Tetralogue| Family communication, biology, personal myths, and identity construction

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TETRALOGUE:
FAMILY COMMUNICATION, BIOLOGY, PERSONAL MYTHS, AND
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

by

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Tetralogue: Family Communication, Biology, Personal Myths, and Identity Construction

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This thesis and the corresponding work stem from an earlier investigation of traits that were passed through three generations of my family in light of calamitous events. I have since altered the conveyance of these personal events and the resulting emotions. In my work I strive to address collective themes regarding familial communication, biology and personal myths through a pluralistic approach to photography. My own experiences are now simply used as reference points. By stressing collective themes, I attempt to more readily engage the viewer with my imagery. Thus, my artwork is no longer a conversation concerning three generations or parties; it is now a four-way exchange, a tetralogue.
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Introduction

Through various photographic, printmaking, and painting approaches, my thesis exhibition addressed my preoccupation with collective themes surrounding the effects of family communication, biology, and personal myths on the construction of our identities. By stressing collective themes, I allowed the viewers to become more readily engaged with my imagery through their own perspectives, rather than through mine. My thesis exhibition grew from an earlier artistic endeavor that conveyed personal experiences and perspectives that are worthy of discussion before looking at the specifics of my thesis work.

With this earlier endeavor, I sought to convey emotional characteristics that were the outcomes of tragic family events. This conveyance eventually led to an exploration of the various traits that have been passed from father to son through three generations of my family in light of calamitous events.

Since this exploration involved my son, my father, and me, I often presented imagery in triptychs (Figure 1). Such presentation certainly offered the viewer three different elements, but these elements were not as intermingled as I had hoped. I wanted the viewer to get a sense of how the distressing events intertwined my father, son, and me. As a result, I produced One, Three, Four (Figure 2), a composite of my facial features with those of my father and son. For me, this composite satisfied the sense of connectedness sought, since the parts of all of our features made a new whole.
The creation of *One, Three, Four* also raised a significant question: How could my work, based in family events that are so personal and specific, relate to the audience? In response, I added a fourth element to the composite: the facial features of an anonymous individual. For me, this addition represented the viewer. While this character had no involvement with my family experiences, he did have his own and that is what tied us together. From this point on, I began looking towards the collective family experiences of our society and the resulting effects on our identity, not just my own. That is, as my preoccupation with themes surrounding family communication, biology, and personal myth flowered, my own personal experiences were simply used as reference points.

*Family Communication*

My thesis exhibition, *Tetralogue*, is loosely divided into three sections addressing family communication, biology, and personal myth and their effect on the construction of identity. The work related to family communication is a series of van Dyke (brown-tone) and cyanotype (blue-tone) photographs printed on thin Japanese paper, titled *...and the communiqué cliché runs dry* (Figure 3 and Figure 4). This paper's translucency and durability are suggestive of skin and its ability to carry genetic characteristics across family lines. In addition, the paper itself is proportionate to a legal-sized envelope, since this was once the primary vessel used to carry the correspondence of family members. These layered images include portions of text from various letters sent between my father
and me over the past nine months. In addition, there are portions of drawings and language development exercises created by my son and me over the same period of time.

This work alludes to the lost art of family communication via conversation and correspondence through tangible objects such as a letter. Specifically, I was curious about the ways in which new methods of communicating (i.e.: answering machine memos, e-mail, text messaging, etc.) affect family communication style, and in turn, family identity and individual identity. Little research attention has been devoted to examining the influences of family communication styles on individuals’ personality development.¹ Yet, some conclusions can be deduced. Cell phone use and internet/e-mail use has dramatically increased over the past decade. As a result, families are spending much less time openly conversing face to face or through writing. When open communication is not practiced or encouraged in a family, parents have little influence in shaping their children’s consumptive patterns.² One can assume other child development patterns are affected similarly through lack of open communication.

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The procedures used to create this work about family communication paralleled its content. To start, I scanned the actual letters and drawings so that I could further manipulate their layouts with digital applications. I changed a given image into a negative and printed it onto an inkjet transparency. While the image is printing, I brush-coated the Japanese paper with the van Dyke emulsion or sensitizer in the darkroom. When the paper dried, I created a van Dyke print using ultra-violet light. I placed my inkjet negative directly upon the sensitized paper in a contact-printing frame. The frame was then exposed to ultra-violet light for a specific time and then was removed and developed in water for four minutes. The paper was fixed in a 1:20 fixer to water solution for three minutes, washed in Perma Wash for an additional three minutes, and rinsed in running water for fifteen minutes. All of these steps required slight agitation. Finally, the print was left to air-dry on a drying rack.

