Shtetl

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Shtetl

Honors Project in the Arts

GenLab User
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Introduction

The idea behind Shtetl is to look at the “faces” of Judaism. People always think of Jews as looking in a specific manner; this is just not the case. As someone who does not look stereotypically Jewish, I hear about this all the time. Many times when I tell someone that I am Jewish, I am met with the response of “you don’t look Jewish.” What does this mean? This is a question I’ve been asking myself quite a long time. Therefore, I want to use this project as a way to explore what it not only means to be Jewish, but what it means to look Jewish. This project looks at both the Jewish community as well as Jewish individuals. It is for this reason that my artist statement is the following:

‘Shtetl looks at the Jewish community as a whole by focusing on the individuals within it. Jews are an incredibly diverse people. They come from all walks of life and racial backgrounds. Contrary to popular belief, there is no stereotypical Jewish person. Not all Jews are rich, nor do they all have curly dark hair and big noses. By being forced to look at the individuals within the community together, it becomes clear that while all of these individuals are Jewish, and therefore bound to each other because of it, they are all different and break this stereotypical mold.’

I hope this project dispels the myth of the “common Jew.” The general population has a stereotypical view of what a Jewish person looks like. They assume that all Jews have big noses, curly hair, greasy faces, and beady eyes. This is, however, not the case. Jews come in all shapes and sizes and it is not easy to tell that someone is Jewish based solely upon their looks. I hope that by forcing the observer to view all of these individuals at once, they will be forced to think about these issues of stereotypes by being presented with the varied faces of Jewish individuals.
One of the largest hurdles in this project was getting individuals to come in and take part. There was outreach not only to the Lawrence Hillel group but also the local Jewish community though the synagogue. After spending large amounts of time trying to get both groups to help, it became clear that only direct outreach to individuals would work. Therefore, all of the people in the project are individuals that I either contacted myself or heard about it from friends that were already in the project.

**Background**

Jews are a very diverse people and are found throughout the world. This worldwide dissemination of the Jews was caused by the Diaspora. The Diaspora, in turn, was caused by the exile of the Jewish people from their original homeland of Judea, now Israel. While there were a number of events that caused the exile of the Jews from their homeland as different times, the most important one for this project was during the middle ages. It was during this exile that the Jews began to spread even further from their homeland and did not return to it for over a thousand years. Because of the massive spread of the Jews, new ethnic and cultural groups began to develop amongst the Jewish people.

While a number of very different cultural groups developed during this time, it was the Ashkenazi who became the most well-known. The Ashkenazi, in addition to being the largest of these groups, settled in Central and Eastern Europe. This gave them more exposure to other influential groups then those Jews who settled in the Middle East or the Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal. Because of their prominence, it is the Ashkenazi Jews that the Jewish stereotype is based upon. However, as was just mentioned, there are many other groups of Jews including the
aforementioned Sephardic Jews of Spain, the Karaite Jews of the Middle East, and the Ethiopian Jews who left after the destruction of the first temple in the sixth century BC which caused the first Diaspora.

While I am of Ashkenazi decent, I do not outwardly appear Ashkenazi therefore I do not fit into the stereotypical idea of what a Jewish person looks like based on Ashkenazi Jews. However, this Jewish stereotype affected me throughout my childhood. While I grew up in an area with a large population of Jewish people, that did not stop me from hearing different “Jew jokes” almost every day of my childhood. There were constant jokes about there being no way someone could be as good at sports as the other kids because they were Jewish, or the constant assumption that a specific kid and his or her family were rich because of this. It was this second stereotype in particular that has always stuck with me. By the time I had reached high school, most of the others had stopped being used but I found that no matter what, non-Jewish people could not get that stereotype out of their head. Despite the fact that in high school I never had the newest, most expensive thing that most of the other students could afford, there was still always an assumption that I had money just because I was Jewish. This was a fact that bothered me for years until I conceived of this project in my sophomore year of college.

In my intermediate photography class, I was charged with creating a project to work on for most of the term. After being greatly influenced by the images of Chuck Close, I knew that I wanted to work on a portrait project. It was then that this idea of wanting dispel these myths of Judaism came back to me and the idea for Shtetl came to fruition. However, while working on what was supposed to be a one term project, it became such a part of who I am that I decided to continue on with it, leading me here.


**Making the Photographs and Gallery Set up**

My technical decisions here were intentional starting with the format of the negative. When I started Shtetl, it was part of a final project that I was doing for intermediate photography, which required I use 4 x 5 large format negative film. However, I decided to continue to use large-format film because I found it to better suit my vision for the project than other formats. Because the prints for this project are 16 x 20 and detail is of the utmost importance, I needed a film format that would not become grainy at this size. Had I used 35mm or even medium format 120, the images would have become distorted and grainy due to the size that I blow my images up to. Because my project revolves around the details in the faces, it necessitated the use of a 4 x 5 negative as I could make larger prints with less distortion from the film.

