Thirty three place settings.

Three sets of fine china
Sit atop the three table cloths that bind
The three separate tables together.

Two turkeys
And two of every side dish with
The worry that there won't be enough
For everyone.
Forget about leftovers.
An extra place setting or two
Just in case
An extra guest rolls in with
The crowd.

One crystalline bead of sweat
Treads down
Nancy's forehead,
She pushes it away
And keeps bustling.

Cars start zooming into the circle drive.
Each carrying no less than
Four bodies
And two side dishes.

The "Helllooooo!"'s echo
Throughout the ranch home.
Sass and cheek pecks from Tom
Are a prerequisite to sitting down.

Wine, Diet Coke and Ruby Red Squirt
Now sit next to the turkey and sides.

"Bless us oh lord in these thy gifts
Which we are about to receive
From thy bounty through Christ our lord
Amen."

Sixty six hands dig in.

As individuals of a single race, we naturally understand the simple things that keep us alive and breathing every day, but what about the details that make us diversely individualistic? Working with my extended family members, through interviews and portraiture, I began to assemble and comprehend some of what makes us all relatable to one another- what truly makes each of us uniquely human.

My research began with looking at a range of fashion photographers, mainly focusing on Irving Penn, Herb Ritts and Mario Testino. Initially I thought my project was going to be exploring fashion and creative directing through photography, however fashion photography is largely ad-based. At the root of fashion photography, there is a product be sold or advertised. I wanted my project to be emotive and explore the humans in the photos rather than using my subjects as mannequins.

In deciding to step away from pursuing fashion in my photography, I began looking at the fine art portraits of several artists including Man Ray's portrait of a young Salvador Dali[1] and Julian Schnabel's portrait of Andy Warho[2]l. Looking at artists making portraits of fellow artists intrigued me. The concept of taking someone with such a strong sense of self, style, and identity and making them your own was fascinating. Man Ray's portrait of Dali looks nothing like how the surrealist portrayed himself; instead of a twisted mustache and one eye twitching toward the camera, Dali looks docile, quiet and almost as if his body is lifeless, like many of Man Ray's

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[1] http://flavorwire.com/251603/man-rays-avant-garde-portraits-of-famous-friends/6.
[2] http://www.julianschnabel.com/paintings/velvet-paintings/velvet-portraits/portrait-of-andy-warhol

surrealist works. Weaving creative flare into works is the job of all artists, but placing a spin on someone else's style had me reeling at how many layers of personality there were to explore.

At this point, I began shooting in the studio with friends who were telling me stories as I photographed them. None of the stories had connecting lines to one another, except for the fact that they were being told by college-aged young adults. I needed to find a commonality or some factor that brought these people and their stories together. This is when I began looking at StoryCorps[3]. Prior to this project I wasn't familiar with the site, however I found the stories to be compelling and interesting. They didn't share an explicit common thread, but upon looking at the bigger picture, the stories spoke largely of the people telling them. There was a human aspect that shone through every tale, expressing qualities of relationships and individuals that are relatable to anyone. I realized that I want to be able to express these kind of emotions through my project- raw feelings and characteristics that make the human population what it is.

The content behind my portraits up to this point was fairly shallow. Besides there being no connection from one portrait to the next, the stories didn't say much about their authors. I was too close to the subjects for me to see this at first, so I began brainstorming ways to change this. I needed to diversify my subjects, both racially and in age, to make the portraits more widely relatable.

Many of the podcasts on StoryCorps are families discussing with or about their loved ones, spurring my interest to work with my family. I grew up in a family of 33, including my grandparents, parents, 10 aunts and uncles and 19 cousins including myself. If I were to work with them, then I would already have a personal connection that would allow me to hopefully dig

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[3] https://storycorps.org/#popular-stories

deep and find strong stories to share. Initially I was focusing on the diversity of my family, as 3 of my cousins and 2 of my aunts were adopted. My cousin Ryan is African American, Nathan is Korean, Aunt Lynn is Vietnamese and Aunt Sarah is Hispanic. Aunt Lynn's kids, Jason and Briana are racially mixed, as Lynn's husband, Kevin and Jason's father, Paul are both African American. There are many stories to be told from their perspectives alone, but the further I analyzed the family as a whole, I realized that I don't know nearly as much about each individual as I had assumed I did.

