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[PSYCHOLOGY] **LOOSE THREADS**

JOSHUA LUTZ DREW ON HIS EXPERIENCE WITH HIS MOTHER'S MENTAL ILLNESS TO CREATE A BOOK ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING. BY CONOR RISCH

THE FABRIC OF human memory is woven from the threads of thoughts, perceptions, and the recognition of meaning in details large and small. At times those threads form something that feels heavy and solid and long lasting. But memory can also be delicate, prone to snagging or even unraveling completely.

Joshua Lutz's new book *Hesitating Beauty* is concerned with, among many things, the fragility of memory touched by mental illness. Based on Lutz's personal experience with his own mother, who suffered from schizophrenia, the book interweaves Lutz's photographs with images from his family archive, and with text that Lutz fabricated, writing letters from the imagined perspectives of his mother and father.

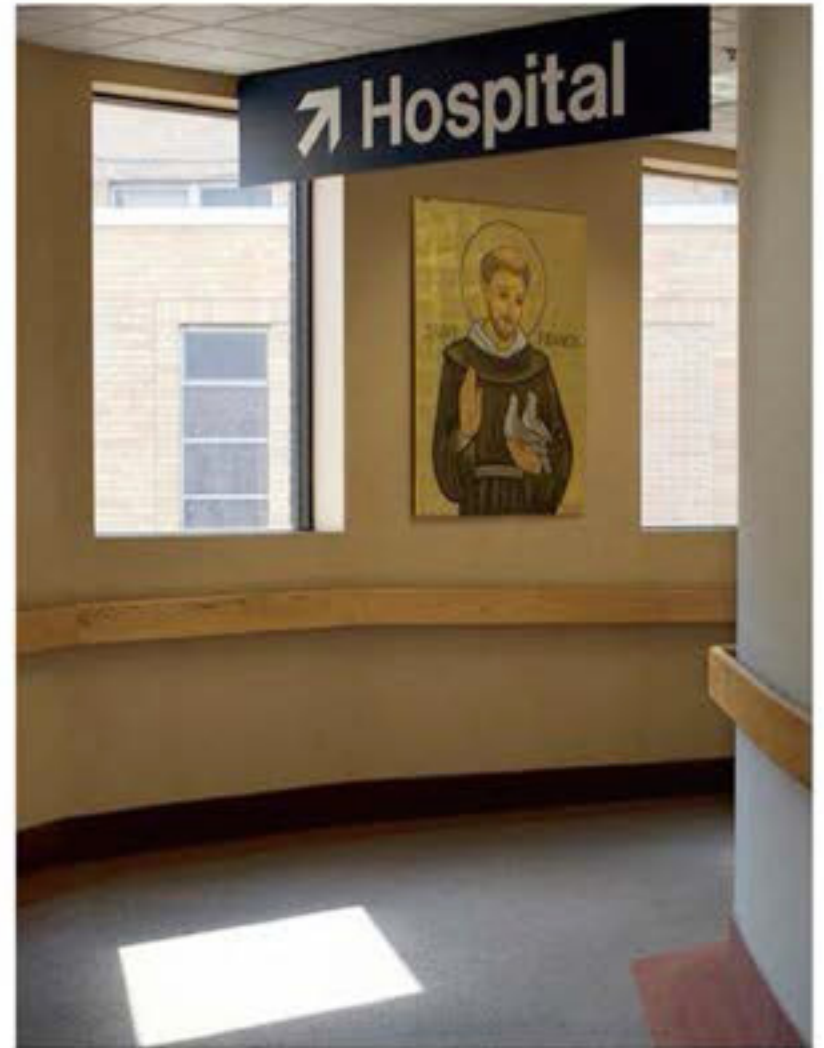
Though it's based on Lutz's life growing up with a paranoid schizophrenic mother who eventually had to be hospitalized (she died a few years ago), the book is "fiction-ish," Lutz says. Rather than trying to represent the lives of his family members, Lutz sought to convey the experience of attempting to "wrap my mind around my mom's illness, my mom's life, my life. It's something that the photographs can't do, writing can't do," Lutz says. "For me, it's inexplicable, and so how do you address that thing that's inexplicable?"



ALL PHOTOS © JOSHUA LUTZ

Though Joshua Lutz's book *Hesitating Beauty* is based on his experiences growing up with a mentally ill mother, Lutz says it's "fiction-ish." It includes staged images and fabricated texts.

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As he was sequencing the book, Lutz would include images meant to “rupture” any understanding the reader was building, “to bring it back to that place of not knowing” which was representative of his experience.

The photographs Lutz created for the book include images of his mother in the hospital, staged photographs in which Lutz imagines “another life” for her—“an escape from the life that she had,” he says—and images that reflect the world as Lutz imagines his mother might have seen it, “in utter terror.” In this context, photographs of everyday things, like an address on a home or mailbox, a man carrying pruned tree branches on his shoulder or a blank highway sign, become threatening. “For her, all that

stuff would become proof and evidence,” Lutz says.

Though Lutz had for several years considered creating a project about his experience with his mother, it wasn’t until he felt sure that he wouldn’t be afflicted with schizophrenia himself that he was able to address her illness. “Coming to terms with that enabled me to really think about what she’s going through, and to sit with it and make work with it,” he says. The process of making photographs that imagined how she saw the world was “freeing.”

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Opposite page and above: One of the "freeing" things Lutz did as he worked on the book was to try to imagine and photograph the world as his mother might have seen it. "I tried to feel what she was feeling," he says.

JOSHUA LUTZ: "I DON'T HAVE ANY SENSE OF ANY CONCLUSION OR UNDERSTANDING. IF ANYTHING I FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE IN NOT HAVING ANY SORT OF CONCLUSION."

Lutz says. "I just tried to feel what she was feeling."

Creating the book wasn't cathartic, however. Lutz says he's no closer to understanding the experience of his mother or what he and his family experienced. The book is as much about the process of Lutz trying, in different ways, to figure it out, and being unable to. "I don't have any sense of any conclusion or understanding," Lutz says. "If anything I feel more comfortable in not having any sort of conclusion."

In sequencing the images for the book, Lutz was able to address the struggle for explanation. Through the introduction of a certain text, or character, Lutz wanted to "rupture" the reader's understanding of the story, "to bring it back to that place of not knowing, to bring it back to that place of confusion and to sit with that confusion again," Lutz says.

A handful of the photographs and letters hint at an escape; we see a woman in a field wearing a hospital gown. "If we leave this week, we can be halfway there by morning, and they won't ever know I left," reads one of the letters. In another photograph we see a handsome man smoking a cigarette, sitting with his arm around a smiling woman. This is Lutz "imagining my mom escaping



and leaving the hospital and starting a new life."

If *Hesitating Beauty* is about Lutz's attempts to come to terms with what happened to his mother, the impulse to create a different outcome for her is part of that story. But in the process of making the work, Lutz explains, "I stopped saying, 'Why me, why her, why this?' And I just became OK with what it was."

Through working on the book, which was published earlier this year by Schilt Publishing, and putting together his recent exhibition at ClampArt in New York City, Lutz has also learned that he's not alone in his experience. "The thing that I'm finding in making this work is that the story is not that unique. That's the sad thing, how many people are struggling and suffering." **pdn**



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