

FAMILY ALBUM



By Pedro Meyer



It was in 1940 that my mother took this picture of me standing there in front of my father, Ernesto, both with our hands in our pockets; the photograph had been in the family album for a long time when I recently rediscovered it. Today, in addition to my first son Pablo, who is now inching towards 40, I have a second son, Julio, who is 5 years old. After seeing the picture in the album, I asked my wife Trisha to take a picture of Julio and me in the same identical pose as that of my father and me in that earlier image, standing in the park in Mexico City.



Too many people associate computers and photography with the application of filters to an image, which in essence almost never adds anything but confusion to what more often than not, ends up being a poor picture. Filters can be great tools, except when they are thrown at you with an “in your face” attitude, leaving nothing to imagination or creativity. In an era of instant food, instant almost anything, there is this fantasy that one can also generate instant art. Simply by clicking on the filter tool of choice which alters the image into an incoherent slap dash mess of displaced pixels. The clicking on an endless array of available filters in the absence of any critical thinking explains in part why nothing more interesting is likely to emerge from such a process.

In opposition to such mindless games, the computer allows us to explore countless new possibilities in the realm of the imagination, and in the exploration of time and place. Take for instance the seamless blending of past and present into new images, which deliver yet new meanings to those held individually by each portion of the whole.

The exercise of going through a family album and looking at the past, is for many of us not an easy experience. In part it has to do with revisiting the image of loved ones that have passed away. In part it has to do with the memory of moments we sometimes would like to forget. Or actually wonderful moments that have long been gone and therefore miss them. For one reason or the other, looking at old family pictures is usually an emotional experience. For this very same reason, there is the potential of coming up with some very powerful new work derived from recycling past moments into new meanings.

Take for instance the image of “fathers and sons” that I have posted here. In this picture, I could very well be the father of my own father, as the age difference between us would allow for such a consideration. In that case, I would end up being my own grandfather, or for that matter, my little Julio’s great grandfather. But then there is also another possible configuration: that of Julio and I being brothers. Julio, upon looking at the picture, came up with yet another iteration, namely that the image had been taken by both his mother and by his father’s mother. What we are contemplating in essence is the continuity of life between generations, only that in this image the time line is not of the usual linear kind due to my having had a child late in life. Such “cosmic confusion,” as my friend E Beardsley would call it, draws poignant attention to what our usual expectations are. Never before have we been able to make visual representations of such matters with greater ease as today. Herein lies one of the more interesting fields of photographic exploration that I can think of.

In terms of psychology, I imagine that therapists could use this potent new combination: photography and computers. The act of changing and altering one’s history through images, moving around and playing with the positioning of partners, parents, children, siblings, and so on, no doubt can offer new insights into our personal histories. From social sciences to the political landscape, such alterations can also allow us to revisit the past with new ideas and directions in light of the present. Blending the past and the present is



more than the idle notion of cut and paste associated with the more linear time frames found in previous artistic expressions. It is rather a more subtle and nuanced delivery of a layered consciousness; a new awareness of how we perceive facts and timelines and of how we deal with our present in relation to past and future events.

A few days ago I was working on a video interview with two ex-Jesuits that I met some thirty years ago while photographing in a slum area in Mexico City. I noticed how time had been compressed; their history of three decades came down to a scant few hours of taping. Particularly poignant was the revelation of one of them that at the time they all thought their efforts to help people out in those slums was a failure. So much so that he, upon leaving the Jesuit order out of frustration, joined the Guerrilla movement in Central America. That did nothing either, as he saw it then, in so far as improving the quality of life of those for whom he was fighting. We sat talking in the very same area that in the past did not have a single paved road, no electricity, water, or sewage, no houses other than cardboard shacks. The interview was being held in an apartment on the third floor of a very good building, however modest, where before there had been nothing but the most abject poverty. And we were arriving at a new perspective: that indeed a lot had been changing all along, and for the better, only that no one had had the patience to consider the long run (thirty years) to be an acceptable time frame for social change, and therefore it had progressed for the most part unnoticed. In the same way we are often unaware of day to day changes in our next of kin. All of that is now open to new insights by looking at past and present within the same frame.

I strongly believe that if we continue to explore issues related to "time," and use photography and computers towards such a goal, we will discover an unending array of new threads to our present lives, and in the process create some exciting new images.

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INTERESTING SITES TO VISIT IN RELATION TO THIS TOPIC OF THE FAMILY ALBUM:

Dana Atchley's Digital Stories: <http://www.nextexit.com/drivein/driveinframeset.html>

Click on NextExit Stories and then "Home Movies"

Claudia Probst and Michael Shpaizman project at: http://www.digitalmutations.de/concept_en.html

