The Curtain Falls: An Interview with Jeff Bierk

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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by Matthew Ryan Smith
the Annex at Spadina and Bloor about five years ago. The front door to my apartment was broken, so I could only get into my apartment up a fire escape and through the back door. It was on the third floor and looked over this empty lot off of Bloor Street. When I moved in, there were a bunch of men and a few women that were hanging out in this back lot. It was really cool. All the back doors of restaurants were open, and the restaurant I was above would often give food to everybody. There were also these kinds of avenues from the Back 40 that would go down other laneways and exit on other streets. The Back 40 is like a central hub, with connecting trails spread out through the neighbourhood.

Through my proximity living there, I came to meet and be close friends with everyone who hung out there on a regular basis. Jimmy called it the Back 40, or the Backyard. There are other parks in the neighbourhood that we have names for, and we hang out at as well, but this one was special because this is where I was living. I had to go through it every time I would leave or enter my apartment. My friend Jimmy has been in the Annex for over thirty years. Bluenose used to live in the building behind my house. A lot of the people that hang out have been hanging out there and working there for a long, long time. They're really cool, funny people, and it was exciting to stumble on such a beautiful and honest community.

**Let's talk about proximity. Is photography a way to get closer to people or to mediate your interaction?**

It can be a couple of things. Photography can act as a distancing force. For me, in certain social situations, the camera functions as a kind of barrier between real engagement, to protect myself from real experience. On the other hand, the camera can act as an entry point to real engagement or participation; it's often a way for me to feel useful in social situations. To take a photograph has been sometimes been an excuse for me to be somewhere, and I've met some of my friends simply by asking them if I could take their portrait. It gives me reason to initiate and engage.

It seems like when people write about you and your work, they casually mention your struggle with addiction but shy away from explicitly connecting it to your work in any way. They turn a blind eye. But there's a stigma there, right, as there is with mental illness; by silencing our addictions and illnesses, we give them a power they don't deserve. So, let's talk about it. How has addiction and the process of recovery influenced your art practice?

It's been one of the main influences. I've been a drug addict for a large part of my life. I've been sober now for almost five years. When I got sober this last time, I felt like I was new to the world in a lot of ways. I felt like I didn't know who I was. But I had this loose idea of who I was before this long blurry stretch of my life, and this was someone who, among other things, loved to take photographs. How I saw myself five years ago is entirely different than how I live my life and how I take photographs today. Initially I was in a lot of pain. I was very confused and the camera was a tool, and photographs were a way for me to try and make sense of my experience with addiction, with loss, and with death. The more that I've grown and healed outside of taking photographs and making art, the less the art and the photographs have been about that. Of course, every photograph I make has some layer that speaks to addiction and some layer that speaks to loss. But it's not
necessarily at the surface any more, or the kind of driving force that it once was. The curtain photographs were made in a really bleak, painful time of my life when I was using drugs, and so those first images were a way to escape the traumatic memories I was having in the hospital.

On that point, most people who are familiar with your work don't know about the number of hospital curtain photographs you shot several years ago, the vast majority of which have never been exhibited before. In November, many of these will be on display for your upcoming solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Grimsby. They're beautiful photographs that really remind me of the drapery and cloth in Caravaggio's paintings, yet they're also intensely autobiographical. How did these photographs come about, and what is their meaning for you?

I got sober the first time when I was 24. I was in a serious relationship and my partner was in the hospital. I remember being in the hospital for the first time since my Mom's death and just being so scared, you know, and visually recalling the last time I was in the hospital, and the time before that when my Dad was dying. I hadn't dealt with that grief at all. It was very hard to be in that situation, and to be faced with those emotions, and in this awful place. I would walk around and take photographs as a way to escape. At the time it was the only way I could articulate what I was feeling. I was drawn to the curtains, which acted as both a catalyst and metaphor for death and loss. And while they were representations of death and loss, and the trauma inside hospitals, I found them to be sublimely beautiful outside of their original context. The folds were beautiful, the way they interacted with light. They reminded me of my father's paintings. It was a way for me to have a conversation with him through these works. I remember I participated in a critique at O'Born Contemporary in Toronto in 2009, and I had two of those curtains printed really big, and I knew nothing of life and the world. I had no idea what I was doing, and I remember trying to talk about these images in this way and talk about what they meant to me, and I just burst into tears because those images were articulations of grief. But it's really interesting for me to revisit that work so much later now. Even though I feel entirely shaped and formed by death and loss, and affected by grief, I feel so far removed from that time in my life, and so far removed from those images. I've been discussing this work with friends and other people because it's been on my mind with the Grimsby exhibition coming up, and it's interesting the way that grief changes. With the passing of time, memory changes. I've healed, and I've looked at, and experienced grief in a range of other ways. That narrative of being high and being in a hospital with my partner and recalling all those things I've just discussed, that's not as hard to talk about anymore. In my life now, grief comes up in different ways; it's activated by different things. Every photograph I take contains in it these layers of memory and experience. I think it's interesting to think of memory in this way—the photograph as an object that can help recall memory, how I can see something visually and recall a certain time in my life, sometimes recall not the time itself but just the memory of that time.

At your upcoming solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Grimsby, the gallery is teaming up with a local hospice to use your work as a conduit for healing. They're also interested in having you run a workshop with an art therapist. By confronting your work which deals with the process of dying, family, friends, and the dying are offered a place to confront losing and loss, to use beauty as an instrument of recovery and renewal. What are your feelings towards using your work in this way?

I think that's so beautiful. I remember the first time that I had shown anyone those images. To me they were so personal to my experience, and it was interesting that people who saw them related their own completely different experiences to those images.

