

# SHIFT

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of  
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the  
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By

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## ABSTRACT

### SHIFT

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Humans change with each second that passes. There is a haze of trying to save each moment.

With my photographs, I am freezing a series of moments in time in order to preserve them. This work depicts fleeting of life- time change, or a shift. *Shift* represents many ideas: the physical movement of my subject matter and the camera, the movement captured in the photographs, and the changing of time. My vision is to create images with multiple portrays of a person or subject.

I am engaged in the subject's aura through their subtle movement by experimenting with techniques that spirit photographers use to capture "ghosts" in their images. As I leave the shutter open, the camera captures their emotions, expressions, and movements. The effect is a combination of aesthetic choices of my subject matter, composition, and superimposition. The final images save memories and expose that people change with the passing of time.

## INTRODUCTION

With each passing second, humans undergo change. As time goes on, personalities transform. There is a constant, almost futile effort to capture every moment. I use photography as a medium with which to freeze a series of fleeting moments in time in order to possess and preserve them. My work is intended to depict these all too brief, fleeting changes in life/time, or shifts.

Most artists have their own definition of art. Charles and Ray Eames, artists mostly known for their innovative techniques in design and architecture, described it this way, “Art resides in the quality of doing; process is not magic”. Art as a process is a movement of the belief that creating a beautiful end result in an artwork isn't the goal or focus. It is the creative journey that is of the utmost importance. The principle of the camera obscura has been known since ancient times. The use of the camera obscura has been used for scientific purposes in order to safely observe our world, but it also captured the attention of many artists. Leonardo da Vinci, who studied both science and art, wrote detailed notes of the process in his notebooks. The camera can transform simple information that we can already see, into a detailed replication. It was necessary to invent a medium that created exact reproductions for documentation, remembering individuals, and able to capture moments in time.

## THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The invention of photography was not discovered by one man. Instead, it took a series of processes and is the result of an evolution. Although invention of photography has been attributed to Thomas Wedgwood who conceived the original idea in 1826, it was initially unsuccessful in practice. Nicephore Niepce was the first to capture a permanent image in nature. Then, Louis Daguerre invented the first practicable process of photography. Later, in 1839, Henry Fox Talbot introduced the negative/positive process.

One photographer used portraiture and turned this fairly new art form into her own by capturing the worlds' first up close portraits. Julia Margaret Cameron was once described as "one of the finest portrait artists of the nineteenth century in any medium" by former art critic of The New York Times, Hilton Kramer. During this time, however, photography was not seen as a true art medium. Cameron was an unconventional woman during the Victorian age and began experimenting with photography in 1864 while in her late forties. She became a well-known portraitist, producing images that often were controversial. Her photographs incorporated trending techniques during that time while adding her own personal style (Ford).

At this time, details of how objects move were still unknown. Eadweard Muybridge decided to experiment with motion photography. In 1872, Leland Stanford placed a bet asserting there is a moment in time when all four of a racehorse's hooves are off the ground. Muybridge captured the movement to prove Stanford right. Years later, Muybridge continued his research of studying the movement of horses. Using tripwires, he placed cameras in a row, forcing each to trigger as the horses ran by. Muybridge's career consisted of him improving his techniques and

discoveries. He made a variety of motion studies during his practice and shared his discoveries through lectures and books. Muybridge gained the title of one of the fathers of motion picture.

Anton Giulio Bragaglia is a photographer that combined and incorporated Cameron and Muybridge's techniques and discoveries, portraiture and motion. One technique included slow shutter speed. Shutter speed is found on both film and digital cameras and is known as exposure or movement throughout time. The function of the shutter speed is to allow light to enter the camera for a certain length of time. The motion of the picture is determined by the set time of shutter speed. With a slow shutter speed, action would be shown as blur.

Motion blur is created when the shutter speed is slow and is commonly used in landscape photographs to show motion of water while the environment is sharp and in focus. Bragaglia used this blur technique in his photographs while using people as his subject matter.

Photographers began capturing the blur effect to capture what the eye cannot see.

