

Home and Other Realms - Michael Kolster

UNE Art Gallery

October 21, 2022 - January 22, 2023

This exhibition contains three groups of photographs: moments at home with my son, Calvin, and wife, Christy, and the “other realms” of self-portraits in my studio and encounters on the streets of Lewiston. They were made concurrently over the past two to three years and, I suspect, stem from a similar set of concerns. The decision to display these different series together comes from my need to plumb whatever common ground they might share.

I have been photographing Calvin since his birth in 2004 and making pictures in various cities for over three decades. Most recently I turned to Maine’s second largest city, Lewiston, visiting frequently and typically circling a ten block stretch along Lisbon Street near Main Street. During my walks I marveled at how much seemed to have changed since my last visit. Or maybe I was just noticing things I had previously overlooked? Which is it? I still wonder, although I suspect the answer is both. As they say, you can never step into the same river twice—because, like water flowing down a river to the sea, we, too, are in constant motion, changing and being changed by the rush of daily life.

The self-portraits are a new development, made this past spring initially as a kind of *quid pro quo* for displaying in public photographs of others, especially my family. It seemed that subjecting others’ likenesses to such scrutiny required me to offer up mine to the same. Another factor is that as I age my body has become less recognizable to me, to which I can only respond by making photographs of it. This is true with Calvin, too, as he hits adulthood. For the past two years now, his nascent whiskers rub against my face in mid-hug to surprise me, this as we change his diapers and put him to sleep in his crib, our nightly ritual over the past eighteen and a half years and counting.

Sitting at the top of the long list of Calvin’s troubling conditions, ailments, and impairments are his intractable epilepsy and inability to speak. He requires constant care and oversight. Christy and I struggle to understand what his behavior might tell us about what he is thinking, feeling, or needing moment to moment. Needless to say, taking care of Calvin means watching him from the periphery of whatever world he inhabits. He does not seem to be aware of being seen and as a result does not hold still for my camera (or anything else, for that matter). This makes photographing (and parenting) Calvin vexing, if not utterly exhausting. In these moments I am struck by how hard it is to forge a bond with him, either spiritually or emotionally. Camera in hand, I feel apart.

I realize, too, that this feeling of separation, while put into high relief in this case, can be common to photographers and I suspect often visits all of us from time to time. To be sure, it underscores how limited our knowledge of another person or place, or even ourselves, can be, regardless of our age or state of mind or body and despite any profound desire to close the gap. Just as the moment described in the still photograph stands in direct opposition to, and thereby underscores, the constant flow of time defining our days, the photograph’s description, restricted to the world’s surfaces, reminds us that much of our experience is felt under the skin, occupying other realms.