They're relatable, relational. Absolutely. I remember when my Dad was really sick, he was dying from leukemia, and he was drugged up and hallucinating. The only thing he could see was a vista, this blank curtain, and I remember him having hallucinations and visions on that piece of fabric. It's always interested me. This idea of the curtain as a backdrop for death, or as one of the last things you see, a screen for the projection of visions and memories.

You've been surrounded by loss: the loss of your mother, your father, and your lover. How did these losses change your approach to making art?

I've obsessively photographed the people in my life as a way to hold onto them. I've known a lot of people who have died. The photograph in its simplest form is a visual record; it can act as proof of existence. As time passes, your memory of someone changes. You may forget how someone smells, or what it was like to be so close to someone you loved.

I think the way that I make photographs is a kind of dance with my friends.

— Jeff Bierk

You can have someone in your life that is closest to you, they're so familiar, and you can take that familiarity for granted, and those things you know so deeply about someone, with all your senses, fade with time once they are gone. I don't know if it's because I'm shot-out from using a lot of drugs or that's a normal thing, but I forget. I forget the intimacy. Photographs really take me back to specific moments in time. I can look at a photograph and recall everything: how the air smells, the events leading to and after that moment, and it's such a nice thing to draw on, to have them activate my memory like nothing else can.

Addiction can force you to lose your memory in different ways, so taking photographs can be a way to preserve what you're in the process of losing.

Definitely.

Recently, your work is drifting outside the photographic medium and into sculptural objects which you've called "photography blankets": heavy, coloured bedspreads featuring close-up portraits of your "Back 40" family. You then shoot them lying underneath their corresponding blankets where they are, in effect, wearing themselves. Since their faces appear on the blanket's surface, Jimmy, Carl, and others are offered an identity that others in similar circumstances tend to go without. Ordinarily, in the street, the blanket covers the person's face, obscuring their identity. Here the blanket is the face; it is putting a face to a face. Do you see this work as social activism?
The blankets are a recurring motif that first emerged from the Sleep series, which I mentioned earlier. I had been taking a lot of photographs of people sleeping on hot air grates by my workplace in downtown Toronto. I shot hundreds and hundreds of those images over a bunch of years. I even had an offer to publish that work, and I never did because of the ethical question of showing a photo of someone who hasn’t consented to being photographed. At the time I thought it was important evidence of the brutality of the homelessness in Toronto, and that it might effect change by bringing about awareness or something. Some of that work I had shown online, and it was criticized, and I was very defensive. But after nine months of considering the ethics of publishing that work, I decided against it. I decided that using someone else’s body, who didn’t have a voice or wouldn’t see the photograph, as a way to build my social capital as an artist and speak to my own experience was wrong. So I took down my Tumblr, my blog that those images were on, and decided not to publish this book of sleeping images. One of the really beautiful things in all those photographs that I was drawn to were the blankets— these really thin, almost transparent Toronto Emergency Service blankets. They’re bright orange and have the city of Toronto logo on them. I was always fascinated with them, much in the same way as the curtains, how they would cover the body, and their folds, and how they would interact with the light. But I also saw them as pretty useless. People were sleeping on hot air grates. It was -20 or -30 degrees outside and the blankets seemed to not offer much in the way of shelter or warmth. So that was the beginning of the blanket. But the reason I started printing on blankets was a question of money and use.

In 2014 I had an exhibition, and I spent a lot of money to frame and mount the work. I ended up getting in debt and after that show, which was funny because the “Back 40” show was only up for three days—in a basement—because no gallery would show my work. I really didn't want to just tack the photographs on the wall because I didn’t want it to seem like it was an intentional aesthetic choice because a lot of people look at the images and would call them edgy or street photographs or photographs of homeless men. I didn't want to contribute to that in the way the work was mounted and hung. To me it was really important to honour the work and its beauty, because it was speaking to the beauty of my friends. I wanted to honour that in the way they were presented; really nice custom frames, beautiful glass, that was important to me.

So after the show, I had all the work in my apartment taking up space. Here were these delicate art objects that cost me a lot of money to make but no one wanted to buy. I was stuck with this tab. I had these beautiful photographs but had no space to do anything with them, other than stack them against my walls. I thought I had made the biggest mistake; I thought I was so stupid for spending the money to frame and mount all these photographs that were now useless.

So yeah, the blanket was coming up in a lot of my work as an object, and after the “Back 40” show, I wanted to print images on blankets so that the images could function outside the gallery. Once I started to make them, it was so cool because everyone in the Back 40 freaked out. When Jimmy saw this first blanket I made of him, he lit up; he had a big smile, he thought it was the coolest thing. It was an object I could scrub up and throw at him. He could pick up this five-foot blanket of himself and hold it up and just laugh. It wasn’t precious and became this fluid thing that could be folded and wrapped and was really nice to photograph as well. For the Contact Photography Festival, I made a series of ten blankets where I would take an image of Jimmy lying on the ground, completely staged, completely performative, make a blanket with the image, and re-photograph him wearing a blanket with a photograph on it of himself. It was such a funny exchange. The blankets for Contact exist in the world now, and I don’t know where. A lot of the blankets were taken; a lot of my friends would take them home. I found one scrummed up behind a street car stop. I’m sure some ended up in dumpsters, thrown away. It was funny how that happened, the chaos of that project.

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D., is the Curator of the Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant in Brantford, Ontario and Sessional Professor of Indigenous Art History at the University of Toronto, Mississauga. He is also the literary editor of First American Art Magazine and section editor for Canada of the forthcoming Art Market Dictionary to be published by De Gruyter Academic Publishing, Berlin. Matthew also sits on the editorial board of the Moving Image Science Research Group at Kiel University in Kiel, Germany. http://www.matthewryan smith.com

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