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Gail Thacker – Fearlessly Alive

Renowned visual artist Gail Thacker beautifully recalls her friendships and losses throughout the AIDS epidemic, letting us into a world captured through her 665 Positive/Negative Polaroid film in the collection *Midnight Call*.

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At CANDICE MADEY in New York City lies a collection of tales told through the lens of Gail Thacker, the eminent visual artist and photographer whose work delves into lives and losses of the queer community throughout her lifetime. Describing these recovered images, dating from the 1990s to the 2010s, Thacker talks of “little shared worlds of being fearlessly alive” when documenting friends, acquaintances, and lovers over this time. Using discontinued 665 Positive/Negative Polaroid film to capture many of her images, the artist’s love for melding the real with the surreal speaks through her velvety, textured photographic technique, encapsulating the fleetingness of life and death in her queer community.

An artistic career shared with peers Mark Morrisroe, Nan Goldin, and Pat Hearn, amongst others, Thacker developed a metaphysical approach to her artistry, retelling stories from over the years through decaying, black-and-white images now on display until the 9th of December of this year. An intimate glimpse into life’s transience, the artist’s collection strikingly recounts each photographed individual’s story, and draws connections between the tight-knit community she



Image: Alice O'Malley

forms a part of. Here, she talks of her discoveries in her photographic techniques, and the dear friends that accompanied her on her personal and artistic ventures.

First of all, congratulations on your exhibition, the images are truly breathtaking. Are there any photos in this collection that you’re particularly excited to showcase?

Thank you! I’m always excited to see this work. They are all little shared worlds of being fearlessly alive. When I was at the Boston Museum School, we were fearless about being queer and without reason: it was like pouring gasoline on a fire. The “fearlessly being alive” part spoke to me during the AIDS epidemic, when it was frightening to be gay.

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People thought it was a queer thing. And the technique of decaying my negatives and Polaroids started to speak to me. It wasn't just a cool trick anymore. It was a meaningful example of what we all are. An empowerment of living life and the alchemy of transformation. The decay was following the second law of thermodynamics: entropy. We are living the laws of entropy every day. One can't truly fight entropy. I'm just saying, isn't it amazing how the disorder can actually be beautiful in its small examples, like the Polaroids.

Oh! I got off topic. It was great having the team at CANDICE MADEY select what to exhibit instead of me. The self-portrait of me with the staples across my lower belly from a hysterectomy scar—I was happily surprised that the gallery selected that image. It is different from the rest. This is one of my few images that is trying to speak to others, especially in the LGBTQ+ community with sexual scars. It's like saying, I love your scars. I have them too. We are beautiful. Keep going. I always try to think in terms of 'we'.

This work features a community of friends, lovers, performers, and acquaintances since 1994. It must be beautiful to capture fluctuations in relationships over the years, and see these growths and distances in physical form. Are there any people that have been present in these photos throughout all these years, or have many changed over time?

Yes. The people have changed as I met more people. One constant example is Rafael Sánchez. He experienced Mark's death with me, so we bonded and became good friends. I call the fifteen years of images of Rafael 'a philosophical lifeboat.' Our friendship navigated the height of the AIDS epidemic, and this work represents a place of safety. I was attracted to his ability to open up with me and break down that wall that people put up to protect themselves. He was easy to play with, like a



Joey Gabriel at Home, 2009 Polaroid 665 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches © Gail Thacker



Scooter as André Kertész's Satiric Dancer in Kevin Aviance's Dress, 2018 Polaroid 665 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches © Gail Thacker

living magical fairytale. We exchanged ideas; I could call him with an idea that we would build upon, or vice versa, often when he was preparing for a performance or performing somewhere. I would bring my Polaroid camera backstage for portraits for my own work.

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We grew together during a turbulent time. I love to go with the flow, and I'm open to anything as I am photographing other artists. It's all give and take on the creative end of the actual photoshoot; participation is important on my end, and the subjects. We are playing 'performance for the camera.' Afterwards, I allow for alchemy on another level, waiting sometimes up to a year for the negative or Polaroid to stew in its own juice and surprise me. So, Rafael is a long, longtime friend I've worked with and gone through many changes with.

I understand that positive-negative film allows for an instant single-exposure print of both the positive and negative image. To me, your images exude texture and have almost a velvety, enveloped feel—does your use of type 665 Polaroid Positive/Negative film allow for this sort of image quality?

Yes!! 665 sometimes allows the artist to touch the negative. You can see my handiwork. That's important to me.

Is it true that the late Mark Morrisroe, pioneer of queer-punk photography in the 1970s, left you his collection of this (now discontinued) film? What was your relationship with Mark like?

Mark was like my brother. My bestie. We shared our formative years together. This story about the box of Polaroids is a little out of whack. Mark and I were close friends, troublemakers, and both used Polaroid film. But I mostly worked with wood and photos. After his death, I wish he would have given me the 195 Polaroid camera that he gave Jack. I got the GAF movie camera at the reading of his will. But when Mark was still alive, maybe months before he passed, he gave me a big box of maybe thirty packages of unexposed 665 Positive/Negative film that he had just received



Dee and Crystal at Gene Frankel Theatre, 2005 Polaroid 665 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches © Gail Thacker



Exhibition view, Gail Thacker's *Midnight Call*, at CANDICE MADEY. Photo by Kunning Huang

from the Artist Support Program at Polaroid. He said, oh well, take it. I'm not going to use it.

