

Louisiana State University

## LSU Scholarly Repository

---

LSU Master's Theses

Graduate School

---

2009

### A shared silence

Jessica Alice Mowers

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses](https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses)



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Mowers, Jessica Alice, "A shared silence" (2009). *LSU Master's Theses*. 109.

[https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses/109](https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/109)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

# A SHARED SILENCE



A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
The School of Art

by  
Jessica Alice Mowers  
B.F.A., SUNY Potsdam, 2005  
May 2009

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Father, for believing in me and buying me my first camera. You saved my life. I love you Dad.

My Mom without you I would never have learned the value of patience and how to love your family unconditionally.

My Sister, Sarah, for trusting me and loving me no matter how much we fight.

Mikey, Ruben, Emma, Enson, and Hannah for being energetic and fearless models.

My Cousins, Jamie and Missy, for giving me the privilege to work with your beautiful kids.

Grams for every card and care package you sent since I start college. They always seemed to appear in my mail box just when I needed a kind word to lift my spirits.

Tara Rene Ratliff, for lighting a fire under my butt when I thought I couldn't go on, knocking sense into me when my sense of reason was on the fritz, and for having the unfailing ability to mellow me out when my anxiety got the better of me.

Bridget G. Kimball, for opening your heart and home to me, all the love and support you gave got me through the tough times. And I'll never forget the many Stargate marathons we held together.

Derek Pevey, for helping me with all my automotive problems. I could not have made out of Louisiana without you.

Jill Moore, giving me a much-needed shoulder to cry on at times and for helping me piece together my final pieces.

Adrian, for piecing together all my frames and supplying the world with great music.

Without each and everyone of you I could not have complete this project or survived Louisiana.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART I.....	3
PART II.....	8
PART III.....	9
CONCLUSION.....	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	21
APPENDIX: FIGURES.....	22
VITA.....	26

## LIST OF FIGURES

1	<i>Untitled Fifteen</i> .....	4
2	<i>Untitled Twenty-One</i> .....	5
3	<i>Untitled Six</i> .....	6
4	<i>Untitled Twenty</i> .....	6
5	<i>Untitled Twenty-Two</i> .....	7
6	<i>Untitled Twelve</i> .....	9
7	<i>Untitled Seventeen</i> .....	10
8	<i>Untitled Three</i> .....	11
9	<i>Untitled Four</i> .....	13
10	<i>Untitled Nine</i> .....	14
11	<i>Untitled Nineteen</i> .....	14
12	<i>Untitled Sixteen</i> .....	15
13	<i>Untitled Twenty-Three</i> .....	16
14	<i>Untitled One</i> .....	17
15	<i>Untitled Eighteen</i> .....	17
16	<i>Untitled Fourteen</i> .....	19
17	<i>Untitled Two</i> .....	22
18	<i>Untitled Five</i> .....	22
19	<i>Untitled Seven</i> .....	23
20	<i>Untitled Eight</i> .....	23
21	<i>Untitled Ten</i> .....	24

<b>22</b>	<i>Untitled Eleven</i> .....	24
<b>23</b>	<i>Untitled Thirteen</i> .....	25
<b>24</b>	<i>Untitled Twenty-Four</i> .....	25

## **ABSTRACT**

I took a journey home to Western New York and turned the camera's lens on both my family and myself. This thesis is a story about my family and me. I photographed my family to confront the tragic car accident that took my brother's life and my mom's sanity. I also acknowledged the present state of my family with these photographs by exploring the root of many of my fears and anxieties that stem from the tense and stressful atmosphere within my home as a result of this car accident.

## INTRODUCTION

My photographs are a story about my family and me. The work I have produced in my thesis year is a confrontation with my past, an acknowledgement of the present I live in, and the future I fear with my family. My story starts with the accident. Before my sister and I were born my parents had a son, Samuel A. Mowers. Sam was born in September of 1973 and two years later he died. One night, my parents and Sam were driving home from grandma and grandpa's house. Since it was a short trip, my mother let Sam sit on her lap for the ride. Unfortunately, on their way home a drunk driver hit their car. Sam died as a result of the crash, my dad was relatively uninjured, but my mother suffered several traumas, which resulted in a prolonged stay at the hospital.

“There's no tragedy in life like the death of a child. Things never get back to the way they were.”

