Listen Up:
Women’s Stories Through a Surreal Lens

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Abstract

As an artist, I’m interested in telling stories that may not otherwise have a way to be told by shining a new light on them. This collection of photographs is rooted in a content analysis of *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, edited by Barbara Findlen. The text includes biographical short stories written by women about significant events in their lifetimes: some traumatic and unfortunate, some pleasant and uplifting, and some which fall somewhere in between. Telling these true stories through surreal imagery allows an audience to experience them from a perspective that they may not have considered otherwise.

Researching the way that other artists have paved the way for surrealism and also documentary-style photography guided this process of taking carefully constructed stories that are art in and of themselves and turning them into art of a different form. Phillippe Halsman took traditional portrait photography to a new place in the mid-20th century by asking his celebrity subjects to jump for the photo, rather than simply asking them to smile. Donna Ferrato exposed a very serious reality for women in the 1980s and 90s when she began documenting domestic violence in real time. Lissy Larrichia is constantly breaking boundaries with her whimsical photos which make it appear that the impossible has been documented. The work that these three artists have created inspired the direction that I took in the re-telling of real stories from real women.

The stories that this project is rooted in are personal and sensitive, and I focused heavily on the human body in my pieces to represent that. Surrealism has been my favorite approach as an artist since I first picked up a camera. Using this lens to tell these women’s stories allowed me to take an art form that I love and use it for a project that is based in intentional research surrounding stories that are important to me as an artist and as a woman.
Introduction

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” But what about when the words come first? I’m interested in the picture that comes after reading the words of strong women who have stories that deserve to be heard. As a young woman, I always have this lingering sense of despair that women aren’t ever going to have their stories told often enough or loud enough. During my second year of college, I took a Gender Women’s Studies course during which we read short biographical stories from a text titled *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* edited by Barbara Findlen. These stories were told by women about things that had happened in their lives that changed them in some way, and the topics were of a wide range: abortion, child bearing, sexual & domestic assault, sexual freedom, cultural struggles and stereotypes, familial conflict, etc. It covers so many issues that women everywhere deal with. Every woman who reads the book in its entirety will find at least one story to strongly relate to. As a woman, reading these stories empowered me. As an artist, they made me consider how they could be told in a new context, through a different lens.

Background and Method

Surreal imagery has always interested me, particularly manipulated and conceptual photography. Mid-20th century photographer Philippe Halsman took photos of celebrities and high-profile individuals. Instead of taking simple headshot-style portraits of his subjects, he captured them jumping in the air, rather than just sitting and smiling as expected. Additionally, Halsman was also one of the first artist to experiment with surreal photographic manipulation. When faced with the project of taking portraits of surrealist Salvador Dali, Halsman took this opportunity to go deeper than just capturing the image of a person’s face; he took the images and
made them into something that represented his subject on another level. This idea is something I wanted to use to string my project together. Halsman’s working logic that people and stories are more than what they appear at face value is something that I applied to a selection of women’s stories from *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*. I feel that we see an abundance of two things in the world of photography: documentary-style photographs that are representations of things that really happened or could happen, and surreal images that are based on imagination rather than being rooted in reality. It’s important to look at stories that are true through different lenses in order for different people to be able to interpret in their own way. To me, taking an image to a place that doesn’t exist using surrealism feels like a way to bring people a tiny bit closer to being able to interpret the art on the same plane.

I began by re-reading all of the stories included in *Listen Up* to find out which ones resonated with me as an artist, but also as a woman. I picked out a handful that I felt strongly about and took note of them. I think that I was drawn to the topics I chose (sexual violence, sexual freedom, abortion, body image, eating disorders) because it seems that women are so often told to keep quiet about those things. I find it so powerful to be confronted with a story so artfully told about the struggles that women face every day. These women and their stories are so painfully real that I couldn’t ignore them. If I could, I’d make sure every single story included in *Listen Up* was told freely and loudly. As I was reading through them for the second time, I noticed what was mentioned in the stories about the author’s emotional state, attitude toward the experience, and personal change. Every story that I selected for this project mentioned all of these things, and I thought these aspects would be important to focus on when I was re-telling the

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story through my art. I then broke this handful of components down into more specific details that I was looking for in each story such as:

- What type of experience is being described in this story?
- What age was the woman at the time of the story taking place?
- What was her attitude at the time of the experience?
- What is her current attitude about the experience?
- Does she feel like she went through a personal change? What was the change?
- What was her emotional state at the time of the experience?
- What are her current emotions when she thinks about the experience?
- What kind of lasting effects, if any, does she feel the event has had on her?