This process is labor intensive and the result it yielded did not necessarily portray this intensity. Such is also true for today’s methods of communication. For example, to send an e-missive, one is required to have access to a computer, knowledge of how the computer and software operates, and a log-in and password to send the message, not to mention typing skills. If the message is delivered to its destination, it is done so extremely fast and seemingly with simplicity. However, without the personalization of a handwritten envelope, letter, and perhaps, ink stains on the paper...
this message is devoid of any human touch. My interest in family communication is rooted in how this absence of human presence affects us.

**Biology**

My thesis work related to the effect of biology on identity construction, was a series of van Dyke photographs depicting various animal and human forms titled, *Part of Parts* (Figure 5). Several of these van Dyke photographs incorporated screenprints. In addition, all of the van Dyke photographs were small-scaled, coated with beeswax, and displayed directly over images printed upon vinyl that was adhered to the wall. Each of these supplementary manipulations made to the van Dyke photographs were connected to the content of the work.

The screenprints were of my son’s drawings, representing various human and animal figures. When these figure drawings were placed atop my van Dyke images of similar forms, the result was a sense of visual layering that was, for me, synonymous to the intermingling of biological traits across several generations.

![Figure 5. Part of Parts, 5" x 55", van Dyke prints/screenprints/beeswax/pigment/vinyl, 2/2006](image)

The squares of sticky vinyl beneath the van Dyke photographs contained inkjet images of my son’s drawings that I further manipulated with digital technology. Through this manipulation, I was referencing humanity’s tendency to alter biological traits to achieve, seemingly, a more normative appearance. My interest in this sort of alteration
stems from my son’s involvement with corrective surgery.

The beeswax, due to its historical use in preservation, was meant to suggest the perseverance of given biological traits over numerous generations, in spite of the intermingling and alterations mentioned above. In addition, by dipping the paper used in this series in beeswax, I was able to procure a medium with much more transparency. Thus, enhancing the layering effect of the van Dyke prints, the screenprints, and the imagery printed upon the vinyl.

Because I envision a trait as a minute fragment on a microscopic strand of DNA, these images were created to mimic this small scale. Each panel measures 5” x 5”. This scale also conveys a sense of intimacy or personal space, since the viewers were required to get extremely close in order to view the details of this series.

Each square, resulting from the layering mentioned above, is meant to be a variation on the life of a given biological trait. Each generation passes on a biological characteristic to the next generation. That trait is then combined with other traits, transforming into something completely new. Yet, there will always be a hint or a record of the original trait, unless, of course, one chooses to alter or eliminate this trait through a measure such as cosmetic surgery. In spite of corrective cosmetic surgery for a cleft lip, this trait may still appear in a future generation. I’m interested in how such intermingling, alteration, and perseverance of biological traits affect identity construction.

**Personal Myths**

The works addressing personal myths are also conglomerations of animal and human parts. The animals I photograph are typically native to western Montana. These
animals (deer, elk, water fowl, and bears) have become symbols for the West. These animals point to a past that has long ago disappeared and help create a representation of Western life that I find off the mark. Thus, I choose to incorporate them in my own imagery, along with people, to honor their “mythical” position in the Western psyche (Figure 6) and to honor the worldwide tradition of human-animal composites in myths (Figures 7 and 8). Most importantly, by fusing these beasts with portions of the human figure, I allude to various personal myths about family that I once held as beliefs or ideals.

Although these conglomerations may not evoke the idea of family myths to the viewer, they do seem allegorical in some way. While manipulating these images into complete compositions, I was driven by my own family experiences and how they altered most of the expectations I held before becoming a father. In this work, I did not seek to convey personal events, nor my once-held ideals; rather, I spoke specifically to the fact that my expectations were extremely altered, so much so that they became personal myths. This idea was communicated through imagery as well as scale.

*What Once Was*, by comparison to *Part of Parts*, was a large-scale installation
piece composed of three panels (Figure 9). The images on these panels are mainly things we find in the natural world: a leafless branch, a white goose in flight, a human arm, the trunk of a tree, and the top branches of a tree. The leafless branch represented the alteration of personal expectations regarding parenthood that had been influenced by cultural mores. The numerous twigs of the branch were symbolic of the number of expectations I had held. By displaying the image of the branch in three different forms (as a full-color photograph, a van dyke photograph, and a cyanotype), I was acknowledging the many possible manifestations of our expectations. These possibilities were also expressed through my decision to rotate each image of the branch ninety degrees from the position in which it was photographed. Furthermore, the viewers were able to see both images on each panel simultaneously. For example, due to the placement of the lighting and the translucent quality of the paper, each image of the branch (the cyanotype version and the full-color version) on the smallest panel bled into the other. This effect also referenced the layering of traits across multiple generations.

The white goose represented one’s tendency to run from beliefs that are altered to the point that they become personal myths. For example, I once believed that my first-time parental experience would in no way resemble my father’s upbringing. Of course, in terms of the resulting emotions, it most certainly did. In the face of such adversity, I am accustomed to removing myself, fleeing like a frightened bird.

