspiration. Italian product photographer Bela Borsodi work is a great example of how photography can bring life to objects that are otherwise stagnant. While his work is representational, it is by no mean literal. The simplicity of his forms and compositions had a big influence on the work in my series. Borsodi merely suggests audiences look at objects through a different lens which is enough to illustrate complex stories throughout his work.

3.



I also looked to photographers like Carl Warner to see just how far food can be pushed in photography. Carl Warner's food landscapes, while much more complex than the work I made in my series, helped me see how important light and other small details are in transforming food in a photograph.

My experience creating this project has allowed me to better get to know my father and given me a new vantage point into my family history. The process of gathering stories and recreating them with food gave me the chance to personally connect to the places my father grew up and the family I've never gotten the chance to get to know.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1983. Print.

Figure 1: Bela Borsodi, 2010: *V Magazine #67 - V LOVE NEW YORK (1/4)*
 Figure 2: Bela Borsodi/Paul Graves, 2003: *Another Magazine #4 -FACE (2/8)*
 Figure 3: Carl Warner, 2008: *Cereal Dust Bowl*

*All unlabeled photographs can be credited to Marissa McClain