### **Spirit Photography**

In 1860, the first attempts at revealing the unseen occurred through a photograph by W. Campbell while taking a test photograph of an empty chair. To his surprise, the developed photograph produced an image of a young boy within the vicinity of the chair. The fact that his camera was able to capture the image of a boy who was not visible to the human eye was a source of fascination for Campbell. He proceeded to attempt to reproduce the phenomena. To his disappointment, he was not able to succeed in doing so. A year later, the idea and application of spirit photography began to emerge.

The attempt to capture spiritual entities, also known as spirit photography, is a topic of significant controversy. It is said that a camera can detect what cannot be seen with the naked

eye and can capture objects that cannot be easily explained. William Mumler, a well-known photographer, described himself as “a medium for taking spirit photographs”. He was known as a fraud and even charged with creating fake photographs.

Film cameras have various ways to create ghost-like figures in photographs. Although the concept of spirit photography was, and still is discredited, the processes sparked ideas for new techniques.

Before digital cameras, there was more of a chance for technical glitches to be passed off as spirit. For example, crystals in the developing solution could leave a mark on a picture that could look like an orb. Double exposures, lighting, bad film, chemicals, smoke or fog, glares, light, and reflections are a few of the many ways photographers manipulate their photographs to create the appearance of “spirit energy”. Now, with digital photography, there are more ways to imagine and create these unexplainable images, especially with Photoshop.

## THE SHIFT

Throughout my life, I have dealt with many losses. A major loss occurred the day I was supposed to move to North Carolina to begin graduate school. The man I was dating took his life. During this time, I went through a variety of emotional and physical phases. As time continued, I changed. I developed anxieties and depression, but interestingly, I also began to slowly gain understanding of what, and who, is truly most important in my life. These individuals were there for me through my entire graduate school career. They are my subject matter and my exhibition *Shift* is dedicated to them.

With techniques by Cameron, Bragaglia, and Campbell in mind, I created my series by capturing the aura of my loved ones. I wanted to create a haunting photograph without the use of manipulation. Cameron is my influence with portraits. The blurring created by the technique I used in my images could have been seen more like an art medium during her time.

I believe facial expressions are an important factor in these images because it shares a story. In order to create a more natural and unplanned expression with my subjects, I continuously took photographs as they made the choices on how to move. I use Bragaglia's technique by employing long shutter speed, which resulted in more texture, depth, unique lighting, and multiple expressions in one image. With Campbell's idea of spirit photography, my final images relate to the idea of spirit photography in the sense that each figure is transparent and has a ghost-like, haunting appearance. Each photograph was a surprise as to how it would look, but unlike Campbell, the final photographs were not magic portals to the beyond, but rather a series of work that strives to capture the passing of time.

I made this technique my own by using subtle color, establishing backgrounds for texture, and allowing my subjects to move freely. The movement with the long shutter created the spirit photography effect which made my subjects transparent. Each decision made by the photographer influences the final result of the image. For example, the environment I used for the background is a lake, which represents tranquility.

Photography uses durations of time which separates it from other mediums. Each image is an experiment. My images are unpredictable, which is why I enjoy using these methods. Much like change over time, you never know what you are going to get. The images are ephemeral, not meant to be sad, but rather contemplative and to entice the viewer to feel peace. We are ever changing and I capture the in-between, a transition, and change, while time slips away. I grasp and freeze the moment. The images have been described as a vivid dream you are trying to remember when you wake up. The images also represent the loss I had and how my mental state has shifted.