The photograph of the tree trunk symbolized the hope of being grounded when
confronted with the reality of personal myths, while the top branches of the tree represented the acceptance of new growth in the face of calamitous family events. The human arm was meant to represent strength during this time of accepting growth.

In the gallery setting, it was difficult for the viewer to ignore these panels due to their size and placement. The panels ranged from 18” x 75” to 18” x 102”. Each panel was hung so that at least three people could simultaneously move between them. In addition, they were hung away from the walls of the gallery, encouraging viewers to witness them from all angles. Perhaps, with these measures, the viewer was reminded of his or her own myths.

This work incorporated inkjet prints, van Dyke prints, cyanotypes, and screenprints. The images for these compositions were originally shot on medium-format film as positives. The film was then scanned and adjusted for color and contrast using Adobe Photoshop. After enhancement, an image was digitally laid out with other images to create a final composition. One of the difficulties presented by these pieces was their final size. In order to prepare for an output size of say 33” x 100”, all aspects of my process from initial scan to final print were carefully considered to accommodate the options and also the limitations of digital media.

Once I appropriately prepared for scanning, printing and made a decision on a final composition, I then digitally removed the shadow areas in select portions of these
images. My intent was to replace these shadow areas by hand with either van Dyke or cyanotype sensitizer. By doing so, I hoped to add to the unreal or mythical sense of these compositions.

These large compositions were printed from an Epson 9800 inkjet printer on Shiramine Japanese inkjet paper. The removed shadow areas of the printed compositions were coated with the selected photographic sensitizer in the darkroom. Using Adobe Photoshop, I converted the positive areas where the shadows were removed from the composition, into monochromatic negatives. I exposed the negatives on large printed-paper using sunlight as a light source since the scale of my prints precludes using the darkroom facilities. Processing these compositions can be a chore as there are no trays large enough to accommodate such large paper. As a result, the prints must be constantly rolled, unfurled, and then rolled again, within the tray, during the entire duration of each processing step. This must be done to ensure an archival print. Finally, these large compositions were hung from a wooden rod to air-dry.

Occasionally, for these large compositions, I will chose to highlight certain portions by screenprinting pigment or a clear semi-glossy transparent base in selected areas. The same large negatives described above are laid upon photo-emulsion that has been applied to a silkscreen. Thus, my printmaking experiences are still heavily invested in photographic reproduction. Since it is much more hands-on than digital applications, I consider screenprinting complementary to my urge to grasp or put a hand on the altered personal myths of my family.

Historical Background and Influences
The execution of my artwork is manifold. That is, I may use several techniques and media for each piece including digital, analog, and alternative photography; screen-printing; acrylic painting; and drawing. Each of these steps affords me more time to process the sometimes emotionally challenging content of my work. The process itself enriches my conception of the project. For example, I may choose to print a photograph on Mulberry paper, which is surprisingly durable despite its translucency. As I work with it, I am reminded of skin, the integument that in some sense contains one's genetic links to his ancestry (Figure 10).

My work is manifold not out of conceit but instead out of necessity. The unpredictability of the alternative photographic processes I utilize parallels the lack of control I have often experienced in my role as a son and a father. The digital, printmaking, and painting applications I use afford me the opportunity to exert more direct control over my imagery; similar to my attempts to exert control in my family life.

Thus, photographers and artists, both historical and contemporary, whose work is multifarious out of necessity influence my work. Photography has a rich history of pluralism, dating back to its inception. In his 1839 essay *Photogenic Drawing*, pioneering photographer William Henry Fox Talbot viewed photography as a scientific device that was only capable of helping painters delineate details of the natural world.\(^3\) In other words, to Talbot, photography was not an art form but merely an artist’s tool. In

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1871, Albert Sands Southworth proclaimed photography to be pure art, due to its aim of
achieving visual perfection, which he also saw as the aim of
the painting and sculpture of that era. We are presented here
with two opposing viewpoints concerning the role of
photography. For William Henry Fox Talbot, photography
was just a scientific tool, whereas Albert Sands Southworth
repeatedly argued that photography was a legitimate art form.
The truth is, even today, photography is used to serve both
fields: science and art.

My primary influences are photographers/artists who use photography for the
sake of art, not science. However, this is not to say that William Henry Fox Talbot’s
photogenic drawings, though driven by science, lack artistic value. In fact, his
photogenic drawing, *English Vine* (Figure 11), dismisses any claims that his work lacked
artistic integrity.