I started to look at artists that did portraits of their family members, some of which included Sally Mann and Larry Sultan. Sally Mann's work is widely known and quite controversial, as she photographed her children around their land in Virginia oftentimes naked, specifically in her series *Family Pictures*[4]. Strongly criticized as possibly being child pornography, Mann defended her work by saying that this is just how her children were. Their land in Virginia was surrounded by wilderness, and the kids were allowed to roam and play as they pleased. The photographs' raw nature reminds the audience of the simplicities of childhood and the freedom that comes with it. I enjoyed the fact that she allowed her children to be themselves, that she was simply there as their mother to enjoy them and to document their growing up. Although she was an observer, Mann took advantage of her situations, and would pose her kids mid-play. I found this to be another key factor in her photography, as she would wait for the right moment and then snap her shot. Allowing for the moment to arrive kept the photos candid, but also powerful and breathtaking.

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[4] http://sallymann.com/selected-works/family-pictures

Larry Sultan's approach to photographing family is quite different from Mann's technique. Like Mann, Sultan wanted to document his family and their time together. However, he chose to photograph his aging parents going about their daily business in their home in his series *Pictures From Home*[5]. In his artist statement, Sultan discusses his difficulty to understand the heart of the project. He is so close to his parents that the lines between his role as photographer and as their child gradually become more blurred. Finally Sultan comes to the conclusion that he is taking photography literally; he is documenting to pause moments because he wants his parents to be with him forever. I felt this was very powerful, as it's an incredibly human trait. Of course we all want our loved ones to be with us all our lives. Using his craft to keep his parents with him, if only for a time, allows him to feel control over the inevitable.

Bringing my family into my project made it very personal to me, but I felt it was also something that many people could relate to. How many people can say that they deeply know each and every one of their family members? Through Mann and Sultan's work, I've found great relatability to their subjects. Not only did their subjects speak through the portraits, but the images portrayed a sense of deep interest, care and love for those photographed. I wanted to get to know my family outside the binds of their familial labels, as knowing them on a human level would make them even more precious to me. Their portraits served as a looking glass for others to consider inter-family relationships, how well they know their loved ones and how much they still have to learn.

At the starting line, I was not sure what my concept would be- my family being furthest from my mind. Tipping off my research with fashion and fashion photographers truly made me

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[5] http://larrysultan.com/gallery/pictures-from-home/

question what fashion's role was in the realm of photography. As an artist, I always felt there were emotions that I could take away from the pages of *Vogue*, *V Magazine*, and the like. However the more I flipped through, I realized there was an obvious lack of emotional range. The models were either in deep scowl or showing a overjoyed, sparkling set of teeth. Their expressions, although beautiful, were picture perfect, meaning they were lacking genuine emotion- a trait of true human nature. These people were paid to look great, draw you in and sell whatever was on their back to you. I wanted my images to be more than that, to provide a glimpse into the humanity of the people in front of the camera.

Having come to this realization, I stepped back into the photo studio. This was where I had control- where the lighting, backdrop, and people were all decisions to be made. I felt most comfortable in this environment, as it was easy for me to maintain uniformity in the photos. Keeping the lighting and background consistent was important to me, assuming it would allow the focus to solely lie on the people. This proved to be true as I began my work, but the feedback that I was getting in critiques wasn't what I hoped. Much of the criticism was around the photos being "too beautiful", posed, and difficult to read. Due to the lack of age range, my peers felt it would be challenging for people of younger and older ages to relate to the work. As these were people of college-age, they were in what some may call the "prime of their lives", deeming their physical flaws to be minimal, which is where the "too beautiful" came into play. None of these were my intentions, in fact they were completely opposite what I wanted my images to connotate. I was looking for my photos to inspire their audience to feel something, recall a memory, spur something specifically human in them.

I knew I needed to widen my subject pool, but I wasn't sure who to approach. The group of people needed to comprised of individuals that I could easily talk with, have access to take photos of them as necessary and be relatable to a diverse audience. This is when I stepped back and began to think of who I knew. I thought photographing strangers could be interesting, but finding a common thread that connected them all to one another, outside of being strangers to me, could be tricky and too time consuming for the constraints I was working with. Then it occurred to me- I have a family of 33 wonderful people, that I'm dearly close to and that are fairly different than your dime a dozen American family.

With 18 cousins, growing up in the Ervin family was *never* dull. My dad grew up with 5 siblings, his three brothers, Pat, Tim, and Dan, and his two adopted sisters, Sarah and Lynn Sue. Nancy took her 6 kids to the ER a total of 48 times over the course of their childhoods. As my grandma says to this day, she was "scared they were going to take them away!!!" Family gatherings could be considered a branch of the Ringling Brothers Greatest Show on Earth, by those who grew up around a...quieter group of family members. Given that, I'd never trade our three-table-long thanksgiving feasts, or individually post-it-note-labeled garbage bags filled with Christmas gifts for anything.