As I once again re-read the stories that I had selected, I searched for the answers to these questions and took note of them on a table format, so I could compare the details of each story. This allowed me to picture relatively how I’d like my suites of photos to look next to one another. I took note of details that were explicitly stated by the author of the story, but also details that may have been interpreted by a reader (in this case, myself).

Before I began taking images, the majority of my preparation came from studying other artists and different kinds of surreal imagery. Lissy Laricchia is a surrealist photographer who specializes in fantasy-style imagery and has been a large source of inspiration for me as an artist since I first picked up a camera. A majority of her surreal images contain animals, insects, whimsical lighting, unique shadows, and many more aspects that take the viewer to another world when viewing them. Lissy’s pieces are complex and detail-oriented, and they very often

take me, as a viewer, quite a while to absorb and fully appreciate every detail. As an artist, they make me want to create images that have a similar effect on others.

From all of my reading, it appears that none of Lissy’s surreal photographs have a single and specific true story behind their creation. I acknowledge that, as is the case with all art, it’s possible that the artist had a specific inspiration that just wasn’t mentioned anywhere; however, Lissy includes a description of all of her pieces that explain her inspiration and none of them have a biographical basis. All of her imagery really inspires me, but I knew my photos might exist in a different space because of the documented stories behind them.

I also looked at artists who take photos for documentation of real things that do not have any manipulated aspect to them. A photographer I admire and referenced a lot while developing this project is Donna Ferrato. In the 1980’s and 90’s, Ferrato developed a series of photos titled *Living with the Enemy*\(^3\) which sheds light on domestic violence happening right in front of her camera lens. This series really speaks to me in the context of my work because it focuses entirely on women’s experiences as I intended to do. While Ferrato’s photos are entirely realistic, they show such a raw side of humanity that feels surreal to look at. Her images are absolutely shocking because the viewer knows how real they are, but looking at them feels like watching a dramatization of domestic violence rather than a documentation. I wanted to create the same type of awe that Ferrato did with her images; additionally, I wanted my art to reach its audience with a surrealism that is tied to a truth as shocking as the stories in Ferrato’s photos.

Susan Sontag said, “…despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tactic imperatives of taste and conscience.” 4 This brings up such an interesting idea about what we consider to be ‘documentation’ when it comes to photography. There is undeniably a huge range of what is ‘real’, from raw camera footage or film to a piece of art that has been manipulated over seven hours using three separate types of editing software; however, Sontag is pointing out that even photos such as Donna Ferrato’s have specific motives and tastes behind them. With that being said, I think it’s interesting to note that photos such as the ones I’ve created and those taken by Ferrato may not be as different as they seem.

**Content Analysis into Art**

“Abortion, Vacuum Cleaners and the Power Within”

When it came time to shoot for the images I had planned, I started with the story “Abortion, Vacuum Cleaners and the Power Within” written by Inga Muscio. This is a story about a woman who chose to have three separate abortions, and her different experiences with each one. Inga had her first abortion in a medical facility, and she described it as very cold and impersonal. It was also a very short-lived but painful physical sensation, and she was shortly sent home after the conclusion of the procedure. As I read and re-read this story, I felt very strongly about including butterflies in this suite of images as they can be beautiful and symbolize transformation, but also frantic and illusive. I created three separate photographs to represent each abortion individually, and I wanted the first to depict vulnerability and the feeling of fear

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that Inga describes. For me as the artist, the butterflies represent the idea of the fetus and the author’s relationship with this idea as she goes through each abortion.

