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Down, Down, Baby

By
Ciara M. Duffy

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Science

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
May 2016

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Abstract

Down, Down, Baby

BFA, Photography, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA, 2012
MFA, Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, May 2016

The series *Down, Down, Baby* is a visual diary, a documentation of the transitory period of my youth: the moments of freedom, debauchery, and recklessness I experienced with my closest companions. These individuals exist in these moments as a symbol for an undeniable attitude within youth culture that is greater than themselves. *Down, Down, Baby* illustrates our early reactions to independence and the animals we wanted to be and were, as well as the desire to stay young and relative by creating spectacles of ourselves. This way of living defies the logic of refined sensibility, political correctness, and good taste imparted on us during our adolescence. *Down, Down, Baby* exists as a physical memento, a reminder of the moments that have outlined my youth. The color photographs range from intense and vulgar to quiet and serene. These photographs function as a conceptual space for my memories and perceptions of history outside of the space of my own mind.

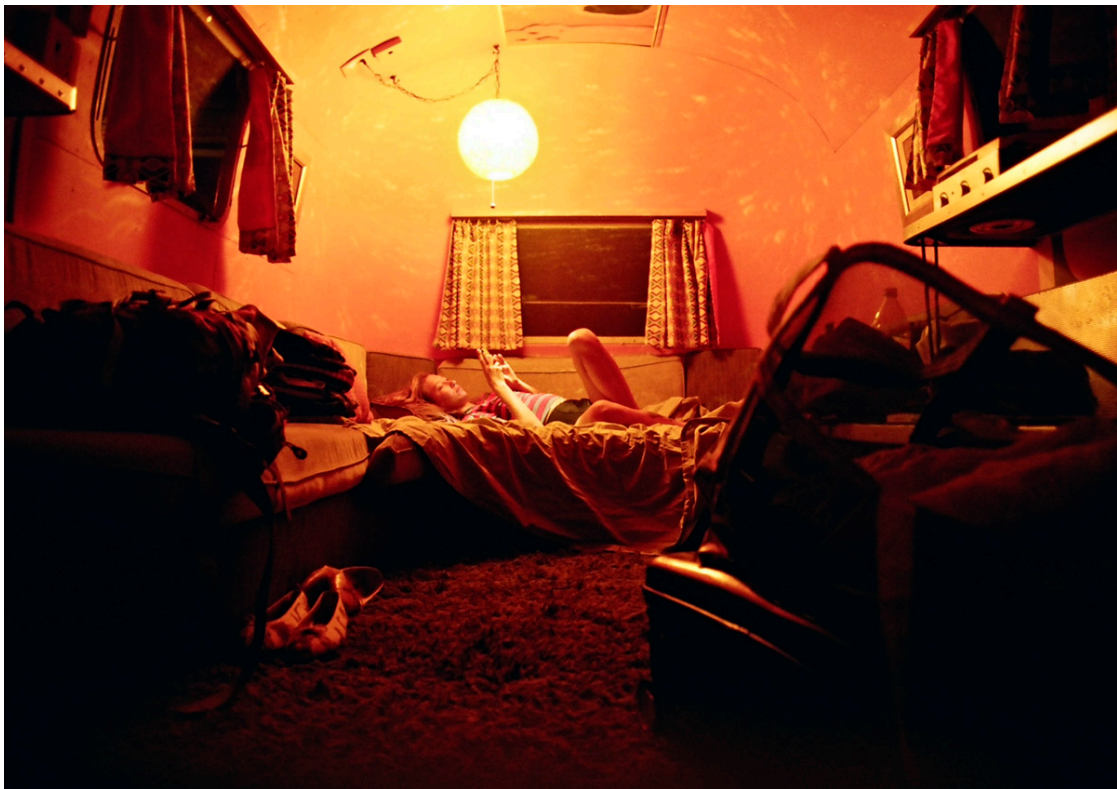
MFA Thesis Exhibition
William Harris Gallery







From the book *Down, Down, Baby: Lokrum Island*



From the book *Down, Down, Baby: Paige in Wally Byam's Dream*



From the book *Down, Down, Baby: Extraction*



From the book *Down, Down, Baby: Speaking in Tongues at La Cita*



From the book *Down, Down, Baby: Alter*



From the book *Down, Down, Baby: High with the Belgian Boys*

Extended Artist Statement

Georgia. The South. An anomaly to a Northerner, but I learned to be free-thinking in Georgia. I willed myself to speak out, to create, to be independent in the South. If you've ever lived in Savannah, Georgia, you'd know a world similar to *Peter Pan*'s "Neverland." Here, as opposed to staying physically young, as the Lost Boys do in *Peter Pan*, one remains young in the mind. There is an underbelly of darkness in these swamps and one that I found comfort in. In November 2008, my third month after moving to Savannah for college, I went to a party in the backyard of a condemned house, and I watched as two girls doused a couch in lighter fluid and lit it on fire. They were acting in the opposite fashion of anyone I had ever encountered before. They wanted to destroy, to act out, to be crude. They were eighteen-year-old sloppy female barbarians. Their behavior fascinated me, as did the situations we would soon find ourselves in, and I felt compelled to document it. As time passed, all of us have moved apart. The encounters we share today are few and far between, but the bond is still strong, and I still record the moments we experience together. The end result, after eight years of documentation, is a body of work titled *Down, Down, Baby*, a visual diary and a vast number of photographs that detail significant and insignificant moments spent with those closest to me.

