In Pursuit of My Eye: A Book of Photographs

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In Pursuit of My Eye

Photographs by Amanda Brooks Piela
Dedicated to my beautiful mother Carolyn Brooks. She has supported me through all my endeavors with a smile on her face, and for that I will be forever grateful.
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Introduction/

Making this book was one of the most difficult projects I've ever encountered. Although I realize that every project I do is a reflection of myself, I never think of them as such in the moment. This book was a whole other feat. A whole book focused solely on me. Not my subjects. I am the subject. I am the photographer and the subject.

It felt a bit bizarre spending so much time on this and reflecting on events and turning points that seem important to me while in the big scheme of things are quite minute. There were times when I put this project away for weeks because it was too difficult to continue. Reflecting on events in my life and then applying them to my photography was a very interesting thing to do. An auto-ethnography through photos is what I like to call it.

Turning the lens on myself and searching for patterns. Looking at my work critically and finding those pivotal moments in my life that define who I am today and potentially who I will be in the future.
This book recounts my 21 years of existence and links my experiences to the universal everchanging yet everlasting human condition. My experiences are unique and not, happy and sad, although mostly happy.

I have led an extremely privileged and pleasantly uneventful life thus far and for that I am very grateful. That is surely something that I try my best everyday not to take for granted. I have chosen the photos shown because I decided that they were pivotal moments for my eyes and myself. This book is my personal photo essay, a self reflective piece, a visual journal, an auto-ethnography.

The works presented here are not necessarily my best pieces (although some certainly are), but a reflection of an important moment or turning point in my life and photographic career. Each one has shaped me and my vision into what it is today.
I knew I wanted to be a photographer ever since I was 3 years old and saw my mom videotaping my siblings and me during the summer. I was fascinated by the camera and how it worked and soon developed an unhealthy obsession with movies. I would watch at least one movie a day. When I got older I would sneak my mom’s video camera out of the house and record everything. I was obsessed with documenting daily life.

I would even use a jump rope to secure the camera to my bike handle bars and record as I biked. It wasn’t until high school that I switched my focus from film to photography. I decided to take a film photography class for fun and ended up falling in love with it. The camera was so much more accessible for me. From then on the rest is history. I started taking summer workshops and then decided to major in photojournalism at Syracuse University.

This book came about when I realized that there were so many countless photos (about one hundred thousand to be precise) that I had taken in my photographic lifetime that I had never gone through.
I took them, maybe edited some of them, and then put them in folders and onto hard drives, in a very unorganized fashion I might add. The hard drives just sat there getting dusty for years and years on my shelf at home.

This is where I decided to start. Even though I am now only 21, I felt as though there was so much of my life that seemed unsorted. I needed to go through all the photos I had ever taken, some good, some not so good, to give myself some peace of mind and find patterns in my work that would solidify my "style", my "eye".

I needed to sort through the old before I could start anything big and new. My "new" project is going through and sorting out the old, so that my next project can be fresh and focused.
The First Chapter/
Sally’s Pond/

When I was younger I spent a lot of time by myself exploring the woods around my house. I would go on long walks through the woods, or swing on our small swing set and just contemplate life. Sometimes I would take a disposable camera on these walks and photograph what I saw around me. I had no filter. Point and shoot, point and shoot. When I had my first disposable camera developed I was shocked.

Every photo was bad (and now I see that most of them were extremely strange) except for one. There were lens flares, black images, photos with no obvious subject, tons of woods or random things, such as dolls and hamsters (I was ((and still am)) a bizarre kid), scattered around my house. I should mention that I did not have hamsters scattered around my house. My family did, however, have a lot of hamsters at one point in time.
The one image that I paused on and ended up keeping for all these years I took on an afternoon stroll in the woods across the street from my house. I was in 4th or 5th grade. I know reflection photos are cliché and overdone, however, it was the first photo that I took that pleasantly surprised me, so I hung on to it. I chose this photo to start my book with in order to show my progression from exactly where I started. This is the first photo I ever remember taking and liking. It is not the most extraordinary image I have ever taken by any means, but it was a pivotal moment in a pivotal place, the place across the street from my home called Sally's Pond.
Sally’s Pond
The Landfill
In My Own Backyard
Into The Woods /

As a kid I was always drawn to the woods and the outdoors. I thought everything outside was so much more interesting than everything inside. Whenever I had free time from the stress of being in elementary school, I would wander through the trails around my house. Once I got into high school and took my first black and white photography class, the same thing happened.