The second abortion was also done in a medical facility, and the physical experience was similar to her first. Mentally, however, she was more confused than ever. Inga knew that this couldn’t be the only way for hundreds of thousands of women to abort their pregnancies and became determined to figure out how to change the fact that this painful procedure was the norm for women. For the second photo in this set, it was important to me to include a woman’s face in order to give the feeling of confusion. It’s easy for humans to relate to other humans, so I wanted the audience to be able to register the confusion shown on the model’s face. This also helped me establish a difference between the first and second concepts, as they are aiming to depict relatively similar emotions.

When the Inga became pregnant for a third time, she talked with friends and learned about the concept of herbal abortion. This consists of eating and drinking certain things in addition to having frequent lower-abdomen massages. During her third abortion, she was able to go through this experience with her closest friends supporting her rather than in a cold and unkind medical facility. This form of abortion was comfortable and intimate; she described it as “a very peculiar mmmmbloommmp-like feeling”5. Inga said the fetus ended up between her feet while she was brushing her teeth. My goal for the final image in this set was to express a sense of calm and peacefulness between the woman and the butterfly. The single still butterfly amongst the moving butterflies in this image, and also in the other photos in the suite, represents a small bit of peace in the author’s long journey of pain and confusion.

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“Lusting for Freedom”

The second story I shot for is titled “Lusting for Freedom” written by Rebecca Walker. The author of this story began having sex at a very young age. In society, this would very commonly be looked at as a bad thing and talked about as taboo. Rebecca, however, grew up in a space where she was free to explore her sexuality and experiment with different partners. She elaborates on the fact that this is an extremely rare situation for young women and believes that everyone would benefit from being able to have sex freely and without fear of social consequences. I wanted these photos to feel celebratory with brighter colors, but I also included a bit of hidden messaging. The flowers used in this suite have meanings that aren’t quite as lovely as their appearance. The orange lily used as the main flower in every piece has a meaning of hatred and dislike. This represents the reaction that many young women face when they make the choice to have sex at a young age or be openly sexual. The smaller flower petals from yellow carnations mean disdain and rejection. This represents the way that some people feel when they learn that a potential partner has had many other partners. Specifically, it represents fact that many women are rejected or seen as unworthy if they’ve had multiple sexual partners. These pieces are about resilience and being proud of your sexuality in a society that tells you you’re wrong for wanting to explore your own body.

“It’s a Big Fat Revolution”

“It’s a Big Fat Revolution” written by Nomy Lamm is a story told by an overweight woman who is entirely happy being overweight. She doesn’t want to not be overweight because

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she knows she’s beautiful. She does go through a phase of feeling that life would just be easier if she could ‘fix’ her body, as many women do. In addition to being overweight, Nomy is bisexual and also receives societal scrutiny for this. Though she comes to a point of being content with herself and her body, she writes about how she’s frustrated that she has to try so much harder than everyone else to be happy with how she looks. Nomy speaks quite a bit on the fact that people try to separate appearance from the person when they think it will benefit them. “Fat does not equal ugly, don’t give me that. My body is me. I want you to see my body, acknowledge my body”\(^7\). She ends the story explaining that she’s motivated to make others see fat the way that she does.

For these images, I felt strongly about representing how complicated self-image is. We have to look through so many different lenses and jump through so many hoops to truly see ourselves, let alone be happy with how we look and who we are. Especially in the age of social media, we are constantly receiving messages about how we’re supposed to look and dress and methods to fit ourselves into these molds so we can be ‘happy’. I played with mirrors in these images because for a lot of women, the idea of looking at your own reflection is met with hesitation because of fearing what they’ll see isn’t good enough. It’s a constant back and forth between what we think we see, what we’re told we should see, and what’s actually there. I also wanted to bring in the idea of forced happiness mentioned in the story, and how sometimes this can lead to genuine happiness if it’s nurtured in the right way, sort of in the same way that faking a smile can actually make a person feel genuinely happier.