I knew in advanced that I wanted to have a very shallow depth of field. I wanted this for two reasons. The first being, I knew that by having a shallow depth of field on the face, it would pop out as the out of focus areas would cause the viewer to look at the in focus areas even more closely. The second was that in all of my images I try and play with depth of field as I find its affects to be very interesting on the eye. In order to achieve this, I had to overcome some technical difficulties. Due to the large lighting kit that I used, explained below, I had to shoot at a very small aperture, usually around f 22. This was an issue as a larger aperture is usually needed to create shallow depth of field. In order to solve this problem, I moved the camera as close to the face of the individual as possible, as proximity to the subject decreases depth of field.

I chose to use the 16 x 20 print size due to the fact that I found that the larger size of the faces gave more impact to the project. When printed larger than life, the faces overwhelm the
observer and force them to engage with the work. I have continued this desire for size by printing all the way to the edge of the paper, in a technique called bleeding the image, instead of doing archival 1 inch margins around each side. This way I was able to use every inch of paper and really create a dramatic affect for each face.

One of the main reasons that the prints are so dramatic is the level of detail in each face. I was able to achieve this by doing two things: The first, was to print my images at an extremely high contrast. In this case I chose a contrast of five because it not only helps to pull out the detail of the face, but also blended the faces into the black background. Having the faces emerge from the inky black of the background helps to highlight the features of each face. Because it is hard to tell the actual shape of each person’s head, as well as most of the hair being impossible to discern, the viewer is forced to interact much more heavily with the features of each face as it is all they have to work with. The second, was the lighting that I used. Typically soft lighting is used in order to mask the use of the lights and create a more even light spread. I, on the other hand, used extremely harsh lighting due to the fact that I knew that it would help pull out the detail in the face. To this end I found that the lighting setup, shown in figure 1, was extremely successful.
The gallery was purposefully set up in a non-typical fashion for this kind of showing. The element most out of the ordinary was the placement of the title at the beginning of the gallery as compared to the placement of the artist’s statement at the end, as can be seen in the gallery shots. Typically, the title of the gallery, along with the artist’s statement, greets the observer immediately upon entering the space. However, I placed the artist’s statement at the end of the gallery so that the observer is forced to read it at after viewing the entire gallery. This was done due to the specific ideas of the project. The observer is supposed to see the set as a whole without any guidance in order to think about why the people were selected for it before being told the idea behind the project. This forces the viewer to look back at what they originally thought about the individuals and realize that their ideas of what a Jewish person looks like may be incorrect.

In addition to the out of the ordinary gallery set up, the framing of the images was also quite unusual. Typically, photographs are matted which creates a border between the end of the image and the beginning of the frame. However, I decided not to do this. I felt that having the
image stop right at the edge of the frame gave it more power. It made the image seem larger as well as emphasized what the viewer can see. Therefore, I felt that it would detract from the gallery to mat the images. Additionally, I would have had to have used larger frames to fit the matt which would have meant fewer images presented in the gallery. This would have further detracted from the power of Shtetl. I purposefully left the images untitled as doing so helps to foster a sense of community between the individuals by stripping them of some of their overabundance of individuality.

Influential Artists

These portraits become part of a continuum extending on the work by Chuck Close and Paul Strand. The aesthetic of Chuck Close’s portraits have had a profound impact on me; not just the first time I saw them, but every time since as well. The daguerreotype portraits produced by Close from 1995 to present are as beautiful as they are haunting. What I love most about his portraits is the detail and work with shallow depth of field. The level of detail in each portrait makes the viewer feel as though they are right there with the person. The detail is then further exaggerated by the incredibly shallow depth of field that Close uses in his portraits. Because the out of focused sections of the image are so close to the sections in focus, the detail is heightened. The shallow depth of field helps separate the details of the face from everything else in the image, which greatly contributes to the haunting nature of the images. These features are demonstrated below in figure 2.
I wanted to recreate these ascetics as closely as possible in my own images. However, I did have some serious technical issues in doing this. Part of the defining visuals of Close’s daguerreotypes is due to the light wavelengths that the daguerreotype process reacts to. These are different than the wavelengths that the film I was using picked up. Therefore, I had to artificially create these visuals through the use of extremely high contrast.

