



*March 19, 1973*



*March 20, 1973*

# More Real Than a Memory Melissa Shook

This spread, left to right:  
March 19, 1973; March 20,  
1973; March 17, 1973;  
March 18, 1973



March 17 (2), 1973



The photographer's rigorous self-portraits show the longing and sensuality of a woman inventing herself every day. Fifty years later, new audiences are discovering her work.

### Lucy McKeon

In December 1972, the photographer Melissa Shook found herself stuck at home in her apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side nursing a toe infection. Removed from her usual busy routine, she began to take daily self-portraits. In a diary from that month, she notes what she photographed each day, along with domestic details and increasingly involved meditations on loneliness and abandonment, the struggles of being a single parent, difficult family dynamics, and her ambitions as a photographer: December 5, "A romantic shot of me with the avocado plants." December 7, "2¼ me, nude, alone in sunlight. Terrible sadness at how detached I am. Real sorrow at not loving anyone, the wall of fear." December 30, "It was a lovely and incredible day. It's very difficult to write about—if I do I commit myself for me to read again, make more real than a memory."

Shook was thirty-three and would continue taking pictures almost daily until August 1973, by which time her young daughter, Kristina (called Krissy as a child), joined or replaced her in the

photographs. Her devotion is to the process. In each image—some playful, sensual, slightly sinister; others melancholy, sociable, abstracted, masked—Shook’s artistic presence is felt. “She didn’t hide,” Kristina told me recently. In these self-portraits, Shook meets what emerges each day, even when clarity is elusive. What makes the series remarkable is its exploration of the self as something familiar and yet removed, unknown. And in some ways, it was. “I was interested in when I would forget that I had committed myself to this project,” she later wrote of the series that became *Daily Self-Portraits 1972–73*. “The obsession with forgetting has been central.”

Born in 1939 in New York, Shook was twelve when her mother died. She was left with few memories of her and a foggy sense of childhood, at best. Her father, who was an alcoholic and refused to speak of his late wife, gave Shook her first camera, a Pentax, for her twentieth birthday. Photography became a way for her to try to make sense of what had been lost so early. “Losing my memory means so much because I lost myself,” Shook wrote in her 1972 diary; the daily photographs helped “to maintain, or more accurately to establish a sense of internal identity.”

Taken mostly against a white wall of the tenement apartment Shook shared with Krissy, the pictures evoke the kind of domestic landscape of dreams—familiar, but with an uncanny sense that something is different. Where the logic of the quotidian might normally reign, here psyche is the primary author of experience. Shook uses a wide frame in some images to show a bed, a chair, several potted plants against the white wall. Others capture at close range Shook’s face—fingers curled around eyes like glasses or outstretched to frame mouth and tongue—or her nude torso, breasts, bush, body, blurred in motion.

The process, according to Shook, was instinctual: “It was important to let my unconscious, rather than my intellect, dictate the progression. For reasons I don’t entirely understand, being nude became part of the project early on.” Some critics at the time saw her photographs as “co-opted by the male vision of the nude female posing against a wall,” Shook wrote, which she believed was “to some extent . . . correct,” but missed the satire and subversion conveyed by the series as a whole. One might be reminded of charges against Hannah Wilke’s nude self-portraiture as narcissistic, frivolous, antifeminist; Wilke and Shook, who both used their young bodies in their early work, would also document their failing bodies, overtaken by cancer, later in life. In *Daily Self-Portraits*, Shook considers the confines and conflicts of beauty, desire, and womanhood, exploring physicality and performance to painful, even wicked, effect. Carole Kismaric, founding editor of the Time-Life Photography Series and editorial director of the Aperture Foundation from 1976 to 1985, was an admirer of Shook’s work. Some of the *Daily Self-Portraits* images were published in 1973 by *Camera* 35, edited by Jim Hughes; the next year, John Szarkowski acquired more than thirty prints for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, some of which were shown in its 1976 exhibition *Photography: Recent Acquisitions, 1974–1976*. Around this time, Shook became self-conscious, her momentum disrupted. The spell had been broken.

