The Arboreal Me
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A tree can be a metaphor for a cycle; in this respect it is also a metaphor for change, as a tree itself is in a constant state of metamorphosis whether or not it is visible to the naked eye. The tree is steady, always growing and changing in order to adapt and to survive in its surroundings. To the unobservant viewer it will seem as if nothing has occurred, we see a tree only as its top layer. To the ones that truly look, however, there is always something new to see, which feeds into my philosophy that things are never what they seem on the surface. That is to say there is always more to what one looks at than what one actually sees.

The world around us is the same, especially in terms of people. People sometimes change without notice, whether it is sudden or gradual; change can be either progressive or regressive. Regardless it is a result of adapting to the world in which you live. I include myself in this process of growth and adaptation.

The tree is the common denominator throughout my work; the types of trees vary, but they are always present. In my photography the tree has become symbolic of myself; it is the epitome of subtle change and adaptation. This process allows me to be true to myself- to look at my past, acknowledge how it helped bring me to where I am now and to embrace it. Utilizing the tree as a symbol also allows me to continue to show the

Figure 1 Grew Two Feet
growth of developing into the person I want to be, while being aware of that process. This has led me to realize I am creating “self-portrayals” rather than self-portraits. One of the first pieces I created in this mindset is *Grew Two Feet* (see fig-1). This piece explores my direct connection to the tree itself. I make reference to having roots and being grounded while also identifying the factor of growth as it is occurring.

The act of referring to a self-portrait as a self-portrayal is not a new one and yet it is still highly important to me. The term ‘self-portrait’ usually creates the expectation that the image will contain a literal visual representation of the person creating the image. In my pieces that is not always the case. A self-portrayal need not encompass traditional ideas- one can break away from the “yearbook” image. In fact one can even break away from depicting one’s face, which is traditionally associated with self-portraits. I have chosen to not only photograph other aspects of myself but in some images have taken to completely eliminating my physical presence. Ellen Lubell discusses the use of what she calls the self-image, “A depiction of the self need not necessarily involve a physical embodiment... A self-portrait could be any work that the artist feels represents this aspect of self.” Working with this train of thought allows me to create pieces that are as diverse as I am.

One might criticize that thinking as Lubell does allows an artist to claim that anything they create can be a self-portrait, as long as they feel the image is in some way representative of a part of themselves. This concern raises the issue of intention. For an image to qualify as a self-portrait, and subsequently a self-portrayal, the artist must intend for this to be the case prior to its completion. This is not to say that final pieces that are not intended to be a self-portrayal do not contain parts of the artist within them- they do,
but whether it is a traditional portrait, self-portrait, or self-portrayal, knowing the image is being created as a portrait affects, not only the artist creating the piece, but the model as well.

This knowledge is key to the way in which the final image is viewed. Richard Avedon, a photographer known for his portraiture, put it best when he said, “A photographic portrait is a picture of someone who knows he's being photographed, and what he does with this knowledge is as much a part of the photograph as what he's wearing or how he looks. He's implicated in what's happening, and he has a certain real power over the result.”² This power of awareness, which stems from intention, is a necessary component in determining the validity of a self-portrayal.

Aside from using trees as a means of self-representation I have used other individuals as well, these figures have been chosen by me for very specific reasons. For example, *In the Midst of Herself* (see fig-2) and *Set Me Free* (see fig-3) were created from a direct connection I felt with the individuals I photographed. The woman is a friend and the man is my brother. I tried to extract visually what it is that made me feel compelled to photograph them. In a
sense I photographed them as I would myself. When I photograph myself I try not to plan out the shoot too much. This is an active choice that I feel helps create an atmosphere conducive to creating imagery that is malleable and can respond to change. I gave loose directions but allowed each model to guide his or her movements as much as possible. Preparations are the same, however, whether I am photographing other individuals or myself.

![Figure 3 Set Me Free](image)

When I photograph, several things have to align for a shoot to be successful. Location plays a vital role, as does the emotion or situation in my life to which I am responding, as well as the way I choose to depict myself in terms of costume. I refer to my chosen attire as costume because generally I use things I would not wear on a day-to-day basis. To a certain degree the use of costume allows me to step away from the person that I am in my daily life and place myself in a scenario that is completely of my own making and wholly representational of the person that I am on the inside—me as I know myself. This use of costume adds another layer of representation or metaphor to my images. The choice of costume and the use, at times, of nudity is directly related to
the location I have chosen. One might even make the argument that the use of figures other than myself is an extension of costuming.

After I photograph for a piece, I view the images, and this is when I become more consciously aware of what I was trying to express. I liken it to re-reading one's favorite book: the second time around you notice the subtleties that you missed in your excitement of the first reading. I generally do not have a solid idea of how the piece will come together, so I print multiple images in a variety of sizes and exposures, which are like puzzle pieces from a puzzle that has no preformed shape. Many times an image or images will be repeated throughout a single piece or pieces and there are times when images that get printed are never integrated into a piece. Others are sometimes cut into strips, halves, or utilized in segments. The constructing of the puzzle or the piece itself generally goes through several arrangements before I find the final composition. The pieces themselves are constructed very loosely, taped together, which allows the paper to respond to its environment, expanding and contracting. It is pertinent that the images retain a quality of life and breath and have the ability to respond to the atmosphere in which they exist.