I focused my attention toward the outdoors. Almost all of my photographs from that class were taken outside, or taken utilizing strictly window light. The outdoors always allowed me to feel a certain sense of freedom. Away from my home, my family, civilization. Everything. When I was outside I was free. I could think clearly and photograph mundane things that I thought turned out to look pretty cool.
Ten Feet Away
High School/

I didn't realize that I had a knack for seeking out light until I took a black and white photography class in high school. My teacher Ms. Lynn seemed to like what I was producing in the class, and it felt very gratifying. It was the first time that I felt like I had impressed someone with my "art". I could never draw or paint as well as my sisters but I could use my outgoing personality to meet new people and photograph them and on top of that take decent photographs of them.

I felt so happy knowing there was finally some form of art that I liked and pleased others on occasion as well. Ms. Lynn submitted the photo shown at right, *Dominick's Pie*, into an art competition for high schoolers where it received a "silver key". I was ecstatic. Not only did my teacher like my photograph but she submitted it into a competition where it won an *award*. My mind was blown and right then and there I decided to stick with photography.
Although I’m not one to enter competitions anymore (I know I should and I’m a bad person and Newhouse student for not doing so) the gratification I received from this one simple photo of my friend eating pizza and drinking a soda was enough to boost my confidence in a field that I had only just entered. Half of it was that I had finally made my way into the art world where my sisters had been since kindergarten.

They had always been incredible artists (and musicians I might add) and I was always eager to meet them there. I chose this photo as a pivotal moment in my photographic life because not only does it depict a very good friend of mine, it also planted the photographic seed that I needed to develop my true passion for photography.
Maine Media Workshops + College will always hold a special place in my heart. I took my first intensive digital photography workshop there which whet my appetite for digital work. Jan Rosenbaum was my instructor for a two-week intensive digital course. The workshops have courses that are built for "YOs" (young artists) as well as one-week workshops for adults. They are intensive and designed to get the student as much content in their portfolio in two weeks as possible.

My class consisted of about 15 other students and a TA Kelsey Floyd. (Kelsey is now a visiting professor at Maine Media). Everyday we were out and about Maine shooting shooting shooting. It taught me that you truly have to be OUT working to get any work done, imagine that. We had the weekend off but were still encouraged to keep shooting. I remember using the time to practice my blur and panning night shots with passing cars. The photo at left was taken at the Bangor State Fair.
Since the fair was over an hour away from the Workshops we made it into a whole day trip. There is nothing I enjoy less than fairs (except bowling) so I was less than excited, to say the absolute least. Fairs are overwhelming, dusty, hot, crowded, wasteful and just plain stinky. I was not excited for this fair but I tried to make some lemonade with the holiest of lemons I was being handed and sucked it up. The fair was just as I had expected and then some. Since it was a State Fair it was twice as enormous and twice as horrible.

After a full day of shooting with the light changing as the sun set I was exhausted. I was so ready to pack up and leave Bangor until I saw this trick bike competition. I took two frames on my way out of the fair, one of which was this one. It was one of my last frames of the day and it was successful. It taught me that patience and tolerance really does pay off in the end. I know it’s not the most awesome photo I’ve ever taken in my life but it was the coolest photo from that whole horribly hot, sweaty, stinky, dusty day.
Isabel
This photograph represents a whole new era in my life. It marks the beginning of the four years that I would spend in a relationship with somebody who challenged me artistically, mentally, and emotionally. Our relationship shaped me in unimaginable ways and I would most certainly be an extremely different person without having gone through the trials and tribulations that accompany a long-term relationship betwixt two young adults.