While the aesthetic style of Chuck Close does play a large part in my portraits, I diverge from his style too. One of the largest differences between my portraits and Close’s is the use of lighting. Close uses a soft and steady light on his subjects. There is very little shadow in his work, and the light is even on most of his portraits. In addition, there are no harsh spots on his subjects. The opposite is true of my work. For me, dramatic shadows and harsh lighting are very important to the end product. The exaggerated shadows extenuate and highlight the shapes
and contours of the face, while the harsh direct light helps to bring out the detail in the image. Additionally, I have found that the harsh lighting creates visually interesting textures on the faces of my subjects.

The look and posing of my subjects is different than those of Close’s subjects, and that is because, for that aspect of the portraits, I looked to Paul Strand. What strikes me about Strand’s portraits, is that they are able to convey a huge amount of emotion and idea with very few visual cues. For the most part, the individuals in his portraits had little facial expression; most in fact, were dead pan when he photographed them, as can be seen in figure 3. This spoke volumes to me. The absence of anything on the face of the subjects allows the true person to flow through the image. I tried to recreate this in the portraits for this project. I felt that keeping the subjects dead pan would do two things. The first is that it would allow the observer to come to their own
conclusions about the individual instead of imposing a forced feeling of happiness or other form of emotion on them. Second, is it would set a uniform baseline for all of the subjects. Smiles would have worked to further individualize the subjects, while having them all have the same dead pan look works to foster a sense of connectedness between the individuals.

While it is certain that connections can be made between my portraits and those of Richard Avedon, I find it important to point out that his work did not, in fact, influence mine. While I have studied him in the past and there is a similar style between us with the use of close up detailed images, not once has his aesthetic ever played into mine. I believe in a much tighter crop of the face with more contrast and detail. He is an extremely influential photographer, and because of that, there may be a subconscious influence on my work. However, there was not a conscious effort on my part to emulate him in any way.

A large part of the impetus behind this project comes from the artist Jason Francisco. Jason is the head of the photography department at Emory University, and one of the main topics for his work is Judaism. I have had the honor of meeting him when I was in high school and having long conversations on this topic with him. In addition, I have continued to keep in touch with him to the present time. As a Jew himself, Jason has allowed a great deal of his work to be influenced by his Jewish upbringing. He has become known for his work on capturing “Jewish identity” through the medium of photography. His ideas, as well as his passion on the matter have helped to push me to make work addressing this topic.

I have gone down a different path in my own work on the Jewish Identity. Much of Jason’s work revolves around Jewish history, and how that has affected the Jewish identity. Specifically, he focuses on the memories of individuals, many of whom were forced to flee their
homes during the Holocaust. He has traveled the world taking portraits of these individuals as well as locations from their past.

While many of his ideas have affected me, especially those on identity and the Jewish community, I have chosen to focus on it in a different way. I look at the community and how, not only it views itself, but how outsiders view it as well. While Jason’s work is an introspective on the Jewish identity, mine is an outward look. My work not only looks at the Jewish community and how it is interrelated, but also attempts to remove the misconceptions that outsiders have of Jews. For this reason, I believe that my project has a larger appeal across the board than his. His work would be of most interest to a Jewish individual because of the connection they have with it, whereas my project, is accessible and made for everyone.

**Conclusion**

As has been mentioned in the introduction, this project is something that is very close to my heart. I have drawn upon my own personal experiences of being a Jewish individual to help create Shtetl. This was a project to dispel the myth of the stereotypical Jew, but it has also revealed so much more about the Jewish experience and community. Jason Francisco summed this up best when he said that the Shtetl images display the haunted nature that is within all Jews. I have been lucky enough to be able to display these ideas in my images through my knowledge of the work of previous artists such as Chuck Close, Paul Strand, and Jason Francisco, in addition to my own ideas on photography. I took Close’s aesthetic nature, Strand’s emotional power, and some of Francisco’s ideas on the photography of Jewish people, and used them to with my own personal take on the matter to create the images in Shtetl. Shtetl proves that there
is no such thing as an outwardly stereotypical Jew, as well as show the emotional interconnectedness of the Jewish Community.

**Exhibition Check List**

Frank Lieberman  
Shtetl  
May 1st – May 16th  
Warch Campus Center Third Floor Gallery

**Gallery Shots**

First Wall  
Second Wall and Alcove

Third Wall with Artist’s Statement  
Long View Towards Third Wall
Images

*Untitled (Mariah)*
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

*Untitled (Will)*
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

*Untitled (Allison)*
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

*Untitled (Danny)*
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20
Untitled (Taylor)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Russ)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Annica)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Mark)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20
Untitled (Dani)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Finkler)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Robin)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Sarah T.)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20
Untitled (Aaron)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Sam)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Bryan)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Sarah B.)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20
Untitled (Abby)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Lena)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Tyler)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Laura)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20
Untitled (Max)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Clair)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Frank)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20

Untitled (Morgan)
Silver Gelatin Print
16 x 20
Acknowledgments

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Bibliography


