Anthony Urrea on finding your subject

September 28, 2017 – Anthony Urrea, is a Colombian American photographer who received his BFA from SVA in 2017. His work actively questions themes of identity and legitimacy, inviting the viewer to reconsider how different bodies are seen. His inclination to explore the visual and psychic complexity of non-normative identities stems from his experience as a young queer Latino. "Growing up, I didn't feel very beautiful or comfortable with myself and I think that's one thing that I try to do with my work," says Urrea. "Empowerment occurs through making these images, but I don't think it's necessarily the point of the work."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2040 words.

Tags: Photography, Education, Inspiration, Process, Identity.

How did your photographic practice develop? Were you always taking pictures of people around you?

I don't know. I guess when I first got my camera. I was in my second year of high school and my uncle had given me a Polaroid camera that he found in his garage. It was the cheesiest way of doing anything. When I went to Colombia, I just started taking portraits of my family, which seems weird now because I don't really photograph my biological family at all. I have a really hard time doing that. But that's how I started. I went to college originally to do Cultural Anthropology and was pushing myself away from doing art school, but then I went through a serious depression during and realized that the only time I really enjoyed my life was when I started taking photos again. My work has been this means of escape from other things. It makes me happy.

I've talked to people who have said "School was beneficial for me to help me figure out what my practice was and crystallize what it is I'm trying to do." I've talked to other people who say, "I never went to school. I just work intuitively and maybe it's better that I *don't* know what I'm doing." As someone fresh out of art school, how do you feel about that?

I think I fall right in the middle. School was really beneficial, but art school is full of very white, wealthy students. That made it hard to talk about the work I was making. I met the people that influenced my work and my professors hit on things I never thought about, so it was influential in that way. But I saw a lot of things that aggravated me in that world. At the end of the day, it was all useful information, even though sometimes it wasn't a great time. Still, I learned a lot about myself and how I work. I think a lot of people fall into this mode of creating work *for* school and not thinking about what they're actually making or why they're making it. I didn't want to do that.

How do you tend to work? What is your process?

I'm a manic person. I'll go a month without shooting and then for the next three weeks, I just can't put my camera down. It all really depends on how I feel. One thing I've learned is that I can't stress myself out to be creating all the time, which is something I had been doing. Just like with social media—we have this desire to be doing things constantly and documenting *all* of it. I finally let go of that. Whenever things start to go in my head, then I start to create. I tend to photograph all of my queer family, so whenever I'm with them, it's a more natural, organic way of shooting. I have a hard time when I'm forced to sit down and work on an editorial or something that wasn't my idea. To do my best work, it's all about being relaxed and spending time with my friends and family.

There's obviously a real intimacy in the photos. They also often relate to classic portraiture in the way that the people are posed. I assume that must be intentional.

For sure. When I think about the people who influenced my work, someone like Peter Hujar, it's all very classic portraits. Documenting the relationships with my friends allows an easy intimacy to happen. Once you have that, what you create from it is naturally very honest. I think there's a habit with photographers of my generation where it's often more about the people than the relationships. For me it's about the relationships. That's where it starts.

When you look at your body of work or the way that you've been able to photograph these people who are close to you, what's important about making these images? What do you feel like it adds to the conversation in regards to what is happening now in terms of queer art?

It's impossible to escape the topic of queerness within the body of work simply because of my queer identity. I grew up in very upper class Jersey suburbs and that put a lot of pressure on how I thought of myself and how I treated myself and my body. I'm also first generation Colombian and I think that's a big factor with my work. Growing up, I didn't feel very beautiful or comfortable with myself and I think that's one thing that I try to do with my work. Empowerment occurs through making these images, but I don't think it's necessarily the point of the work.

My work isn’t necessarily about empowerment. Allowing the true person to shine through is the most important thing, allowing people to be themselves. I think that what I want to capture is just this truth of people. When creating, I’m not like, “Oh, this is about *this*.” But then when you put the body of work together, it becomes about this larger subject.

Anytime you’re making representations of queer bodies and trans bodies, specifically through the prism of 2017, it’s a loaded thing. Your portraits, particularly your photos of Bailey Stiles, speak to this in a graceful way. It isn’t just about the physical body itself.