This photo represents the blooming of a new time in my life. I will forever look at this photo with wonder of what could have been and even what should have been. But a wise person once said to me that there are no right or wrong decisions, just consequences, and you have to decide which ones you’d rather deal with.
They have been the most helpful and understanding roommates any photographer could ask for. For three years now they have put up with my shit and modeled for me in every kind of photoshoot imaginable. They let me invade their lives and their privacy and didn’t even get mad when it took me two years to send them all their photos. I am so lucky to have friends like these who are willing to help me out just for the sake of helping me out and making sure I get my work done.

These fine women are ever-present in my life as they are in this book. Hence why I am introducing them here. They have modeled nude for me, in zero-degree weather, in creepy locations, at night and when they didn’t have the time. They made me realize that photographs done well take time and they gave me that time.

Madey and Peggy
A New Perspective/

During sophomore year all of the photo students enrolled in a new class called MPD 300 taught by Ross Taylor. It was a class where students were encouraged to work on whatever kind of work they wanted to be producing, while adhering to the guidelines of the weekly assignments, of course. We got weekly assignments that were very difficult but in general very fun and rewarding. This was the first class where I experimented with nude photography and truly fell in love with portraiture. Everyone in the class always had very constructive criticism to offer. It was the perfect place to test the turbulent waters of risk-taking.

My first nude project "The Party Room" was well-received most likely because the story behind the photoshoot was so bizarre (more information on that to come). Ross was very respectful and made sure that everyone in the class was okay with viewing my photos before I presented them to the class.
I think that presenting my work to others is almost as much fun as taking the photos. I love surprising people and making them think. Nudes definitely make people think. Especially nudes taken by a 19-year-old photojournalism student.

Back to Ross. I learned so many things in Ross's class that I will never forget, including to shoot for yourself. I will carry Ross's words and passion for photography with me for the rest of my photographic career. Shoot for yourself. Shoot for yourself. Shoot for yourself. If you’re not passionate about the subject, it will show in your photos.
Our first assignment was a portrait assignment. I had never focused in solely on portraits before so I used the opportunity to exploit my closest friends (just kidding). I had their full permission for every photo I took, I swear. Nude photography first peaked my interest during my time at Maine Media. There were adult workshops dedicated completely to nude portraits.

Bodies have always been of interest to me because I believe that everyone has a body that is unique and beautiful. Luckily, when I started to put my money where my mouth was and actually photograph nudes, I could ease into the matter by starting with my roommates as models. We are all a little bit too comfortable around each other. I got over the awkward phase a very long ago.
Beauty in the Party Room/

The story behind this photoshoot may be slightly illegal. Our assignment in class with Ross was "beauty". Nothing more, nothing less. We were only given the word beauty. I had been considering doing a full nude series for quite some time. I took "The First Nude" for Ross's class but it didn’t receive the feedback I was hoping for so I was anxious to try again.

I immediately started brainstorming about how to do a successful nude project. The most beautiful and precious thing in the world to me is the human body. I asked around my friend circles who would be willing to model nude for me. Finally my requests were met by numerous members of my ultimate frisbee team. I knew there was a team party happening during the upcoming weekend so I decided to set up a "studio" in one of the bedrooms there so that I could get everyone photographed in one night.

I knew nothing about artificial lights but had always wanted to try them out. Now that I think back to this, I can’t believe that I didn’t start using artificial light in my photos until sophomore year.
I photographed the people who originally agreed to model for me as well as interested passersby once word spread throughout the house that I was photographing naked people in one of the bedrooms at a party. Apparently that's not normal. I had a line of people waiting down the hallway outside the door of my "studio". Since many of these people were intoxicated I made sure not to include any faces in the photoshoot. Drunk consent is not consent. I should mention that many of the people who gave consent to this photoshoot before the party were sober. It was an eye-opening experience and made me realize that people are much more open than I originally thought.