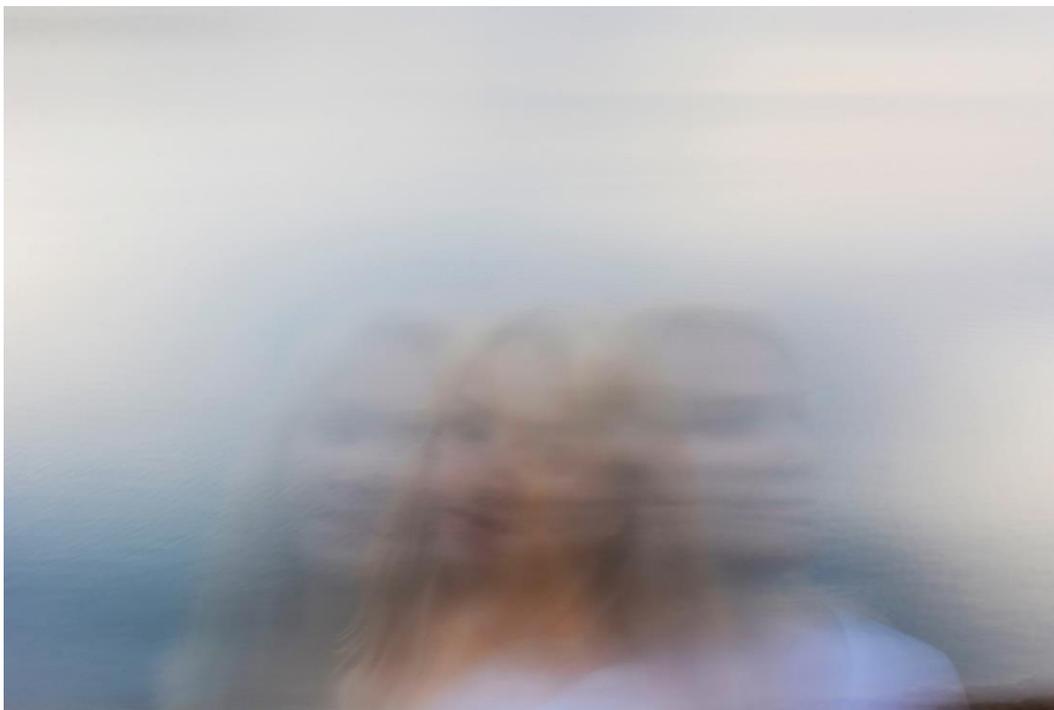
## CONCLUSION

While photographers have used various methods to create spirit photographs, they are still a common topic of debate. I used processes from various artists to create my own techniques in order to develop haunting, spirit-like images without using manipulation. Each picture is unique despite the same process because the movement was determined by the individual's choices with the relationship of my movement. Because of these, my method, it is highly unlikely there will ever be another exactly the same. Each photograph holds a life of its own. Time changes all things, including living beings. Photography can freeze moments in time in order to conserve and share the memories.

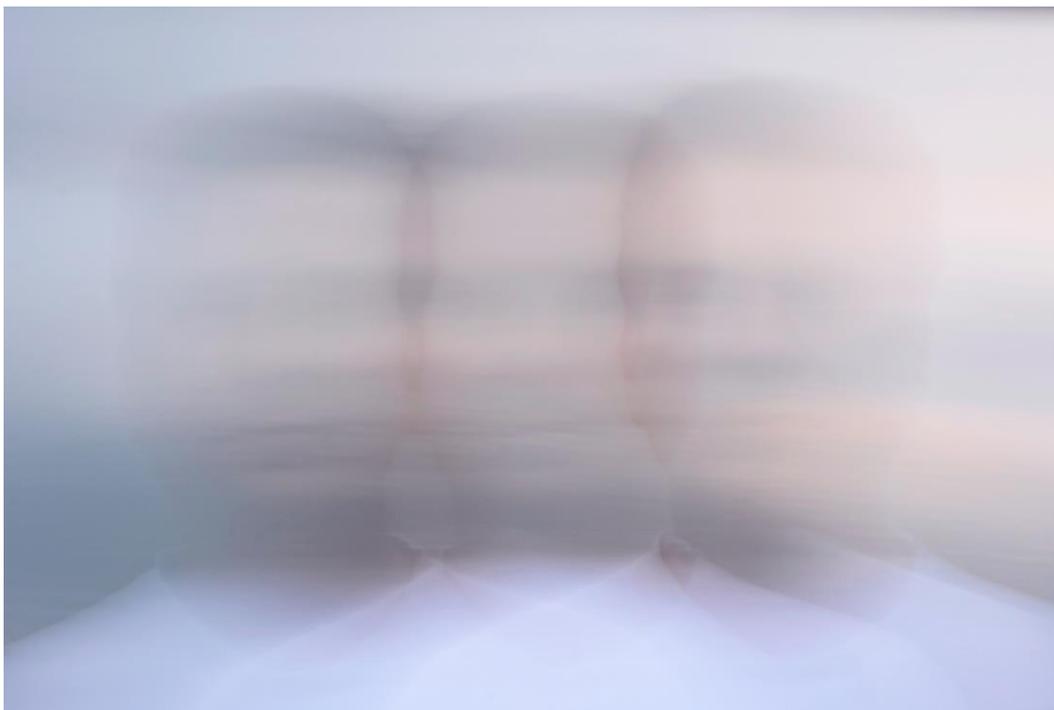
*Shift*, the title of my show, encompasses many ideas: the movement of the subjects in my images, the physical motion captured in the photographs, my maneuvering of the camera, and the changing of time.