I adopted the use of the van Dyke printing technique from Sir John Frederick
William Herschel. In 1819, Herschel was the first photographer to utilize the iron-silver
process referred to as the argenotype, upon which the van Dyke process is based. The
van Dyke process is named for its deep-brown tone, similar to the pigments used by
Flemish painter, Van Dyck. For me, this process conveys a sense of nostalgia. The
brown tone is less assertive and seemingly outdated when compared with the black and
white or color digital prints of contemporary photography. Since the work preceding my
thesis exhibition was rooted in the investigation of family past, present, and future, I felt

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of Photography, 18 (November 1871): 530-2.
strongly about using a photographic process that evoked nostalgia. I continually incorporate the van Dyke process into my images.

Around the time that I created *One, Three, Four*, I began looking intently at the photographic work of artists like Hans Bellmer, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, Gerhardt Richter, Sebaastian Bremer, the Starn twins, and Christian Boltanski. I initially looked at Hans Bellmer's provocative photographs from the Doll Series, since this also paired color applications with photography. These photographs originally documented the various configurations of a mechanical, sexualized doll that Bellmer had constructed. They were hand-colored to heighten their emotive impact.° The color, though secondary to the monochromatic tones of the photographic under-images, provides supplementary emotive qualities to the content of a photograph.

Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhardt Richter appeal to my sensibilities, since their work utilizes photography in some manner. Richter appropriates photography from periodicals and then reproduces it in painting. Yet, his results often appear more photographic than painterly. Sigmar Polke has used his photographs as stencils (Figure 12). He will cut out select areas of the images and push ink or paint through them onto a canvas. The result is something more akin to printmaking, yet it still retains a photographic quality. Anselm Kiefer will combine his photographs with paint, steel, and even lead (Figure 13). Like these artists, Kiefer chooses these approaches for the sake of furthering his intent, not out of conceit.

Sebastiaan Bremer inspired my use of screenprinting over photographs. However, Bremer's under-image is often a full color photograph, rather than a monochromatic van Dyke print. In addition, the color placed over his photographs is applied with colored-ink, rather than with screenprinting ink. Nonetheless, the layering of both the ink and the photograph evokes a powerful aesthetic experience for the viewer.

Christian Boltanski's work is captivating not only for its use of multi-media but also for its strong relationship between materials and content. I am specifically drawn to his photographic installation entitled *Monument* (Figure 14). This piece is often mistaken as a memorial to survivors and victims of the Holocaust, since Boltanski’s work frequently addresses the results of this catastrophic event. *Monument* was actually created from the portraits of French school children from the 1970s. Yet, similar to Boltanski's work about the Holocaust, this piece does indeed convey loss and in addition, death:

...we know little of these children beside the fact that Boltanski was personally interested in the children growing up in post-war France (despite the constant attempt to read this work as alluding to the Holocaust). Boltanski admits that whilst the children were anonymous French children of the 1970s, the images did flirt with death, as the children in the photographs were "now dead, not really dead, but [the] images of them were no longer true," since they had grown up to adulthood. He states "[t]he children in the photos no longer existed, so I decided to make a monument to the glory of childhood now dead".

In this series, Boltanski altered the photographs of school children with extremely soft
focus and high contrast so that facial details are obliterated and each child seems anonymous. The focus is not on each specific child but on the experience they all seem to share collectively. This collectivism is heightened by the presence of wires running from light bulbs above each image to a single electrical outlet. When the viewer takes notice of the way in which the children fade into the light illuminating them from the perimeter of the installation, he or she becomes keenly aware of the sense of loss that Boltanski creates. Much of Boltanski’s work uses the power of light and shadow to emphasize the role of memory between past and present. Thus, this installation highlights his commitment to the marriage of materials and content.

**Conclusion**

My thesis exhibition was inspired by an artistic exploration of emotions resulting from calamitous family events. These events primarily involved my father, my son, and myself. As a result, the artwork addressing these events felt very insular. With my thesis exhibition, I strove to use my personal experiences only as reference points while creating a body of artwork that the viewer could, at the very least, find more accessible. My focus was on the effect of family communication, biology, and personal myths on identity construction. Though inspired by communication, biological traits, and personal myths within my own family, I deliberately chose imagery that was much more symbolic of my experiences, rather than being literal representations. In doing so, I felt the viewer

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was much more apt to apply the imagery to his or her own experiences rather than being inundated with mine. That is, I intended to create a body of work that represented a conversation between four parties (my father, my son, myself, and the viewer), a tetralogue.

In the future, I anticipate creating work that is similar in appearance but this work will differ in the experiences it references. The time spent referring to my experiences in order to create work for the collective audience has been arduous. I also foresee myself pulling from the familial stories of people from a variety of backgrounds. I would like to collect these stories through interviews and then compile categories for which each story could be placed. For example, a category for a story might be labeled “family vacations”. In response to each category, I will create photographic-based imagery, in the vein of symbolism rather than literalism, to record the participants’ stories of each category together in a single document. In doing so, I hope to honor photography’s history of serving documentary purposes while also honoring my interest in photographic iconography and experimentalism, as evident in Tetralogue.
Bibliography