In school when we’d talk about the work—I’m thinking of one specific portrait I have of Bailey—the conversation would always be about the body but never about the relationships represented or about anything besides this one thing. It’s hard to escape that just because of where we are. When I’m photographing her, I’m not viewing it as “Let me photograph this trans body,” which I feel like a lot of people right now are fetishizing and glorifying in strange ways, as if it were a new fad or something. For me, it’s not about that. It’s about this beautiful person, who is more than just her body.

This is why talking about my work makes me nervous, because you are conscious of having to talk about the work in a careful, specific kind of way. You start to think about how it will be viewed and read. These people are my friends, my family, so when I'm taking their photos I'm not thinking about "normalizing queer bodies," but just seeing this person I love and care for and creating a space to be who they are at that moment in time when I'm taking the portrait.

You also photograph yourself a lot. Why is that important?

At first I really didn't incorporate myself into the work. I was just predominately making work around my friends and stuff like that and wasn't incorporating myself that much into the images. I eventually started to realize that a lot of the issues around not photographing myself were directly related to issues I had with myself, which isn't surprising, I guess. I didn't find myself to be attractive in this way that other people did. Part of accepting myself and loving myself involved doing self-portraits. I was able to let go of all the issues and accept myself, which had been a big problem connected to the way I grew up—being a minority, being queer, being brown. A big part of finding my subject matter was really about finding my community. It took me a little longer to realize that feel comfortable with the idea that I was also my subject.

Do you always shoot with a Polaroid?

Yeah, they're all Polaroids. That work is mostly what I have on my Instagram, but I also shoot with a 4 x 5 format. I really love the 4 x 5 just because it slows everything down, makes everything slower and more intimate and allows me to be in that moment with the person. My Polaroids are an easy thing I can do on the go that I'm also obsessed with. The "instant" nature of polaroids is great because I'm impatient, but there is just something about they way they look, they suggest this kind of alternate time and space. I fell in love with them as soon as I got my first camera, but it's also an easier way to shoot—for me, anyway—than doing digital DSLR's or something. It feels different. It allows me to be in the moment. It's an easy camera to use, but knowing how to make really good images with it can be a hard thing.

It's very easy to take a bad photo with a Polaroid.

I think my first three years doing Polaroids are tragic. It just became this thing for me. I'd carry it everywhere. It fits in my bag. It's just an extension of my arm.

You have an Instagram. Do you find that most people discover you that way?

A lot of people do. I go through periods of hating Instagram and hating social media, but then also really enjoying it. I think it's great in the sense that you can literally get your work anywhere. I know that people in other countries can be viewing the work and that's great. I think social media has totally created this idea of what things can be and what people are and stuff like that. I have definitely tried to escape the idea of what my generation is typically using Instagram for, which feels like a popularity contest. I'm just trying to have my work be seen. In that way, it's been good.

It's funny, the way I have my Instagram, the images appeared in rows of three. I found that was actually heavily influencing the way I treated my work, also because this book I keep my Polaroids in is also rows of three. Without even realizing it, that was putting this pressure of how I thought about my work. At a certain point, I took a step back from Instagram for about six months and focused in on my actual photographs and stopped thinking about views or likes. I think people tend to do that, they really connect how well they're doing with their work with their Instagram and it's easy to get sucked into that. I try not to connect the value of my work with those things and just think of it as a space to show images. I can't knock it because of gotten editorial jobs because of my Instagram. It can obviously be beneficial.

The images you have on your website you wouldn't be able to post on Instagram without getting into trouble over the nudity.

Censorship is always an annoying thing with Instagram. A lot of my photographs are nudes, so I'm constantly putting cheesy hearts over dicks or over all my trans girlfriends' boobs. It seems so stupid, but also it's Instagram so I get it. I guess I put certain things on my Instagram and other things I wouldn't even bother because I know it would get deleted. You get annoyed by it, but it's another thing that I think is important to acknowledge—it's a digital space where you can get work, you can show work, but it's not a place where your work should exist in general. I've been working on a book for the past two years, which is almost done. That's where I want the actual work to live—in books and gallery spaces, not on your phone. I like physical, visible things. Your phone is great, but I like paper and prints a lot more.

