

*Home On The Limbic Range*¹

The seeds for this project began with a chance discovery of five slides from my childhood and my growing interest in the limbic system of the brain. My interest in the limbic system was sparked from learning about the 1878 Phineas Gage event. Phineas Gage was a railroad foreman who was impacted through the brain with a railroad spike. He survived the incident. The damage, however, severed the connection in the brain between the limbic system and the forebrain. The word limbic refers to a border, fringe, or hem. The structures include the hypothalamus, the amygdala, the hippocampus and the septal area. It is the location for such primary functions as rage, euphoria, and sexuality. These function of rage, euphoria, and sexuality are kept 'in check', so to speak, by the forebrain. With the connection severed, Phineas Gage was forever tortured, existing from one extreme to another. I was feeling rather 'limbic' during this time and wanted to understand and possibly reduce the signal of my own extremes.

*The limbic cortex of the basal part of the frontal lobe is where we lie. Ablation of the limbic cortex would destroy one's sense of self; any other part of the brain or body can be removed, or substituted for without limited effects on abilities or learning but no fundamental effect on the sense of self.*²

Since the limbic system is associated as that part of our brain where self resides and my study of these old slides in an investigation of my 'self', it seemed an appropriate combination of interest and chance. These slides represented artifacts or data of my past, of my developing self. The slides were morphed by heat, water, and time resulting in cracked and melted emulsions which created a surreal representation of those early years (much like my own recall of those years). The distorted imagery was both curious and beautiful. Many artists intentionally distort their imagery. Early surrealist photographers such as Ubac deliberately melted the emulsion of the negatives. Contemporary experimental filmmaker Phil Solomon is known for films in which he scratches, melts, and chemically alters the film emulsion. This chance 'find' of childhood slide data came ready-damaged. (I could not have done a better job myself).

I projected the slides onto a wall that was painted either black or grey, instead of white. Since the projection represents the past, the wall was painted non-white to subdue the project light, therefore making the images dim and recessed into the background, further emphasizing that they are from a past time. I positioned my camera on a tripod pointed at the live projection. I would then re-enter this distorted image tableau by positioning and moving my body in front of the slide projection. I was nude so as to remove any signal of my current day and to allow the imagery to imprint onto my form. Throughout my process, I only had a dim idea of what the photograph might look like. It was another play of chance.

This process, similar to my other work, was a type of performance. It depicted the simple theatrical play of standing, gesturing and dancing in front of a slide projection, and interacting either with its content or the textures and shadows of its imagery. It was also a kind of “phototherapy” as done in the 1980’s by the photographers Jo Spence and Rosy Martin. In discussing the process of phototherapy, Rosy Martin writes:

It has enabled us to create a new range of images, which makes it possible to re-evaluate our own past, and the part that visual memories play in our highly censored/limited/edited understanding of it...Using simple lighting and camera equipment, and drawing on techniques from psychotherapy and psychodrama, we have created a range of extraordinary narrative portraits of ourselves...This self-examination led to the integration of a variety of different “selves,” an acceptance to the complexity and contradictions which have formed us.....This work also takes up and questions many of the major themes of photography itself, challenging the concept of the “decisive” or “perfect” moment and the “truth” of the photographed images.³

Spence and Martin claimed to recover parts of *the highly censored and limited understanding of their own historic pasts from the minefield of memory*. This process reflects many of my own intentions. Physical projection most certainly allows for psychological projection. It is a rather uncanny and haunting experience to stand in darkness, nude, beside a life size image of yourself as a child. Although the first few photo shoots were of a serious, probing tone, the later ones became loose, silly and irreverent. All round, it was cathartic.

Initially the imagery was very readable as a narrative probe into the past. But as the process evolved, the imagery became more abstract. I was more interested in the palimpsest layering of shadows and textures of the image than the readability of the photograph.

The final exhibition and installation featured a series of photographs with a room built for the projection of color slides and ambient sound. The soundtrack was layered with the voices of my parents as they react to the slide and projection imagery together with the music of myself playing an unrehearsed “Home, Home on the Range” on my old pump organ.

¹Adapted from:

Home on the Limbic Range, MFA thesis, Associated Artist Gallery 937, (Pittsburgh, PA, 1995).

²Bullock, T.H., Orkand, R., Grinnell, A. *Introduction to Nervous System*, (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Col, 1977) p. 484.

³Martin, Rosy. “PhotoTherapy: The School Photo (Happy days are here again)” *Photography/Politics: Two*, Holland P., Spence, J., Watney, S., Editors, (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986), p. 40.