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What Does Happiness Look Like

Senior Thesis

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A first word. The feel of your callused hands on my cheek. Cherry sherbet ice cream. The first embrace after distance. Hiccups. A warm Bubble bath. The smell of a freshly cut lawn. Home. Soggy fruit loops. The comfort of my father's arms. Gritty sand over bare toes. An overload of chocolaty goodness. The sound of her voice. An ending that stems new beginning.

A photograph, to me, is more than just an image; it is an intimate experience with the subject matter. To provoke feeling and emotion in viewers experience I embarked on a photographic journey unlike any other I have ever taken. I began my project in search of something more than an average photo project, but a true emotional draw towards subject matter of my work. After much trial and error, I drew away from my initial ideas surrounding out of the ordinary landscape photographs to the opposite. I found that what I wanted to photograph all along lay right in front of my eyes. It wasn't the forced perspectives of breathtaking views and sights, but rather the things and people that I came across every single day.

I began to see that the things in my everyday life were the things that made me the happiest and ultimately produced my best photographs. As my realization occurred, I

began wondering what made other people happy. And moreover what they thought happiness looked like. Because happiness is hard to define or produce with a single definition and image I found there are endless possibilities to document and convey this simple term. To fulfill my curiosity and transform my project, I set off on an interviewing frenzy to find out what happiness looked like to different people. The question was simple, but the answers vastly eye opening.

“Being greeted by your little dog at the front door,” “a small touch from the one you have been waiting to nudge you,” “a warm sunny day after a long winter,” “having your child return from college.” As the responses increased, so did my inspiration. I photographed every possible scenario that people suggested and everything that I came across in my daily routine that sparked a smile. Happiness may be hard to define, but the images made it seem so easily accessible. I enjoyed the idea that people felt happiness in the small things that surrounded their everyday routine and I took it upon myself to showcase this with my series.

The photographic series was never intended to overwhelm viewers with bright smiles and shiny yellow lollipops. The project was initiated to find peace and beauty in the mundane and ultimately allow viewers to understand that happiness isn't just one thing, it is everything and anything. Or what my father would call “an extra-large chocolate cherry ice cream.”

To accurately portray the ideas surrounding the *What Does Happiness Look Like* series, the photographs needed to depict many different scenarios. The images are all black and white in order to develop cohesiveness in the differing subject matter. The monochromatic qualities also evoke a pureness to each photograph. This helps

simplify each image in order for the happiness characteristics to shine through. In total there are fifteen images, most of which consist of people or animals. The work also ranges in size of prints, some small, some large and some in between. These decisions were made in order to establish a specific viewing experience. I deeply desired an intimate viewer-image relationship, yet at the same time also desired an overwhelming viewing encounter. With the range in image size and display, both of my wishes came true. Spectators can gaze at an individual image up close, but still have the larger viewing experience when taking in the images as a whole from farther away.

I began the process of this project with the intent on having a large-scale display, which would overwhelm viewer's senses. I thought that the only way to astound viewers was through size, but as time went on I realized that it is not about the scale or even its surroundings, it is about the image itself. To convey this message I decided to create a wall display. I used 15 separate photographs that when put together created the original large appeal I was seeking. The images work well together as a photographic installation; yet individually still have the unique feel apart from their surroundings. Each photograph is surrounded by a dark black wooden frame and sandwiched between two pieces of clear glass. The images fit well together with their matching frame settings and viewers can easily transition from one image to the next. With the clear glass frames the photographs almost look like they are floating and the deep black lines from the frames create a guide to assist viewers on where to look next.

The differing sizes of both frames and images were necessary to assist in showcasing the individual characteristics of each object, person or thing in the image. The unity in the framing style and coloring helps the images come together under the

overlying theme of happiness, but the sizes help to break up and juxtapose the many different ways happiness is portrayed. The goal in framing and displaying this way really allowed for the joyous characteristics to be brought forth separately, yet still connect overall with the theme. This aesthetic approach imitates life itself: just as the small, discrete images are connected through unifying coloring and frame style, our disjointed experiences as human beings coalesce around a shared desire for- and interest in- happiness.

These ideas of greater connection through human emotion and expression are seen in photographer Richard Avedon's work, especially his series titled "The American West." I have long been inspired by Avedon because of his ability to tell a narrative and give someone a story through his portraiture. His style of photography is a perfect combination, mixing his pure journalistic style photography with his famous style of fashion photography. This combination developed Avedon's style into one of pureness and subtlety, creating images that allow for viewers to see beauty in the small things. Avedon's "American West" series was truly inspirational and he used his desire to tell a story through a photograph to recapture each individual's personality and character. This series really inspired the aesthetic surrounding the *What Does Happiness Look Like Project*. I feel my series allows for viewers to find their own narrative for each photograph and also develop their own connections to the images and project as a whole. I feel my series has a similar feel to that of Avedon's. The simple subject matter is not complex or chaotic, but allows for viewers to take a breather and focus on the smaller characteristics. And maybe, even for just a second, feel a sense of happiness.

Another photographer who has also really inspired my work and this project in particular is, Sally Mann. Mann uses an outlook of natural beauty in her work through capturing images of everyday life and what she deems as splendor. Mann's greatest subjects have long been those in her immediate surroundings, her children. With each smirk or glint of light, every detail adds to the story she is trying to tell. Despite her children already being quite adorable, Mann's portraiture showcases their everyday adventures and the events that occur while growing up. Her photographs range from the children playing in their backyard stream to her daughter smoking a candy cigarette in the grass. I feel that her work is evocative in the small things, just as the *What Does Happiness Look Like Series* is trying to project. There is true feeling and pure emotion one gets while gazing at the images and subjects. Sally Mann's work allowed me to feel inspired and truly developed my photographic passions as an artist.

Because these artists have provoked so much emotion and passion in my own photographic venture, I feel this senior thesis project is a true product of my inspirations, education and passion. I feel I have grown to appreciate the exquisiteness of the everyday and I have tried to push that simplicity in my style of photography. I love the idea that happiness can be documented and shared through a photograph. With something as simple as your dog playing in the snow, a little boy innocently gobbling up his mac and cheese or a warm bath overflowing with bubbles, these things make up what we like to call ordinary. It is when you look at these daily occurrences and find happiness where the true beauty lies. I truly hope that the *What Does Happiness Look Like series* reflects this.

Through commitment to showcase a character, a story and happiness, the-*What Does Happiness Look Like* series is one of discovery and one filled with life. Through the process of creating this series I discovered a new outlook, one of setting aside the negative and finding the positive. American Film Actress Glenn Close once said, “It amazes me to think that every house on every street is full of so many stories; so many triumphs and tragedies, and all we see are yards and driveways.” I hope people look beyond the fences and driveways and get curious enough to find the story. The *What Does Happiness Look Like series* allowed for me to push beyond the curiosity and give narrative to the many people who so deserve it. With a simple series, some amazing answers and beautiful subjects, happiness looks pretty good.

Works Cited

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