-President Dwight Eisenhower

This accident left my mother a shattered person, both physically and mentally. The physical injuries included head trauma, half of her jaw was shattered and replaced with metal (making her practically unable to taste food), and a broken arm that never healed properly because she did not do the recommended exercises for physical therapy. However, the biggest difficulty to overcome was the head injury she sustained in the crash because it affected her memory. While in the hospital, my dad had to keep telling my mother that Sam was dead because she would forget and kept asking where he was. Yet to fully understand the significant effect of the harm, I must add that before the accident, it has been theorized that my mother probably had a learning disability; this is the reason that she dropped out of school at the age of

17. Officially when mother dropped out she was only in the seventh grade. The trauma from the car accident coalesced with her learning disability and magnified, for the worse, my mother's mentality. My mother never fully healed and to this day is still getting worse.

## PART I

"Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win."

-Stephen King

I was never directly told this story; in fact all the knowledge I gained about the accident was compiled together over the years from bits and pieces of information slipped out by various members of the family. The event was not kept as a secret; the family just did not talk about the issue. I grew up in a silent house. My family has developed their habit of not immediately addressing issues over the years. The habit continued to the point where we do not even tell each other that our problems even exist. As a child, I learned fast that it was better to keep quiet because when you talk it gets you into trouble. Silence seemed to be the easiest way to exist and when it came time to speak, only soft tones escaped. People would ask me to repeat myself so I would give up on speaking again.

Most of my memories stretching back to childhood involve no one but myself. My sister, Sarah, was six years older than me and never found the time to play with me. My father worked all day everyday and my mother preferred to watch soap operas. Having no friends, I often found myself in a universe of my own design and very much seeking a quiet hiding place to leave the actual world behind. If life didn't bother with me, why should I bother with it? As I grew, I began to feel my station in life was to observe. As Shakespeare said, "the world is a stage," and I'm the lone audience member locked inside the theater and chained to my seat. I'm only permitted to move and interact at the concession stand during intermissions. In figures 15 and 21, I photographed two young girls, both hiding and spying on some mysterious situation around them. These girls portray me as a child. I used to sit in the same places but they

provided more than a shelter to hide in. They were a place to live out of the way of people and family. As I grew up with silence these special hiding places provided me with the right conditions to learn about my family. No one talked to me about finances, death, fights, disabilities, or other family related issues, but from these perches I saw and felt them. The tension between my mother and my sister was the easiest to read, because of the violent outbursts that would occur between them in front of my eyes. The financial problems I would hear about made me anxious as a child and even today. The threat of losing our home looms heavily. I have never truly felt safe in life except when I could hide myself away in a confined place where no one could see me or hear me.



Figure 1: *Untitled Fifteen*



Figure 2: *Untitled Twenty-one*

Before I continue to discuss the observations I have made over the years about my family and the images they spawned, I will address the haunting boy (figures 6, 20, and 22). Since the death of Sam was a key point in my family's existence I determined that a young boy would be the best physical manifestation of the monsters and ghosts that follow my family and I. I photographed the boy as if he were a silent observe, veiled by his surroundings. In figure 6 I cut off his head and had him hug the window frames edge to become apart of the house. I obscured his eyes with the basements stairs in figure 20 to sever our ability to connect with him on a physical plain. Equally the damp, dark and dirty basement enhances the coldness of the child's expression. As a child I shared a common fear, I was afraid of the dark. I used the deep dark shadows in figure 22 that fall under the bed to encompass the boy's body. I wanted to make it appear as if the boy was what is contained within the dark.



Figure 3: *Untitled Six*



Figure 4: *Untitled Twenty*



Figure 5: *Untitled Twenty-two*

Our family's ghost has won. The grip he has around my family is the consequences from the car accident that have rippled through our lives. These consequences appear through out the series of photographs as they relate to my inner thought, fears, and anxieties.

## PART II

"When you look long into an abyss, the abyss looks into you."

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Above I spoke about the unseen ghost of the past. Now I will articulate on the demons of the present. I could say the demons I face are anxiety, fear, and depression. However they are feelings and feelings cannot create themselves. Since I believe an emotion such as anxiety cannot create itself, I consider that they are side effects generated by an outside source. Those outside sources are my true demons and they are my family. I love my family but whether they know it or not, they exert an unyielding pressure.