“Don’t Call Me a Survivor”

The next set of photos is rooted in a story that was very hard for me to read. It’s titled, “Don’t Call Me a Survivor” written by Emilie Morgan. This is a story about a woman who is sexually assaulted on more than one occasion. The first instance was when she was a young girl, too young to understand the social implications that are commonly imposed on women who experience sexual assault. When she was a teenager, though, she was sexually assaulted at a party by more than one man. As one might imagine, this was an incredibly traumatizing experience for the Emilie. She went through a phase of passiveness regarding what happened to her, resigned to it as a “part of life” for women and eventually internalized the blame. In college, she connected with a group of women who had stories to tell similar to hers, and she finally began to recover. She explains that what happened to her will always be with her, and she relives the experience for a split moment every single night. As many women who have experienced assault, she writes about how she is still very broken but finally found a way to be hopeful in her group of peers.

While I read this story, the overwhelming imagery that came into my head was dark. I wanted to depict her creation of the memory and also how she carries the memory with her. I did some research into different fabrics and ended up wanting to incorporate tulle as a representation of what happened to her. The middle image represents the beginning of the trauma, where the tulle is resting on its own. The other two images represent the way that the author carries the awful memory with her, even as she tries to move on. The harsh lighting in these photos feels

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like a nightmare to me. I felt very strongly about not sugar-coating the mood in these images because what this woman went through is a very real thing for so many others, and it’s important to me to convey the seriousness of the issue in my art.

“The Body Politic”

The final set of photos is inspired by a piece called “The Body Politic” written by Abra Fortune Chernik. Abra developed anorexia at the age of 21 and felt that it was the only way to have any sort of power. To her, control over her body was the same as having at least a tiny bit of control over her life. Her body was the only important thing about her, and she felt absolutely huge. When she was in rehabilitation, she had a big turning point. She was awarded a two-hour visit to the mall with her mother, and while she was there she snuck away from her mom to go visit a fitness shop. The man who worked there measured her body fat index and proceeded to congratulate her on how thin she was. At this point, it registered in her mind that this type of idolization of being overly thin is what perpetuates anorexic culture. Abra writes that her response was, “‘I am dying of anorexia,’ I whispered. ‘Don’t congratulate me.’”

scheme to introduce a sense of being zoned out and stuck inside yourself. I wanted to give the feeling of viewing everything through a very dull lens. The first image is a representation of the overwhelming need the author felt to change her body to what she thought was ‘normal’. The last is a representation of the contentment with her life she felt as a result of being able to control her body. There are so many emotional and physical mountains to climb when battling with an eating disorder, and I wanted to speak on a few of them while keeping the design cohesive.

**Artist Reflection**

This entire process has been very eye-opening for me as an artist and as a scholar. I feel privileged to be able to take the art of conceptual photography that I am so familiar with and use it for purposes that are important to me. The research aspect of art is something I’ve never explored, and it opened new doors of creation for me that led to me feeling even more attached to the final product than I often do. It was enlightening to be able to have psychological reasoning for my choices as an artist when I’ve only ever created pieces that stem almost entirely from imagination. As I was developing this project, I went back and forth for quite a while trying to decide if I wanted to conduct primary qualitative research in the form of personal interviews, or if I would be better off going with secondary research in the way of a content analysis. Most likely, the women that I would have interviewed would have been victims of some sort of trauma, and that was not something that sat lightly with me. Because I didn’t feel 100% confident interviewing women about such sensitive topics, I decided against it in order to protect the victims. Conducting a content analysis ended up being the safest way to get the type of information that I wanted to complete this project. At the time, I struggled with the thought that I might be taking the easy way out, and that my pieces wouldn’t be as valuable. On the contrary,
however, I found that analyzing *Listen Up* added an entirely new level to my art. There was also this question regarding what makes me qualified as an artist? Is it really my place to take the stories that these women so selflessly shared with us and use it for my own art?

The pieces of writing included in *Listen Up* are more than just a documentation of something that happened; they’re pieces of art, crafted carefully and deliberately by the women who chose to tell their stories this way. I feel very privileged to be able to take this art that these women wanted to share with the world and use it to make new art of my own. In a way, it made me hold myself to a higher standard for creating because in my mind, these women are allowing me to use their words and are trusting me to do them justice in whatever way I choose to use them. When I think about this, I go back to what drew me to these stories in the first place when I took that Gender Women Studies class, before this project was even in my brain. As a woman, all of the stories in *Listen Up* felt so real. It didn’t feel like I was reading a simple documentation of facts like in a history class, and it didn’t feel like I was reading a fictional piece of creative writing; in fact, *I knew* that wasn’t what I was reading. Even though this project wasn’t even an idea in my head yet, I knew that these pieces were incredibly important, and I was so thankful that I had the opportunity to experience them.

