

SHOOK, LINE AND SINKER

Not many know the work of contemporary artist and photographer Melissa Shook – but those who do quickly fall for it head over heels. Is it the doubleness it gives domesticity, asks Charlotte Jansen, or perhaps the bittersweet tenderness palpable in her portraits of her daughter? Whatever it is, it's drawing new devotees to Miyako Yoshinaga gallery in New York

By Charlotte Jansen

Among the grand and grandiose photographs on display at Paris Photo this year, a suite of modest black-and-white photographs caught my eye. A young woman poses alone in her New York apartment: here, she is demurely naked, a towel wrapped around her head, the sparse foliage of a potted plant creeping up into the frame. In the next image, a sudden gear shift: the subject assumes a theatrical pose against a bare wall, the camera moved back now, the plant in full view – a concession to domesticity in what looks like a spartan apartment. The space of someone, perhaps, who is still figuring out their domestic space.

The woman in the pictures, and the photographer, is Melissa Shook. Subject and narrator, Shook embarked on this series in 1972: she vowed to take a picture every day for a year. She moves the camera in close, paradoxically revealing less of her inner world, more of her flesh. She hides from her own camera too, behind a newspaper or shielding her face from its exposure behind her hands. Often the backdrop is the same: a peeling wall of her tenement flat.

Shook remains a little-known figure in the history of contemporary art and photography – perhaps down to the obstacles she faced as a working single mother. Born in Manhattan in 1939, her first contact with photography was in the 1960s, when her father gifted her a Pentax. Shook attended Bard College, and she was still a student there when she gave birth to a daughter, Kristina. She returned to work part time, doing odd jobs, when her daughter was just two weeks old.

By the time her daughter was four, the photographer had separated from her daughter's father. In 1976, Shook and Kristina relocated to Boston, where the former found a job teaching photography; by 1979, she was the first female photography instructor at the University of Massachusetts, where she then taught for 31 years. She continued to take documentary pictures, including of unhoused women in Boston and Ohio, and also made further serieses of daily self-portraits in bursts over the years. Her extensive, diaristic writings – available online – are fascinating insights into her life and experiences. Shook passed away in 2020; her estate is now represented by New York's Miyako Yoshinaga gallery.

Shook's experiments with photography at home in the 1970s respond and relate to the feminist photographic artists of her day in Europe and the US, from Renate Bertlmann to Cindy Sherman. Yet unlike many of her peers, these private performances have a frankness and candour about them. 'I think of her as a documentary photographer working with and through photographs to reveal her consciousness,' Shook's daughter Kristina – Krissy – told me. The pictures seem to push against the camera's abiding relationship with going out into the world, with expedition and travel, to plunge instead into the mundanity and minutiae of the interior world. The unremarkable-ness of her photographs is what makes them remarkable. With little at her disposable in terms of time or resources, what Shook

offers is herself, in its rawest form. ‘I imagined little for myself, a common dilemma for women who graduated from suburban high schools in the late 50s,’ Shook wrote.

But the photographer also had another reason for documenting herself. When she was 12, Shook lost her mother to cancer. As a consequence, she suffered memory loss so severe it wiped out her entire childhood. Bereft of the image of her mother, photography became ‘her very organic search for her identity, her life, her need to create memory – given that she lost her mother at 12 and had total amnesia in regards to her mother’s character, her voice and even her love,’ Krissy said. She herself became a frequent subject of her mother’s: Melissa photographed her regularly between the ages of one and 18. ‘She dearly wanted to make sure that I knew I was alive, that I came from a large artist community and ultimately that I was loved.’

Shook’s portraits of her daughter are the natural extension of her daily self-portrait serieses. She searches for traces of her missing matrilineal line in her daughter’s face, sometimes finding it in their striking resemblance, though at other times that same resemblance retreats and appears lost. Reflected in the young girl is the self-assurance Shook also seems to look for – her own self-portraits often reveal a self-consciousness and vulnerability. The connection is profound and penetrating.

Today, Krissy still recalls her earliest memories of being photographed ‘with my friends on the Lower East Side of Manhattan – running naked on the street, or playing games in my friend’s apartments. My mother Melissa chasing after us – not interrupting us, simply clicking away with her camera, an extension of her.’

The pictures are also punctuated with grief – the Barthian kind of grief that a photograph has, that ability to invoke a life so accurately, to capture time even as it slips away, steadied by the bitter knowledge that a photograph cannot hold on to a life. ‘My mother was a quiet-soft spoken person, battling many insecurities,’ Krissy reflects. ‘The camera was an instrument with which she could communicate and capture our life, our friends’ lives and a past that no longer exists.’

Looking at the photographs now, she adds, ‘I see my hero.’

‘Melissa Shook: Krissy’s Present’ runs from 8 December 2023–20 January 2024 at Miyako Yoshinaga, New York. For more information, visit miyakoyoshinaga.com