My mother the first and most dangerous demon is portrayed in figures 12 and 17. When I was about four years old, my mother put me in danger when she got caught switching prices at the local Ames. I actually repressed this incident for years until I witnessed my mother switch a price on a toy at the Salvation Army. Figure 12 depicts a disconnection and the longing I have for her to be my mother. The disconnection is portrayed in two ways: separations through physical walls and the gaze of my mother. The longing is shown in the reaching hand that connects with nothing but cold, hard glass. This portrayal of my mother comes from the experience of my sister and I. If my mother had any maternal instinct, she lost most of it after the accident. My mother would have flashes of rage on some occasions that would result in a violent confrontation with my sister Sarah so I learned to stay away from mother.



Figure 6: *Untitled Twelve*

As I aged, I eventually started to realize that my mother was different than others. I don't remember when I understood this, but one day she was my mom and the next she was someone else. The stress I felt was the need to compensate and watch out for her in public so she would not offend others or be misunderstood. Because she is my mother, I love her, but I do not like how childish she can get in public or even around family. In fact, our own aunts on my dad's side claimed not to know my mother in front of my sister and acted as if Sarah would understand.

In figure 17 I photographed my mother facing the corner of our basement, stuck in a rocking chair doing a repetitive task. This illustration is a physical manifestation of the kinds of thoughts I have about my mother. When I place her in this setting I have put her out of sight, where she cannot do any more damage. Every time these thoughts possess me I die a little

inside. After I made the image, I began to see it held a deeper connection to me. Without ever realizing it, I put my mother in the same place I inhabited as a child in school.



Figure 7: *Untitled Seventeen*

I was slower than my fellow classmates with reading and writing, so I was always allotted extra time when taking tests. But the extra time came with a price; the teachers would separate me from the rest of the class. I was placed in a room alone to finish my test while everybody else got to move on. I was put in an unused nurse's office. The room was cold, sterile, and brightly lit with fluorescent bulbs. Although visually different, the room I deposited my mother in was the same room in which I used to sit. I hated that room. It was and still is a constant reminder of how I always felt set aside and left behind.

The photograph (figure 3) of my nephew, Ruben, staring out the window brings up more indications about isolation. To augment his separation from the outside world I used a single box filled with his possessions inside a nearly empty room that is dimly lit by a single window. As he looks out the window the tilt of his head and his hand on the screen imply an observant child who is lost in a world of his own thoughts and suggests a mental and emotional separation in conjunction with a physical one as well. On several occasions, as a child, I would watch out the window and look upon people interacting and enjoying life. I chose Ruben for this image because he has fragile-x syndrome, a genetic disorder that can cause autism in children. When I watch Ruben, I often wonder if he feels as trapped as I felt as a child, being unable to truly communicate and interact with the whole of society.



Figure 8: *Untitled Three*

### PART III

"The strength of a family, like the strength of an army, is in its loyalty to each other."

-Mario Puzo

Although my sister and I grew up together, we have developed two different behaviors about existing in society. As long as I can remember, Sarah has always sought to be included in a group and have a good number of real friends. In my view, she looks for acceptance and life without confrontation. Like my sister, I also seek to avoid conflict, but I do so by avoiding society.

Nevertheless acceptance and confrontation is something that has eluded my sister for most of her life. My sister was badly bullied and teased for a good portion of her school career, so she never like the idea of a continued education. These unpleasant experiences led to lowered defenses that allowed my sister to form relationships with manipulative people.

Sarah's choices led to the expansion of our family. She had two sons, Ruben and Mikey. The family portrait of my sister with her sons (figure 4) depicts the chaos and the interrelationship in this family unit. Ruben is the eldest child and he clings to Sarah for stability, while calling all the attention toward himself. Mikey, the little brother, sits back and off to the side making no real contact with his family. His eyes drift in our direction and engage the viewer. His expression reveals an acknowledgment and a certain amount of acceptance with his brother's behavior. When I see Mikey's face I wonder if he knows what is expected of him in the future when it comes to the care of his brother. As it is Mikey has already begun to surpass Ruben on education as well as emotionally.



Figure 9: *Untitled 4*

The photographs of Sarah sitting on top of the washer (figure 9) and in the shower (figure 19) are brief moments in between the chaos. When her children are at school or asleep, sometimes she gets to breathe a sigh of relief. I have witnessed and experienced my sister's stress of her own family, so I know these are periods she needs to survive. Only in the last year, I have started to develop a connection with my sister Sarah, but the relationship seems to disconnect when we are apart because our lives are no longer entangled with one another (figure 16). When I framed the portrait of me with my sister cut my head off as a representation of how I disengage with my sister emotionally. While my hand is on Sarah's shoulder is a sign of our continued bond as siblings.