So with this rich group of characters sharing the blood that runs through my veins, how could I have overlooked them? Next was figuring out how I would approach my family in order to understand them more, and make this project more than just an involved, artsy family album. I wanted to understand my family on a deeper level, because the more I thought about them, I came to realize the miniscule amount that I knew about each member individually. So the process came to light, I would spend time with each member, getting to know them better on a

personal level outside of family labels, such as aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent, etc. In doing this, we both get the opportunity to bond with one another, which is hard to come by as everyone has busy lives and family time is all too scarce as of recent.

As I began my interview and portraits, I asked my family members the following questions: When do you feel most free? When do you feel most human? What is your favorite thing about being part of a large family? What is your least favorite? In asking them these questions, I felt I was able to learn something about them as people, but also as part of our family. However, visiting artist Sarah Geis pointed out that if I was trying to get to know each person outside of the confines of our family, then asking each person about our family could be counterintuitive. Instead, asking further questions inquiring about their person could be more productive, such as, What is something about you that would surprise (person's name)? and If someone were to introduce you, how would you want to be described? And how would you think (blank person) would describe you? These questions have shone great results in getting a look into the minds of each person, how they think and how they interpret other's viewpoints.

Taking portraits of each person has done equally as much for me as the conversations have. How everyone presents themselves says something unique about them and their character. From the young kids, who complain that it's taking too long, to the adults who plead that I be "kind in my editing", the process was telling of each person's strengths, as well as some of their insecurities. Pairing their verbal responses with these images is intriguing to me, but I also feel it is intriguing to an audience, where at first, it is not physically clear that this group of people is related to one another. In this way, some may draw conclusions about the individuals, and the words that are paired with them, differently than they may if they are aware that they are all

indeed family- or vise versa. Nevertheless, the main thing that is important to me is that the audience is meeting this group of strangers, through portraits and short responses in a gallery. How will this affect their interactions, their assumptions, and their feelings? Afterall, regardless of the time and place, these are simply humans viewing other humans in a unique context.

Building the physical gallery installation proved to be a challenge, going through several iterations and attempts before finally finding what felt right. My first instinct was to gather the images and arrange them on a wall space, as this is a pretty traditional way of showcasing photographs and 2-D works. However the more I thought about this, the less appealing it became. I needed my final piece to be immersive and all-encompassing, as this project has been for me. It needed to more dynamic than just faces peering back at you from a wall; it also begged an interactive element so that the audience could not just see, but feel with the portraits.

In the gallery, I assembled 28 foam core-mounted, 15 ½ by 22 inch portraits; the prints themselves were black and white, printed on ultra premium presentation matte paper. There was a 4-inch white space left at the bottom, white was dedicated to each family member's handwritten response to either of these questions, "When do you feel most free?" and "When do you feel most human?". The 28 portraits were glued back-to-back, and then strung on grommets with fishing line to a 10 by 1 foot suspended white wooden frame. Each was hung at an angle 8.5 inches apart, so that the audience could walk in a circular motion about the installation; the audience would have to complete this ovular motion about the perimeter, in order to see each portrait and written answer.

The night of the gallery opening was phenomenal. To see the work that had been pinned on my studio walls for the past eight months, elegantly showcased, being examined and enjoyed

by so many, was more gratifying than I could have ever fathomed. Seeing how my audience interacted with the portraits and hearing their candid responses gave me so much satisfaction; but also made me reflect so much on the process leading up to that opening night.

After the opening, I began to consider the elements of the last eight months that I saw most in my installation. My first, and most dominant, observation was about how the audience interacted with the piece. My goal was for the audience to connect with each portrait, to get up close and personal, to truly feel the human and their sense of individual being. I would say the interaction was by far the most successful portion of my installation; the audience walked about the piece, getting very close, and, at times, even pulling the portraits closer to examine. Although I was thrilled that the audience was so enticed to actively interact with the installation, I wish I'd planned better for the audience's physical contact. The installation was getting slightly damaged, to the point of one of the portraits falling mid-opening; luckily I was able to quickly fix this, but had the fishing line been more stable, perhaps this could have been avoided.

Additionally, I felt I could have spaced the pieces further apart, perhaps allowing people to move closer to the pieces without having to touch the images. However since there were roughly 30 people showing in Slusser Gallery alone, I understand that space was limited and there was little to be done in this scenario.

The most trying part of my IP process were figuring out what I wanted to get out of the process myself, and, in turn, what I wanted others to gain in viewing and interacting with the piece. I thought I would be able to figure this out and then move into the physical making process, but they were very intertwined for me. As I worked with my family members and the materials that I gathered from them, the more I understood my goals for the final installation; a

glimpse into the individuality of the subjects, and the relatableness qualities that we as humans

can naturally understand.

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