People want to model for me because they've never done it before and they are open minded. It truly drove the point home that I cannot assume anything about anyone without asking them. People will always continue to surprise me, another reason I love photography. Even in the most controlled settings and photoshoots, there is room for a surprise. The only aspect you can never truly control is the model and that is something I have grown to appreciate so much more over the past few years.
After I took "The First Nude", I never looked back. I was hooked on nudes. They are always an awkward blast and I truly never know what I'm going to get depending on the model I am working with. Obviously everyone is more comfortable when we go into the photoshoot knowing each other, however, as time progressed I got over the initial awkwardness people might feel when they strip in front of me. At least I like to think that I make people feel comfortable. In fact, now I prefer photographing naked people I don't know because I like the challenge of making it not awkward. Naked bodies are such a taboo in our culture, and yet everyone's got one! My intention with my nude portraits is to break down some of these barriers and portray nude bodies in a beautiful, non-sexual, prideful way. We need to cherish and treasure and revel in our bodies, not be ashamed of having one.
My roommates were always interested in modeling for me because they, "wanted to remember what their bodies looked like in their twenties" when they got older. A very valid reason in my opinion. Nonetheless, I was always very happy to have my roommates and teammates willing to take their clothes off for me whenever I had a photo assignment to complete. My friends at Syracuse are 90% of the reason why I have been able to be a semi-successful photographer at all. My friends have been the most supportive and beautiful models I have ever had the pleasure to work with. They have led me to more friends who have led me to even more friends. I am always amazed and elated when people come to me and request their photograph. I never thought the day would come when the tables would turn and people would come to me for their photograph instead of me hunting them down.
Madelyn’s Light
South Africa/

During the summer after my sophomore year, I was granted the Mark and Pearle Clements Internship Award through Syracuse University. My dream of being able to travel and photograph was beginning to become true. I used the award to travel to South Africa and intern with Oceans Campus/Africa Media in Mosselbay. It was an incredible experience where I met people from all over the world and got a true taste of South African culture.

Although my mom was pissed off at me for half of the photos I took involving dangerous animals, it was an incredible journey that I will never forget. The program consisted of photo and film internships as well as Great White Shark research internships. Even though each student that showed up that summer was completely different, we were all there for the same reason, we were passionate about the environment and researching ways to preserve what was left of it.
Young Male Lion
During my time in South Africa we went to tons of wildlife preservations and animal sanctuaries. The animals we photographed were all protected and cared for by park officials. Although the experience was amazing and I took a ton of cool animal and wildlife photos while there, I am only including three of my favorites since I don't think the actual photos are definitive moments in my photographic life. However, they are worth mentioning and including because of all the wonderful people I met, places I saw, and experiences I had outside of photography.

If you ever have the opportunity to go to South Africa I highly recommend you jump on it. It is an absolutely beautiful country full of beautiful and friendly people. You will not regret the braai you eat or the sunrises and sunsets you experience.
Style and Technique/

Style and technique are words that frequently come up in my photo classes. At the beginning of my senior fall semester, professor Heisler asked us what we all wanted to get out of the class and told us to write it down on notecards and pass it in. He read each card out loud anonymously to the entire class. Every single card mentioned something about wanting to hone their style and technique. This prompted a class discussion about style and technique.

Style and technique have become an interesting phenomena in the photographic world because nothing and everything is original anymore. Every "style" has been done by someone at some time. However, techniques are always changing as technology develops. Although styles are replicated all the time, it is how people interpret their own style that makes it original. Everyone (thankfully) sees the world differently and photography is no different. It is a personal vision, interpreted by the eye on the other side of the lens. Before my photography classes at Syracuse University, sadly, I didn't know much photo history.
Of course, I had glanced at the iconic images of Ansel Adams, Margaret Bourke-White and Henri Cartier-Bresson, but I had never studied them. Thankfully, the MPD department at Syracuse University forced us to learn about our predecessors in depth. I had never considered the fact that what I thought was my "style" was actually very normal, basic, and unoriginal. This made me realize that I didn't even have a style to call my own yet.

I had this realization at the beginning of this year. My senior year, the fourth year out of four years, in a school that was supposed to be helping me find my way, my style and myself. This realization made me start pushing my limits. Professor Heisler, like Ross Taylor, kept reiterating how we must shoot for ourselves. Keep the assignment in mind and let the assignment guide you, but in the end, make the photos your own, and create them for yourself. "Every photo has the potential to be the photo of the year," he wrote at the bottom of each assignment.
At first his assignments intimidated the crap out of me, but then something changed. I matured an unbelievable amount over the course of my Fall 2015 semester and my photos immediately started changing with this newfound maturity. Maybe it was my breakup over the summer, senioritis, or possibly even my weakened immune system that made all my actions more intentional. Whatever it was, my work began to change.