The successes within much of this series are weighted by time passed and by the intimacy that was enfolded in this passage of time. My title, *Down, Down, Baby*, derives from a hand-clapping game that I played during my youth with other girls my age. To perform the song/hand game, one becomes engaged with one or multiple persons' hands clapping together and transitions to a snake-hip swivel. This hip gyration is both playful and lighthearted and suggestive of future sexual endeavors. Many different male artists sampled and recorded their own version of *Down, Down, Baby*, for example, Little Anthony and the Imperials in 1958 in

their recording *Shimmy Shimmy Ko-Ko-Pop* and Nelly's 2000 version, *Country Grammar*. Kyra Gaunt discusses in her article *Music between the Sexes, from Double-Dutch to Hip Hop* how the song's popularity was born out of "the gendered and embodied relationships shared between the sexes through female experience."¹ The multiplicity of meanings behind *Down, Down, Baby* compares the innocence of this hand game played during the years of my adolescence to the promiscuity that resonates throughout my own work.

The creation of this body of work originates from my compulsion to photograph the moments outside of the commonplace. I've avoided the pitfalls of the unremarkable and the everyday by documenting the actions in between. Outside of the constraints of school, work, or responsibility is where I've focused my camera, the valuable time in which we are free to choose how we spend our time. In this series, the moments in these photographs range from intense and vulgar to quiet and serene. My successes come out of the anticipation that a certain energy will appear. I am constantly attuned to the present so that I may comprehend the importance of the scene that surrounds me. The moment an undeniable quality of life appears, I document it. The photographs function as a conceptual space for my memories and perceptions of history outside of the space of my own mind. This allows me to move through these memories without so much subjectivity as common memory. Through these images, I am able to understand more in hindsight when issues are given time and space and to remember certain details due to documentation of them.

The incentive to create my own visual diary occurred after viewing Nan Goldin's visual diary series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. This body of work, created in the years following

¹Gaunt, Kyra Danielle. *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

Goldin's move to New York City at fifteen years old, includes moments from an insider's perspective of intimate experiences that one could only have with those closest to him or her. As Goldin says about her friends:

We are bonded not by blood or place, but by a similar morality, the need to live fully and for the moment, a disbelief in the future, a similar respect for honesty, a need to push limits, and a common history.²

Goldin photographs moments that are personal and private, but her subjects are very much participatory. To create this level of intimacy, you have to gain the trust of your subjects, but you also need to be aware of when to back off. This sentiment resonates within my own relationships with my subjects. These are the individuals I feel closest to and who actively collaborate with my camera and me. A poignant remark Goldin made of her collaboration with her friend Kathleen is that she is attracted to photographing her due to her "combination of wildness and fragility."³ Paige is one of my most photographed subjects, similar to the relationship that Goldin has with Kathleen: Paige stays open emotionally and physically in front of my camera. These are moments of vulnerability, rage, anxiety, narcissism, intoxication, and pleasure. She is an intriguing and enticing subject, owing to her beauty, her ferocity, her tenderness, and her sartorial choices.

The ephemeral nature of both Goldin's and my photographs highlights the power of a moment. Guido Costa states, "There is no covert documentary or ideological purpose, no neo-realist mission in Goldin's work—not, at least, in these early shots. There is, however, a pure determination to capture the moment, free from domination by abstract constructs of art."⁴ These are fleeting, temporal instants that exist for only a particular amount of time. Goldin furthered

² Goldin, Nan. "Preface." In *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, edited by Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn, and Suzanne Fletcher, 6–9. New York: Aperture Foundation, 1986.

³ Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6–9.

⁴ Costa, Guido. "Introduction." In *Nan Goldin*, 3–15. London, UK: Phaidon, 2001.

the ephemeral quality of her work in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* by presenting 690 35mm color slides in a looped 45-minute slideshow format at exhibitions.⁵ My decision to utilize paper pads as means to exhibit my photographs is also one that furthers this transitory quality.

The photographs in *Down, Down, Baby* depict the feral nature of our youth. I use the term *feral* to describe a behavior that is both uncultivated and tempestuous. It felt liberating to act in a ruthless manner; to be messy and untamed was an emancipation from the standards once expected of us during adolescence. This series illustrates early reactions to independence, the animals we wanted to be and were, and the moments that technology saturated our lives, as well as the desire to stay young and relative by creating spectacles of ourselves. The decision to focus predominantly on female characters in my work is based on the abundance of depictions of these individuals, who have been a constant presence in my life. My subjects exist in these moments as a symbol for an undeniable attitude within youth culture that is greater than themselves. This way of living defies the logic of refined sensibility, political correctness, and good taste.