Simply stated, my process is to open the camera exposure in order to capture the body and spirit of an individual through their subtle movement. I am capturing the individual's aura by using techniques that spirit photographers use to capture “ghosts” in their images. As I leave the shutter open, the camera captures their emotions, expressions, and movements. The final images capture memories, show the fleeting of time, and expose that people change. My vision is to create complex images with multiple portrayals of a person. The effect is a combination of aesthetic choices of my subject matter, composition, and superimposition. The final images are beautiful, unique, and haunting.

## FIGURES



*Figure 1: Nora, 2016, digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



*Figure 2: Don, 2016 digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



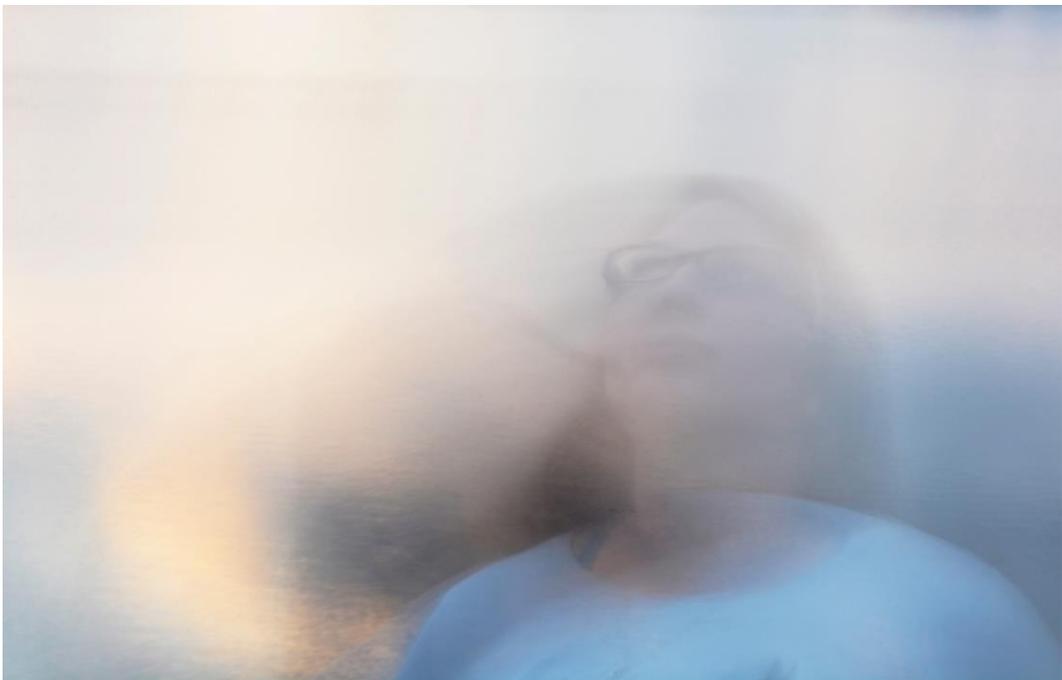
*Figure 3: Candice, 2016, digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



*Figure 4: Brad, 2017, digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



*Figure 5: Erik, 2017, digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



*Figure 6: Donna, 2017, digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



*Figure 7: Justin, 2017, digital photograph on aluminum, 24 x 36 inches*



*Figure 8: Tenacity, 2016, digital photograph on polar fleece, 60 x 80 inches*

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