Interview with Peggy Nolan

Peggy Levison Nolan, *Untitled*, Gelatin Silver Print, c. 1996

Can you talk about your family life when you were making these pictures? Where were you living? What were the challenges?

When I first began photographing seriously, we were living in HUD housing in Naranja, just north of Homestead. The housing complex was a social experiment between an advocacy group for farm workers and HUD. Six single-family houses were built in three circles, connected by grassy play areas. To be eligible for the subsidized inexpensive rental, one had to be a farmworker

with at least 4 children and an income just above the poverty level. We applied and were accepted with 5 children. Two more were born in that project.

I come from a comfortable middle-class family, but I have always been able to survive without a lot of creature comforts. When my husband and I and my first two children moved back to Florida in the 70's, we lived in an un-air-conditioned trailer for several years along with the sand fleas and mosquitos and we all toughened up.

My neighbors in the HUD project (it was called Rainbow Village) were primarily African American and Mexican. We were one of the only two white families out of the 18 residing there. My kids glided seamlessly into this life and made friends easily. I apologized for my whiteness for a while and then calmed down. During our years there I pushed out two babies at home with midwives. I earned cred. The neighborhood folks were tight and extremely generous. Food was always being passed from house to house along with gossip and childcare. My family was very fortunate to live in this rich environment and the experiences molded the rest of our lives. There was crime, mostly from outside, and there was some domestic violence and death. My house was on the banks of a canal and one child drowned while I was living there. This is real life anywhere. In more upscale neighborhoods, these events more often happen behind closed doors and are hushed up. In Rainbow Village, we needed each other for support and there were few secrets.

While there, I set up a darkroom in a shed containing my washer and dryer. I draped heavy blankets over the metal doors and put an enlarger on top of the dryer. I would print at night after the kids were in bed and wash the prints in a large plastic garbage bin. Everyone in the neighborhood had my black and white 8x10s. When I finally saw the darkroom at FIU, I felt like I had arrived in Nirvana

When you look back on your children's childhood what are some of the most significant memories that come into focus?

I don't think of my life like that…I like the ordinary connective tissue that makes up the majority of the story.

You mentioned to me once that over time your children forgot about the camera. Can you share more about this?

I always brought home all my work from the darkroom the day I printed, laying partially dried prints all over the house. Everyone in the family could see what I was up to and mostly shrugged and moved on. It was evident from early on that I was spying and not cooperating in order to deliver "prom pictures". They all eventually acquiesced. Occasionally someone got very mad. I have a few pictures of that.

When your children look at images now of *Blueprint for a Good Life*, what are their responses?

They are very happy. We are a close family, who lived together like sardines for many years and in some unusual spaces. The acknowledgement visually makes for an entertaining ride.

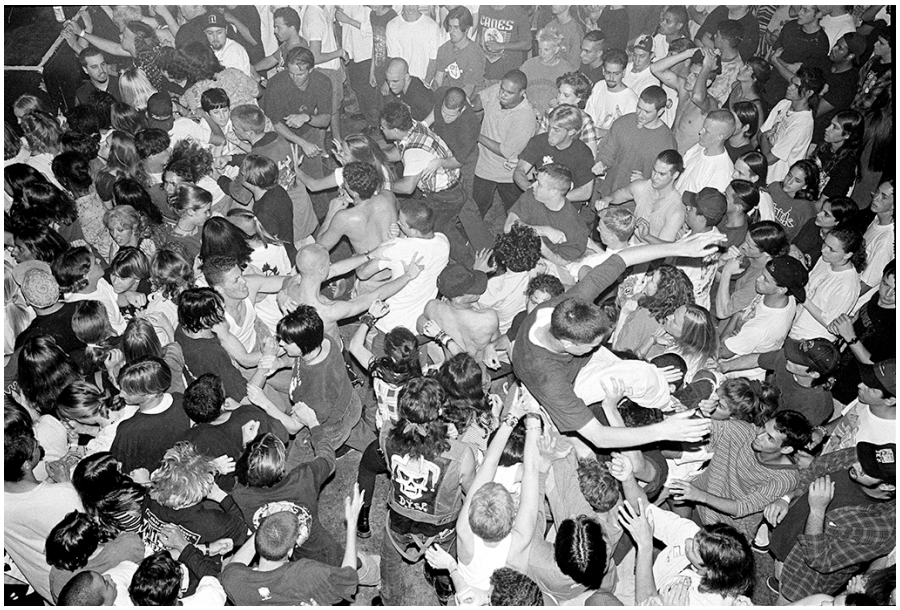
Peggy Levison Nolan, *Untitled (Feminist Art Project-Florida)*, Chromogenic print, 2014, 16 x 12 x 0.25 inches, Gift of Dr. Carol Damian, FIU 2014.30.6

Can you explain your shift from black and white film to color?