The young Dutch female artist Melanie Bonajo examines different aspects and issues that her generation contributes to the world through her videos, performances, photographs, and installations. In her own words, she “explores the spiritual emptiness of her generation, examines peoples’ shifting relationship with nature and tries to understand existential questions by looking at our domestic situation, ideas around classification, concepts of home, gender, and attitudes towards value.”⁶ Bonajo examines the complex relationship between real presence versus cyber presence and the barrier, or, rather, lack thereof, in our private and public lives due to social media platforms. This subject is particularly interesting to me because, over the course of this

⁵ Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016. <http://collection.whitney.org/object/8274>. Accessed May 4, 2016.

⁶ Bonajo, Melanie. *Bio: Melanie Bonajo*. Accessed May 2016. <http://www.melaniebonajo.com/index.php?/projects/info/>.

series, I observed my friends place more importance on their cyber presence over their physical and mental presence.

Bonajo often discusses the topics that society prefers to conceal and does so with wit and humor throughout. Kara L. Rooney, in a discussion about Bonajo's beliefs in her article *Freedom Spirit/Ritual Anarchist*, states:

The Dutch have a word for this, *keurslijf*. An abstract concept in and of itself, *keurslijf* refers to the societal demands and "proper" modes of being imposed upon the individual. In its corporeal representation, the corset is its closest symbol. To push against this is to push against the powers that restrain us. Bonajo's revolutionary discourse is grounded as much in her life experience and rejection of *keurslijf*.⁷

Bonajo's early work demonstrates this push. One photographic series that later adapted to a video, titled *Pee on Presidents*, is a collection of over 500 photographs taken from 2000 to 2013 of Bonajo's female friends' peeing in public. Bonajo explains this work:

The series often try to address the subject of female liberation and (body) representation, meaning they are not stylized images designed to appeal to the implied male spectator projected upon us by advertisement and mainstream media. Taking yourself not too seriously is liberating the mind and spirit. Especially in these times of extreme narcissism, this can be a cure for society.⁸

Bonajo's sentiments in her work align with many post-feminist viewpoints, as do they with the ideas that drive my work. As Mirjam Western states in her Introduction for the catalogue *Rebelle*, "The concept of 'post-feminism' suggests a more sophisticated, more intellectual, more contemporary concept, more capable of self-reflection, humor, and relativism than 'feminism' had been before it."⁹

⁷ Rooney, Kara L. *Melanie Bonajo: Freedom Spirit/Ritual Anarchist*, 2016. <http://www.melaniebonajo.com/index.php/projects/dialogue/>. Accessed May 2016.

⁸ Frank, Priscilla. "Meet The High Priestess of the Anti-Selfie, Dutch Artist Melanie Bonajo (NSFW)." *The Huffington Post*, September 15, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/15/melanie-bonajo_n_5811496.html http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/15/melanie-bonajo_n_5811496.html.

⁹ Westen, Mirjam, Els Brinkman, N'Goné Fall, and Saskia Bultman. "Introduction." In *Rebelle: Art and Feminism 1969-2009*, 5–6. Arnhem, Netherlands: Museum Voor Moderne Kunst, 2010.

These attitudes are dispersed throughout *Down, Down, Baby* but align most directly in the depictions of sexual intimacy in this series. The female perspective is something crucial to a viewer's understanding of my work. In many of the photographs from this series, my female gaze is present. Men are often portrayed as the object of my desire and in a passive position, "feminizing" them by conventional devices. Abigail Solomon-Godeau spoke often of her interest in the perspective of the female photographer in *Sexual Difference: Both Sides of the Camera*. She asks us to consider how the body is presented as a photographic subject. What different does it make, then, when a woman is behind the camera? She answers by acknowledging that it is not determined simply by biology, for notions of sexuality and desire are socially constructed. She states, "For women, whose position in the economy of looking conventionally resides with the surveyed rather than the surveyors, the use of the camera to 'expose' and capture the social and sexual transactions of others is particularly charged."¹⁰

The way in which the photographs in *Down, Down, Baby* are displayed in an exhibition invites the audience to interact with my work. As a photographer, I've dedicated my practice to imparting moments of my private life to the public, and I wanted to bring this idea one step further. The photographs are exhibited on individual pads of paper on the walls, beckoning further interaction between the audience and artist. The audience is encouraged to physically bring a piece of the artist's experience home with them, a further opportunity to share in these memories. Control of these images is then imparted to the audience. I am now a spectator in the gallery, watching the audience choose which photographs they want to bring into their lives. The experientiality of the paper pads at the exhibition heightens their value. The touch and sound of the paper pads while being torn off from the wall enhances one's experience with the

¹⁰ Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. *Sexual Difference, Both Sides of the Camera*. New York: Columbia University, 1988.

photographs and satisfies the senses. When all of the photographs on the paper pads are taken, all that is left is the cardboard backing, a memory of what was.

The photographs in *Down, Down, Baby* depict the years of my youth, freedom, debauchery, and recklessness. These moments were lived without rationality, during the period in one's life that entails constant evolution and a deep exploration of one's self. *Down, Down, Baby* exists as a physical memento, a reminder of the moments that have outlined my youth. The non-conventional family I have made through my friendships defines me for who I am and serves as the backbone that pushes me further into my future.

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