I found a new love for the studio that I did not have in previous years. Although I am a photojournalism major, my mind has begun to see people in a different way, a controlled way. I want to control the light, not work with it. I began thinking of all my friends as "effortless models" because they truly were. I would set up the lights, maybe give a little direction depending on who I was photographing and then let the model give me whatever they had to give. Photographing my friends, aka effortless models, was so enlightening and helpful to my portfolio and my eye.
Maybe it was the anthropologist in me that lead me to feel such a strong connection with all my subjects, but being in the studio prompted a whole new vision of photography for me. I started seeing light in a different way and photographing in a different way. Since my mind changed, my eyes changed, and therefore my photographs as well. Although neither of these photographs were taken in the studio I began to gravitate toward a certain look of light. These were both lit with every desk lamp I could find in my apartment. Some were taped/strapped to the walls and door next to her. I included these images because they were some of the first in which my "style" or preferred way of seeing started coming through. Looking back at these photos and then ahead to where I am now, there is a similar style present but the technique has gotten massively more sophisticated.
This is one of the photos that I took for no reason during junior year other than pretty light. I magically stumbled upon this image in my surplus of unorganized hard drives.

It is not spectacular by any means, it may not even be interesting. I chose to put this photo in here because it is a strong precursor to how I began seeing light. Window light is one of my very best friends.

It may very well be every photographer’s best friend actually. I realized that some of my most intimate photos are not my highly controlled and well-thought-out nudes, but the relaxed and casual portraits of my roommates and friends.

Never Seen Before
A Closed Door
“Breaking the Cycle”
I worked on "Breaking the Cycle" for Newhouse’s 2014 Fall Workshop. Shannon and her family left an everlasting impression on me that she will never know. As a single mom living with her sister and three daughters, Shannon struggles to make ends meet for her children.

When I met Shannon she had three jobs in order to support her family. Her story was inspirational and she continues to love and cherish her children despite the abuse she faced as a child and the adversity that always seems to find her.

Spending the weekend with Shannon and her family showed me the importance of family and the importance of telling people’s stories. Everyone has a story to be told and I just hope that I did her justice in telling hers.
“They Saved Me”
Let the studio begin/
(with a break)
Eyes on You
Back to Maine/

I spent the summer of 2015 in Maine back at Maine Media Workshops + College working as their staff photographer intern. It was so cool to be back in Maine on the other side of things. Working and making the workshops happen for 11 weeks instead of taking a short two-week intensive workshop. It was an incredibly enriching photographic experience where I met influential and quirky photographers such as Michael Wilson and David Turner.

The job required me to have a camera in my hand 9am-5pm every single day of the work week. The Canon 5D MKiii and Zeiss lenses they let me borrow all summer spoiled me rotten and helped build my arm muscles up quite a bit. Although I was shooting for Maine Media, I had chances to shoot for myself. I met so many people whom I admire and have influenced my work and work ethic in innumerable positive ways.
Over the summer is when I ended my (10 days short of) four-year relationship with my boyfriend at the time. After spending much of the summer in a heavy slump, I now can see where the inspiration for many of my most recent photos has come from. Many of them are dark and mysterious and wary. Throughout the whole summer and for months after I was unsure of my decision to end a huge chapter of my life and potentially lose my best friend forever. However, my coping process began once I started taking Ross’s and Professor Heisler’s words to heart and shoot for myself. Photography helped me cope, grow and move forward from a chapter that was extremely difficult for me to let go of initially.
Peter
My Last Year/
Karina’s Eyes
“Flawless”/
"Flawless"

One of the most defining projects of my semester and most likely future photographic life was the project "Flawless". I completed this project during the weekend of Newhouse’s 2015 Fall Workshop. I started the project on the Thursday morning before the workshop by photographing three subjects in the studio. My lighting setup was completely random when I first started because I truly had no clue what the heck I was doing. I had been in the studio before, but never with a full portrait series in mind, just single portraits.