Figure 10: *Untitled Nine*



Figure 11: *Untitled Nineteen*



Figure 12: *Untitled Sixteen*

In the end, the desire to be accepted resulted in my sister becoming a demon of need. I love and accept my sister for who she is, but I have rarely seen a day pass by when Sarah did not request support. When she was younger, it was to fit in with society but now it is for survival. Once Sarah's survival blossomed to include her two sons, she put a constant financial strain upon our family.

The photographs of my father on his bed (figure 23), mowing the lawn (figure 1) and sitting at the dinning room table with bills and a calculator (figure 18) is how I remember observing him as child. In figure 23 I framed my dad by using the doorway into my parent's bedroom to create the effect of someone spying on him as he sat in silent meditation. The dramatic shadows I placed my father within in figures 1 as well as 18 help operate as barrier between him and us. His preoccupied state of being mimics his distant from the by being lost in the shadows thoughts. When I would see him in these circumstances I often found myself

wondering where he went within his thoughts. Where he would be is still a mystery to me. Was he thinking about money, Vietnam, or the family? My dad always seemed to be an inaccessible but at the same time completely reliable. He kept the roof over my head and food on the table, but he never seemed to want to be a part of my life.



Figure 13: *Untitled Twenty-three*



Figure 14: *Untitled One*



Figure 15: *Untitled Eighteen*

Now we are a family that does not confront issues on an emotional level, so when I told my dad that my school counselor thought I had depression and should get help, he looked at me, gave no response, and continued to read his periodical. After his reaction, I was embarrassed I had mentioned the matter and never mentioned it again. But a week later when I could not bring myself to get out of bed, I think he realized if something did not change I would be lost forever. He saved my life that day. He gave me back the feeling that I did exist with the simple act of buying paint primer and to cover up the walls of a room that still carried my sister's presence. As my sister never completely moved out of the room, I never got to completely move in myself. My dad brought me back from the edge and our relationship grew to a new stage. I became my dad's best friend, which is a heavy responsibility for a seventeen year old.

My father is a fragile demon, yet the most powerful. To portray my dad's authority over the family I placed him in the foreground of our family portrait (figure 14). By setting us apart from him I am also representing his emotional distance from the family. It is his lead we often follow. If he does not discuss an issue, we remain silent about ours as well. Yet as strong as my dad's will is, his physical health is bad. Due to years of nervous chain smoking he developed asthma, which was followed by emphysema. Although it has been years since he quit smoking, my father's body has grown tired and compounded by more than health issues but with the strain from years of manual labor and the exhaustion of keeping this family on its feet financially. I feel that my fate will be similar to his because my father instilled in me a sense of duty to ones family regardless of all their failings. When he is gone I will inherit his responsibilities and that scares me to no ends.



Figure 16: *Untitled Fourteen*

## CONCLUSION

"If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace."

-Thomas Paine

By photographing my family over the past year, I tell our story. I acknowledge all the unpleasant events and bad choices that have occurred since the accident that claimed my brother's life and my mother's sanity. But for all the information I have gained from the experience, we are still just a series of insoluble problems. I have to hope that when I piece together all of the good moments they out way the bad. But then again in my generation maybe all I can really hope for is to get through and try to make the next generations life just a little bit easier.

## Bibliography

Dunbar, Max. "Classic Books: The Shining." *WordPress*. 24 August 2008. Web.

<<http://maxdunbar.wordpress.com/2008/08/24/classic-books-the-shining/>>

Frank, Leonard Roy. "All About Children: More Selected Quotations." *Wildest Colts*

*Resources*. n.d. Web. <http://www.wildestcolts.com/parenting/morequotes.html>

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Regnery. Chicago, 1949.

Paine, Thomas. *The American Crisis*. No.1. London Print. Philadelphia, 1776.

Puzo, Mario. *The Family*. Regan Books. 2001.

**APPENDIX**  
**FIGURES**



Figure 17: *Untitled Two*



Figure 18: *Untitled Five*



Figure 19: *Untitled Seven*



Figure 20: *Untitled Eight*



Figure 21: *Untitled Ten*



Figure 22: *Untitled Eleven*



Figure 23: *Untitled Thirteen*



Figure 24: *Untitled Twenty-four*

## **Vita**

Jessica Alice Mowers was born in Brockport, New York, in March of 1982. She lived in the village Bergen, New York until she graduated from Notre Dame High School in 2000. She then went on to earn her Bachelor of Fine Arts at State University of New York Potsdam in 2005. After taking a year off she continued on to Graduate school at Louisiana State University.