_The Arboreal Me_ began with layout pieces, one of the earliest pieces being _Grew Two Feet_ (see fig-1). This piece is an example of how I began challenging the standard "photograph as a rectangular" that seems to be expected. While the pieces still exist in the family of rectangular shapes they begin stepping away from the standard singular shape the viewer has come to expect with photographic images. Over time this process was fine tuned as the individual pieces within a layout began to relate to one another in a more specific manner, both in scale and content. As a result each piece started to read as
one cohesive image, as is the case with *Facing The Ghosts That Decide* (see fig-4). The way the separate images connect to the ones next to them creates an entire scene, which the viewer can easily read as one single piece. This additive process allows the piece to read naturally within a rectilinear pattern or shape.

![Figure 4 Facing the Ghosts that Decide](image1)

Considering the premise for these pieces is change and growth it was inevitable that the work would continue to evolve. My cutouts are the result of this continuation. They also break away from the standard shape of traditional photography, however rather than using an additive process, as with the layouts, I have implemented a subtractive process.

![Figure 5 Neither Here Nor There](image2)

In *Neither Here Nor There* (see fig-5) you see that while the print is still contained within an overall rectangular shape the removal of sections breakdown the solidness of the piece. The portions that have been cut away allow the viewer to complete implied lines and respond to a forced perspective. The removal of portions also creates a much more fragile
and delicate image in regard to the physical print. This fragileness can also be compared to the delicate way in which change and transformation can occur.

This cutout process is still relatively new in the series and as a result has the potential for continued growth within the set. I have already begun to explore some of the potential for these cutouts by layering; however, this is just one possibility as the series continues to grow.

**Influences**

My technical foundation is built on the back of Bill Brandt, a black and white British photographer who worked in the mid 20th century and is known for his high contrast imagery (see fig-6). I have emulated that style throughout my work- allowing little to no middle gray tones to exist in my imagery. I find this to create an interesting play on words in relation to the content of my work. When one views something in black and white they may be described as seeing something in a very cut and dried manner. My images, however, deal directly with the idea that things are not always what they seem; someone operating in this manner may be described as ‘seeing the gray area’ in a situation. I choose to explore this gray area through self-portrayals and the allegorical use of trees.
Aside from the conceptual implications, the use of high contrast imagery also plays a role in the visual aesthetic of my pieces. High contrast, while eliminating middle gray, can also help bring out certain detail in prints—largely in terms of texture. The work of Bill Brandt is also responsible for influencing me in this manner. Brandt’s self-portrait (see fig-7) shows how increased contrast can bring out textures in surrounding environments. These two characteristics of utilizing high contrast, extreme highlights with deep blacks, and the emphasizing of texture, can be seen in Searching For Truth (see fig-8). In this piece I have combined both techniques, providing the viewer with a range of visual surfaces.
My interest in non-traditional self-portraits led me to contemporary photographer Ann Arden McDonald who has explored the world of self-portraiture (see fig-9). She refers to her work as installations as well as self-portraits. While she only photographs herself in her portraits (as opposed to other individuals) she understands the importance of exploring the many different sides of her being, "I see not one imagined self but many, each in a constant state of flux, passing from one state of being to the next, sometimes quietly, almost imperceptibly, at other times violently or joyously." This idea of change appearing subtle at some points and extravagant at others is one that I identify with and try to replicate in my own work.

Figure 9 Anne Arden McDonald, Anne Arden McDonald: Installations and Self-Portraits (Euro Grafica, Italy: Autonomy and Alchemy Press, 2004). Untitled, silver gelatin print

Process

Photography is a diverse medium that leaves the artist with a plethora of choices in which they can work. With the fast paced developments in photography perhaps the most common question asked of the modern photographer is why they choose the processes they do. In the 21st Century that question seems to be formed around the digital medium- 'Why didn’t you just do it digitally?’ While it has become more difficult to maintain traditional and alternative process techniques due to the availability of chemistry, paper and film they are still valid and valuable choices for any photographer.
The choice between using digital or traditional techniques is a subjective one. Some artists will always employ one over the other, while some artists will use a combination of the two. Still, others will let the concepts and work itself dictate which process will best fit their needs.

*The Arboreal Me* was completed using traditional black-and-white darkroom techniques. I chose this process for a variety of reasons. For me it was important to work in a way that was tangible. The darkroom is a place that requires hands-on activity and allows the artist to make choices during the process that will affect the outcome of his/her final prints. This process, in addition to manually matching the prints and taping them together, strengthens the feeling of creation– it goes beyond sitting at a computer screen and clicking your images into place.

The chemical process of the darkroom is one that is hard to replicate in other forms. While the digital medium has grown in leaps in bounds, in terms of black-and-white imagery, it has not yet become an equal to chemical reactions. The tonal range reached in the darkroom is a vast one, combine that with the papers and surfaces one can print on, the results are endless. Digital printing in black-and-white, at this time, is limited. The recent development of different shades of black and gray inks has been a step in the right direction but tones do not yet match the range of the chemical process.

The tangible element and superior tonal range, however, are not the only reasons for choosing the darkroom method. Working with chemicals, developing your images both on film and paper, give the artist an element of surprise or chance. The overall process is a stable one but you never know when you will have to respond or adapt to that ‘happy accident’.
2 Steven Biver and Paul Fuqua, Faces: Photography and the Art of Portraiture (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2010), 149.
3 Anne Arden McDonald, Anne Arden McDonald: Installations and Self-Portraits (Euro Grafica, Italy: Autonomy and Alchemy Press, 2004).
Bibliography