While Shook had conceived of the series as a project to be shared, she was also “always ambivalent about the self-portraiture as a public work,” Sally Stein, an independent scholar of photography and a longtime friend of Shook’s, tells me, and Shook’s diary confirms this. In an essay for a forthcoming monograph, which coincides with an exhibition at La Patinoire Royale in Brussels, Stein argues for expanding the historical record of that era to include Shook’s project of sustained self-imaging—not overlooked at the time but largely forgotten today. Before Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits as film stars in the late 1970s and 1980s, before Carrie Mae Weems’s landmark *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), Shook began her



Dallas Jan 7, 1972

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daily practice taking pictures of herself at home—amid second-wave feminism’s radical inventory of gender roles and inequality.

The domestic, and the labor that went on there, was a critical site of inquiry; as Silvia Federici, the scholar, activist, and author of *Wages Against Housework*, would write in 1975, “To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking.” Shook was an artist following her instincts, but her personal inquiry can also be seen as a political one. For the male-dominated and still burgeoning field of fine-art photography, the domestic was not widely considered a suitable subject. In Dorothea Lange and Daniel Dixon’s 1952 essay for *Aperture*, “Photographing the Familiar,” they distinguish between the familiar they champion and the domestic: “The photographer need not suspect the familiar for fear of the domestic. The two are not the same. Nobody likes to look at dull photographs; boredom, in the end, is as outlandish as outrage.” Stein argues that Shook’s

self-portraits were invested in the balance between the everyday responsibilities of a single mother struggling to support her family—Shook taught at the private Dalton School and led small workshops—while making time for herself as an artist. “Melissa’s work is essentially saying, ‘But, of course, it’s going to be boring some of the time!’” Stein says. And in this plain fact, one might see existential depth. Other times, “explosive surprises” arise—as in the bodily contortions, ghoulish and amusing, like a deranged ballerina—out of images taken April to May 1973. Mistaken for the innocent maiden, Shook reveals herself a clownish sage, an avant-gardist reminding us all of the absurdity of our own mortality.

There’s a wisdom to Shook’s playful and sincere improvisation—a claim on her own time and bodily autonomy but also a recognition of the losses and loneliness of womanhood, motherhood, the struggle toward selfhood. Critically, she also explores the mother-daughter relationship, a dynamic she had no memory of as a daughter but was remaking as a mother. “Not remembering meant,

Left:  
February 27, 1973; right:  
February 28, 1973



to some extent, having to create a self without the foundation of remembering much about those first twelve years,” Shook wrote, “and trying to raise a daughter without remembering having been a child.” Shook documented their lives through sustained exposure; the incorporation of the camera into daily reality was, in itself, a radical gesture.

“My mother had a third hand; the camera was always there,” Kristina Shook tells me. Shook had met Kristina’s father, Darryl Clegg, at Bard College, where they were studying literature and art, respectively; he eventually went west, leaving Shook to care for Kristina on the Lower East Side. “I grew up mixed. I never thought anything about it,” Kristina says. “One of my closest friends, Naima [the daughter of the late jazz singer Jeanne Lee], was the opposite of me in terms of having an African American mother and a white father.” There is a lovely picture of the two of them on a stoop, Naima’s arm around Krissy, one of countless photographs Shook took of her daughter over the eighteen years following her birth in 1965.

“When I look back at these pictures, she was recording our life,” Kristina says. “I really have proof that this is what I remember.” It was an unconventional, bohemian life, where kids played freely; single mothers, interracial couples, and artists abounded and struggled for money; and the community looked out for one another. It was beautiful, in Kristina’s telling, yet not without difficulty or danger. “My mother had to photograph our life—to prove that we were there.”

During that time, Shook was deeply influenced by Paul Byers, a Columbia University lecturer whose anthropological view of photography emphasized the importance of the photographer’s subjectivity. Will Faller, a neighbor and editor of *Photograph* magazine in the 1970s, was also influential—he taught Shook how to use the darkroom. Shook’s friendships with Faller, his ex-wife Marion, also a photographer, and their son, Little Will, were central to her and Krissy’s life in New York and to Shook’s photographic education.

