

Curatorial Statement for “Contemporary Photographic Practice and the Archive” exhibition at the Harry Ransom Center

by Susan Scafati Shahan

Inspired by the ways in which archives provide glimpses into individual lives and creative processes, my own body of work captures my personal journey developing the character Shelly-Ann McGlamery, through which I intentionally blur the lines between fiction and reality. The impetus for this series initiated with a snapshot of Norman Mailer in swim trunks and a snorkel mask that left me with questions: Who took it? Was snorkeling a favorite pastime? How did it get to be part of his archive? I found myself captivated by how the artifacts within one’s personal history fit into a larger organization of meaning. In the past decade, my artwork has addressed the ways in which individual and collective identities are influenced by their cultural contexts, including bullfights, robot competitions, nun traditions, and through the biological nature of ant colonies. In the making of Shelly-Ann, I weave together real artifacts and environments from my Austin, Texas-based surroundings and explore the connections that arise. Techniques are drawn from archive selections where the hand of the artist is present, such as editing marks and torn paper, as well as deliberate, performative acts like staging of the model.

My series starts with *Three Shellies* in which she is drafted, crumpled, in progress. This triptych connects to the repetition and acts of staging seen in Audrey Hepburn’s *My Fair Lady* hairstyle test photos and Pierre Cordier’s chemigrams. The chemigrams additionally reinforce the transition from figurative to abstract, in which the medium itself is pushed through camerless experimentation that fuses painting and photography.

My *Whiteboard/Blackboard* diptych is a reverie, in the spirit of Cy Twombly, of the passionate correspondences preserved in the archive. The style also references Maurice Ravel’s colorfully annotated orchestral score whereby the expressive lines are at once a record of the act of editing and a visually striking memoir.

In the *Strings + Lines* diptych, Shelly-Ann plays the violin alongside objects that are visible in the captured moment—the violin strings and white Mongolian bow hair—and ones that are implied—the tuning pegs needed to harmonize the sound. A physical parallel is drawn between the photographic moment and a dissection of the fragments that compose it.

Performance in Granite and Wax contrasts Shelly-Ann with the background present and then dissolved. This technique references Henry Peach Robinson’s *Girl with a Sunbonnet* and his interest in art-making as a means of creative expression in addition to reality-based reproduction. The artist’s influence is also exemplified in the working print of Arnold Newman’s portrait of George Brassai, in which the editing techniques indicate the subjective discretion of image-making. Structurally, the crumpling and wax casting of Shelly-Ann simultaneously signifies preservation and transformation – both from a photograph to an object as well as self metamorphosis and transcendence.

The sculpture titled *Yippee Ki Yay*, consisting of over three hundred images from the making of Shelly-Ann, is a mini-archive that contemplates the act of archiving and repurposing history. The objects interspersed throughout— such as pieces of a violin, a Harry Ransom Center brochure, and a bag from the photography lab— give visibility into the creative process, considering works-in-progress as singular artifacts of an individual’s history.