I think the most jarring part of this entire experience was being able to finally share my art with the public. All of the pieces were displayed in a gallery with no context attached to them. This way, I was able to explain in detail every story behind each set of photos to whoever wanted to listen. On multiple occasions as I was explaining the stories, the person I was talking to would stop me and say something along the lines of, “That’s so intense, but these aren’t even true stories, are they?” It was really fulfilling to be able to explain to them that these are real things that happen to so many real women. Even though I was only able to directly reach a handful of
people at my gallery, it made me feel like all of this research and time and tweaking of images means something because I had the opportunity to maybe open another person’s eyes a tiny bit wider to the reality of women’s struggles.

The particular issues that are discussed in the stories that my photos are rooted in are experiences that women are expected to and often encouraged to keep to themselves. I hope that having my photos hanging in a gallery or posted on my social media page may get people to stop and think just for a moment about the voices that are represented in them. Unfortunately, it’s not as likely that all of the people that I’ve been able to connect with about my art and these stories will have the chance to pick up Listen Up and read every chapter. My photos being displayed somewhere slightly more accessible than a novel will hopefully give more people the opportunity to be exposed to the reality of women’s struggles that are often silenced.

I also really enjoyed listening to what people interpreted about the photos in each set before I explained what each image was intended to represent. I don’t know what I expected, but while I was talking to people outside of the project I fell in love with this idea that my images have a very specific inspiration and story behind them, but they can all exist on their own with no explanation and tell whatever story the viewer interprets. This makes my art feel successful because it represents the story, but the surreal aspect takes it to a place that doesn’t have to be literally relatable to be understood. This project has taken my love for the surreal to a different dimension because I now have a small idea of what it is capable of when it’s rooted in something so real. It’s sparked a passion for using my skills to shed light on stories that are important to me, stories that I feel need to be told. I’ve also come to appreciate the research aspect of creation more than I ever would have otherwise. I find the idea of making art with the intent to make your
audience feel something specific very interesting and exciting, and I’m grateful for the privilege I have that allows me to explore such a thing.

Susan Sontag said, “Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it.”

Though my photos are a very particularly crafted version of the reality that the women in Listen Up wrote about, I like to think that they’re furnishing evidence of what happens to women everywhere all the time. I hope that the ‘proof’ I’ve created regarding these stories help the audience understand and possibly feel what these women felt. I also hope that this project is at least a tiny step in the direction of opening up a conversation about women’s issues like these that are far too common.

Since I first began manipulating photographs as a teenager, I’ve been wound up in this idea of constructing my own reality using computer software and photos that I’ve captured myself. As an artist, I quite naturally feel that imagery is such a powerful way to connect with people about things that require attention. When you make an image surreal, it grabs the eye, makes an audience look and more importantly, keep looking. This project has bridged a gap for me as a surrealist. I think it’s one thing to create surreal imagery; it’s fun and kind of silly and out of this world. It’s another thing entirely, however, to create this wild imagery that is based on something so serious and real and crafted so intentionally. I’ve learned how powerful it feels to give a voice and new representation to something that is so important to me as an artist, a woman, a feminist. Surrealism is something that I hold so closely to my heart and I am so grateful that this project has opened up such a huge door for me to be able to use my passion with a deliberate and intentional purpose.

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Bibliography


Imagery inspired by “Abortion, Vacuum Cleaners and the Power Within” written by Inga Muscio.
Imagery inspired by “Lusting for Freedom” written by Rebecca Walker.
Imagery inspired by “It’s a Big Fat Revolution” written by Nomy Lamm.
Imagery inspired by “Don’t Call Me a Survivor” written by Emilie Morgan.
Imagery inspired by “The Body Politic” written by Abra Fortune Chernik.