June 4, 1973  
All photographs from the series *Daily Self-Portraits 1972-1973*  
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In both the series of Krissy's childhood and in Krissy's appearances in *Daily Self-Portraits*, Shook's daughter is a natural before the camera. "I forgot it was there," Kristina explains. In one photograph, Krissy stands naked on a wooden chair, arms outstretched as if addressing what appears to be a melon rind on the floor below. Here is the full-throated embodiment of childhood, a world in which Krissy is king. Slowly, over the course of the series, the valance of girlhood descends. Krissy poses ironically for the camera: modeling dresses, bikinis, and costume jewelry. The torture of having her hair brushed. Reading quietly, flanked by stuffed animals. Arms folded behind her back or slung around her knees.

Shook's close observation of others took many forms. Kristina remembers her mother as a curious person, more likely to ask after others than to talk about herself. She interviewed photographers, including Harry Callahan and Steve Szabo, for *Photograph* magazine and other publications. An illuminating and amusing conversation with Roy DeCarava, published in 1983 but conducted primarily in 1977, spans masculinity and money, his signature prints, racism in photography, and the origins of the Kamoinge Workshop, a collective of Black photographers. One has the sense of both a mentee consulting a mentor and two friends chatting over dinner.

Around the time of this conversation, Shook had recently relocated herself and Krissy to Boston for a job teaching photography with Minor White at MIT's Creative Photography Laboratory, where she stayed for three years before moving to the University of Massachusetts Boston's art department. She taught photography with dedication for more than thirty years, most of them at UMass Boston, and might have recognized herself in DeCarava's words: "In teaching you have a serious relationship toward your students, no matter what level it is. It's stimulating. I feel I'm not wasting my time and I think I'm doing some good."

Teaching may have been one way for Shook to look toward the future, through the eyes of her students, a respite from the instinct to look back to the childhood she could not remember. That same 1973 summer of daily self-portraiture, Shook returned to Port Washington, Long Island, to the house of her aunt Marion, which was next door and almost identical to her mother's home, where Shook grew up. There, she tried to re-create scenes from her childhood. These photographs, some of which were featured in the Time-Life Books series in 1975, are quieter than those in *Daily Self-Portraits*; Shook, Marion, and Krissy variously inhabit the space like three generations of ghosts. Shook would continue to photograph herself in several regular yearlong series until her death in 2020 from a brain tumor. Later in life, she became increasingly interested in documenting aging (her own as well as that of family members) and, finally, her experience of cancer, exhibited as *Clutter* at Boston's Atlantic Works Gallery in April 2019; she also used Instagram as an artful, diaristic medium.

"When I look at these photographs, I see a young woman, trapped in a body too attractive for her to manage, much less enjoy, who was battling depression and struggling like the devil not to reveal the pain she was in," Shook later wrote of *Daily Self-Portraits*. Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery, which represents Shook's estate, holds one complete set of these prints; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, in Kansas City, has the other existing set and is planning an exhibition of them in 2024. In these remarkable images, one can observe the pain Shook was reluctant to reveal—but there, too, that sense of searching and slow revelation. In 1972, Shook wrote in her diary, "I can't dislodge the past . . . I'm more aware now that that's specifically what I'm working through and using in my work—the source of it—the source of my depression also, but a coin which won't flip over and let me free myself."

Shook's approach as a photographer began largely in response to the absence left by her mother's death. But by chasing memory, searching to recover a sense of self, Shook was making herself in the



process. With the daily self-portraits, she began to flip the coin, and we see in the uncertain movement a map of difficult discovery. That the work is gaining new audiences today, fifty years later, is a testament to its honesty. Through disappointment, longing, fear, frustration, determination, sadness, sensuality, and boredom, nothing is hidden. And there is new relevance to Shook's insistence that her and her daughter's lives—the care and care work, the artful and the demanding, all of it pictured at home—warranted close looking. Kristina wants to be sure her mother's photography is not forgotten. Seeing these photographs now, through the eyes of others, Kristina observes, "I keep discovering her."

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