Anthony Urrea recommends:

Bailey Stiles

Martine Gutierrez

Matt Holmes

María José

Benjamin Ackerman

Name
Anthony Urrea

Vocation
Photographer

Fact

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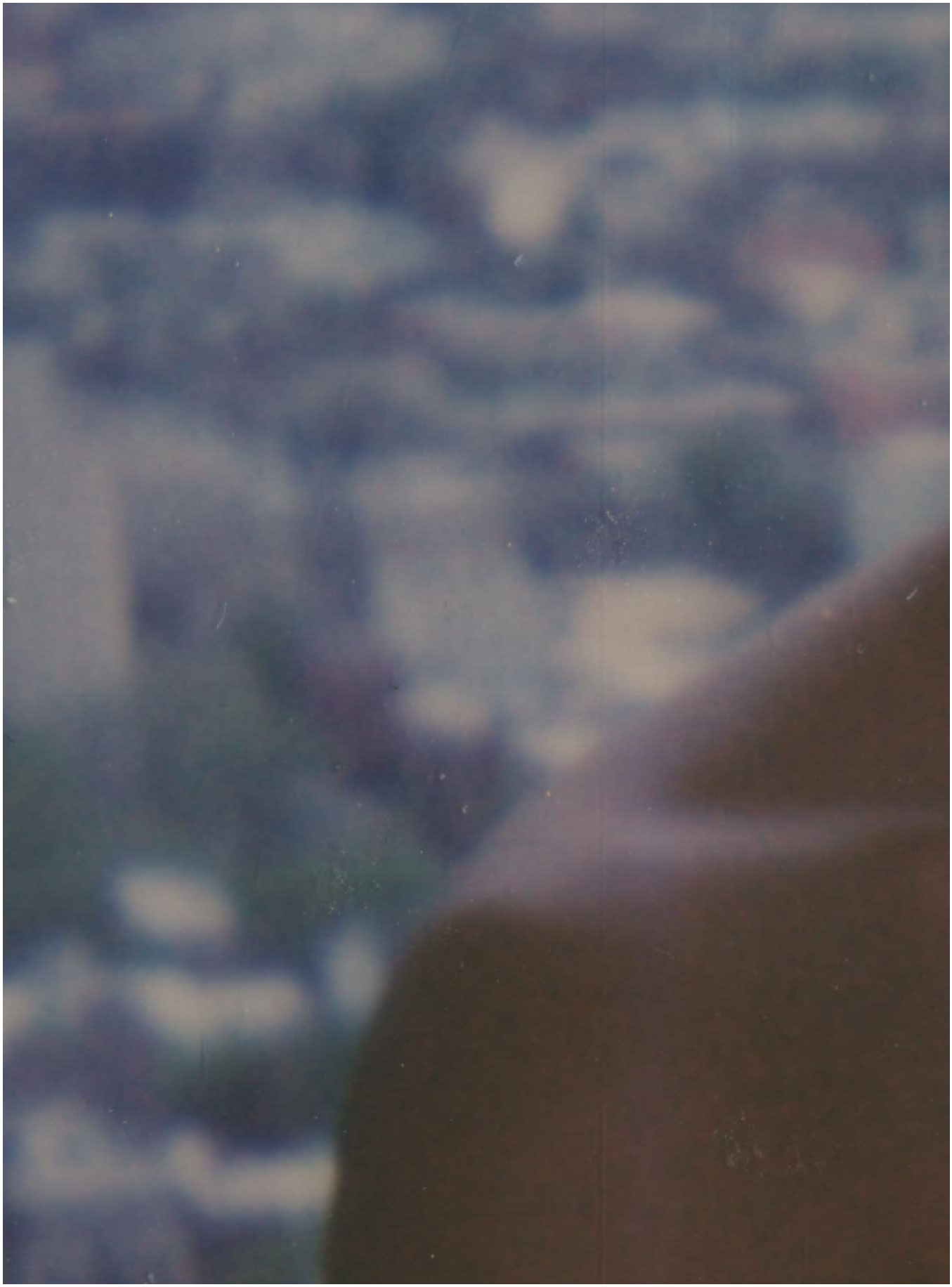

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