I was in the first MFA class in my department. I studied with the same faculty and mostly the same students who were in my undergraduate program. I needed to give myself a challenge that would transform my learning curve. I had recently contemplated an image from Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency,* in which a couple had been crying. The woman's eyes were red and watery. I know that a black and white version of such a thing would not have the immediacy of a color image. Black and white abstracts whatever it describes so that the viewer must step back. Color puts one closer to the experience.

That said, I saw the world in black and white for many years and I was used to the formal strength of the grey scale. Meanings seemed more obvious without all the color distractions. Also, I was far too poor in the early days to afford color film and processing, whereas I could develop and print black and white pictures in my laundry room.

Peggy, you seem so rock n' roll. What music do you like to listen to? Do you listen to music in the dark room?



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Stack Bach's Musical Offering or Beethovan's 7th symphony's second movement on top of Girl Talk's *Feed the Animals*, some Radio Head or Thom York, throw in some Brubeck….*Time Out* or *Time Further Out*, add The Walkman and Belle and Sebastian (*I love my car* is a good one), add some Regina Spektor, The Staves, The YeahYeahYeahs, Nina, Aretha, Lizzo, Lauryn Hill, Nikki Nack…..I'm an open-minded music junky, but….not in in the darkroom. I am focused on the work and it takes all the senses.

How has being at FIU impacted your work? From professors to student interactions?

The first time I sat in on a class with Prof William Maguire, I know I had landed in photo heaven. Anyone lucky enough to be enrolled in The History of Photography classes has been touched. He created a real community in his studio classes….much competition for sure, but also a sense of sharing, as if we were all stumbling around together trying to make sense of the world through our cameras. The amount of failure compared to the few amazing images was fairly evenly distributed and the most successful students and artists were the ones who persisted, no matter what. At the onset of graduate school, Bill managed to bring John Szarkowski to FIU on a visiting lecture line and all of us would be forever changed by the experience of being taught by the long-time curator of photography for the Museum of Modern Art. I wrote a poem about him that was published in *The Photographer's Play Book* in homage to the amazing adventure of that semester.

As for student relationships, most of my close friends are photographers and many came out of the program, either as students with me or students taught by me. Photography is changing rapidly in this digital app frenzied world of ease over mindfulness and I am fortunate to have learned the craft years ago from serious practitioners of ideas. Those of us like-minded [practitioners] stick together.

Can you share a little but about the project that you have been working on with FIU students in Little Haiti?

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The project is a collaborative research grant funded in part by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The grant application was open to collaboration between scholars in all humanities disciplines from FIU and Miami Dade College. Professor Richard Tardinico from the School of International and Public Affairs reached out to myself and Professor Joseph Tamargo, head of photography at MDC Wolfson Campus in order to recruit 10 photo students, 5 from each campus, to witness families confronting gentrification, dislocation and eviction in the vast neighborhoods of Little Haiti. Our students have been working in these neighborhoods since last summer and in the beginning of March, we mounted a large photo show of their work at The Art Gallery of the Wolfson campus. The experiences of those involved have been profound and life changing and have increased awareness of lives far from comfortable and families powerless in the face of corporate greed and corruption. The project is ongoing; during this lock down, all are encouraged to write about their impressions so that we can eventually produce a book with words and pictures which we hope will have a lasting effect on this crisis.

Can you share with us your thoughts on resiliency? What does it mean to you? How have you practiced it in your life?

According to the Oxford dictionary, one is strong, hardy, quick to recover and irrepressible. I would like to be described as such but with many slow days, I try to think about the present mostly and living in the moment helps boost my optimism and strength…….even in the lock down experience we are having at present.