My first few photoshoots took a little longer than the latter because I was simply playing with the lights. I had no intentions yet, just the thought of doing a nude portrait series with the word "pride" in mind. I started off slow with three subjects and then hit the ground running once the workshop started. At first my coaches McKenna Ewen and Dayna Smith seemed nervous about the content of my project, but I reassured them as the weekend progressed and they began to see my vision with me.
My images were not pornographic at all. In fact, my biggest fear was that people would misinterpret my photos as being pornographic. Once I had more models lined up, most of them friends and teammates, my vision for the project started solidifying. I photographed three more people that evening, and then six the next day, and finally three on Saturday.

It was the most time I had ever spent in the studio in one weekend. I learned more about photography in that one weekend of countless laborious studio hours than I did in my first three years at Syracuse. I met so many beautiful people, and gained so many insights on how I work best and where I want my photography to go in the future.

Halfway through the weekend, I had people contacting me because they heard about what I was doing and were interested in modeling nude. After "Flawless" launched on my website and got rave reviews from the general public, I was psyched. I knew what I liked and I knew what the people wanted.
Leg’s tattooed.
“Let’s model together!”
“It’s all about the booty.”
“Strong.”
The Next Chapter/
Surprised by Emily
Into the Woods

Self Portrait Assisted by Drew Osumi
Conclusion/

After having made this book and gone through and edited so many parts of my life it seems, I feel more balanced. I have an idea of the direction I want to grow toward now. When I think about my future, I don’t feel anxiety or fear of the unknown. I feel strength and a yearning to grow and learn and experience all that I can with the gift I was given. I want to continue photography for the rest of my life. I realized that working one-on-one with people and learning their stories and quirks truly makes me happy. Listening is key.

I learned that you can learn so much by listening. I listen to my friends, I listen to my professors, I listen to my mother, and I listen to my models. Listening does not always mean complying, it just means listen and interpret and then act how you see fit. No matter what decision you make, there will always be a million different ones you could have made. The possibilities of outcomes for any one decision are endless. This is why you need to stop, listen, think, and then act. "Don’t react. Just act." (Stole that quote from one of the paper tabs on the end of my honey lavendar Yogi tea bag.)
There are so many projects I could have worked on as a senior MPD Newhouse student and yet I selfishly decided to focus on myself. I don't consider myself a selfish person at all, well that's not true, everyone can be selfish at times, but I felt as if this was very necessary in order to beat down the path I want to take. I have grown so much since my time at SU, it is unbelievable. To my professor's surprise, I have always been very outgoing but my confidence as a photographer and active community member has grown exponentially in the past few months of my senior year alone.

I feel as though I didn't truly understand why I felt the need to be a photographer until recently. Falling in love with photography again has truly helped me realize that I have the true and absolute privilege of doing anything I set my mind to. I am driven and passionate and looking at my own work over the years has helped me realize that. I am touched when people say they like my work because I only stopped doing it for other people last semester. It became "good" when I started producing work from my heart, for myself, and not for others.
My images became strong and independent when I went through with my own ideas instead of following the lead of others. That was when I became strong and independent. I realize now that even though I am unsure of what my next steps will be, Syracuse has opened up infinite paths for me. I feel so incredibly privileged that Syracuse University and Newhouse have allowed me to be confused about exactly what I want to do when I graduate because I have gained so much knowledge, dabbled in so many juicy courses, and met so many remarkable and riveting people.

Instead of pigeonholing myself to one paved path after I graduate, the university has cleared the way to an infinite number of exhilarating paths for me to choose from. The ability to pursue so many interests has broken me down and scattered my thoughts, and in the process, built me back up in ways that have left me more resilient and excited for future challenges. No longer am I tunnel-visioned into choosing the clear-cut path, or what seems like the safest option.
Thanks to Syracuse, my future is delightfully unclear. My classes and peers have pushed me to realize my extreme privilege as it relates to connections and opportunities, rather than feeling overwhelmed by the possibilities.

I am determined and have built up tremendous strength to gladly adapt to and take advantage of any bump my future throws me, knowing that the challenges will open up doors for a stimulating and fulfilling journey.

-Amanda Brooks Piela, 2016