That's such a nice detail.

I immediately said, let's take your portrait in bed. I bet I can still capture your beauty. He looked at me and said, "Oh Gail. I feel bad for you." I asked, "What? Why?" He answered, "because I am your

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only friend and I am dying.” This broke my heart, but he was right.

How so?

At this point, I had managed to get everyone to be mad at me and gossip. I had taken the bad girl approach too far. At least no one forgot me. Ha. So, the images that I show of Mark in bed were the test shots with the covers up to his face...that's what I used some of that film for.

I have the negatives and some of the Polaroids. I probably gave the test shots to Mark. I would guess that Jack has them, or I lost the two test-shot Polaroids that I print. The rest are too painful to look at. But yes, Mark passed the torch with the box of unexposed film. 'That girl' wasn't going to give me his exposed negatives. That's his work. No artist does that.

It's understandable.

Mark had other boxes of Polaroid though, because two weeks later he asked Brent to take his portrait in bed. Those images are harsh. Mark loved to photograph us and to be photographed. Ramsey McPhillips, who was with him when he died, said that he asked, take my picture. And at the click of the shutter, he passed. That's another difficult image to see.

At the time, my head was spinning with grief. I had just lost my only real friend, along with other people I cared about. But, that big box of film that Mark gave me was a sort of 'lifeboat.' I was able to create. I took portraits and played 'performance for the camera' with our friend Rafael. So many different kinds of play dates. Rafael made these incredible head pieces extending up to the heavens. Amazing! My interest in decaying the negative renewed because of the AIDS epidemic. Before that it was just an interesting trick. During



Walter Hurley Butching, 2012 Polaroid 665 4 1/4 x 3 1/4 inches © Gail Thacker

this time and even now it is symbolic of our impermanence.

Speaking more generally about your work, I can feel the importance of transience in your images, and confrontations of life, death, and other realms, especially around the time of the height of the AIDS crisis. 'Pataphysics' is a concept that peered out when I researched you; does it have anything to do with how you view these concepts in your collections?

Pataphysics is a made-up 'science' by the absurdist Alfred Jarry that examines the particular instead of the general. It has a lot to do with my approach. I seek the accidental. The decaying of the negatives is all accidental.

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I notice the way you capture history, particularly queer history, through images of your friends—can these kinds of intimate, diaristic photos tell larger stories to you than scenic images might?

The portraits—I love them and want to show how beautiful these friends are. They just so happen to turn into a sort of queer history because that is the life I live, so these are the people in it. I work in the most primal way; I'm seeking their energy, the essence of the person or place. It is all very spontaneous on my part. The process I use happens after the fact.

But for the photoshoots, I start with an idea and see where it takes me. I expect participation. That's why I call it playing. We both play. But I can only speak from my truth and the world that I'm in. It's a community. A community that existed long before I stepped into the picture. This queer family is made of incredible artists. My friend Paul Alexander explained—it's like six degrees of separation. But instead, it is two or three degrees of separation. Everyone knows each other. Or enough to say hello.

But my work is also about the bigger existential picture, fleeting time—that we are one of many. With the cityscapes, especially during a snowstorm, the city becomes empty. The people become just shadows: they could be anyone who was there once. This rather explains, like my father used to say, don't worry about it. No one will remember this small incident in a hundred years. So, enjoy the now.

It's important to share those stories so they don't fall into oblivion. For example, this year, I watched Nan Goldin's eye-opening and heart-breaking documentary *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, where we see her tireless fight against the Sackler family. As a curiosity, have



Good Night, Sleep Tight, Don't Let the Bed Bugs Bite, 1995–2017
Analog color print of a B&W polaroid 665 negative with watercolor and acrylic 20 x 16 inches © Gail Thacker

you watched it yet? Do you feel it shares some connection with your own work besides the context?

Yes, I saw Laura Poitras' film on Nan, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, twice. The first time I observed it. The second time I cried. I cried because I survived. And I cried because I was mourning. I mourned for those I've lost, and mourned for years of my youth lost.

My life and art touch on beauty, death, and survival. Life sometimes seems like a miracle. So, I ask for respect for those in my images, and for myself. I hope for a day of understanding and recovery. I'm big on recovering and saving lives.

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Thinking a little about your personal life, where were your first encounters with photography? Has its role in your life changed much over the course of the years?

I used 35-mm photographs and drawings as my portfolio to the Atlanta Arts Alliance. I didn't return to photography until the Boston Museum School, so I could pour queer gasoline on my friends and my life. But I didn't take photography seriously until about 1980, and stopped painting in 1988 and took a deep dive into Polaroids. That's a loooooong time ago! I mean, that's all I did. No kids. No career. Just a deep revealing dive into a wonderful community of people; analog-darkroom time and a little dab of bright, colorful paint to cheer up the day. To say, it's not so bad. We are in it together.

And finally, what is life like for you now?

Fabulous! Life, with all its ups and downs, is an amazing ride. I'm at the age now where I like to help young artists grow. I've been doing this for seventeen years now in the theater. But now it's time for me to organize all of these Polaroids and concentrate on printing the negatives.

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