

THE PROCESS

IN WHICH AN ARTIST DISCUSSES MAKING A PARTICULAR WORK

Leigh Ledare, *Shoulder*

I first encountered Leigh Ledare's photographs when I was twenty-two years old. The majority of them were of Ledare's fifty-year-old mother presenting herself to Leigh in a hypersexualized fashion; in one now-well-known series of images, she splayed her bare legs open for her son's camera, smiling as he photographed her hairless labia, her black panties pulled all the way to one side. In another series, Ledare photographed his mother in the act of having sex with a younger male partner. Those and other photographs were shocking to me, but others were solemn or tender or both, and were complemented by collages and pieces of text. The resulting book, which came to be titled *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, was a familiar and disturbing visual exploration of emotional projection, neediness, and familial enactment.

A few years later, I saw Ledare on the Canal Street subway platform, in New York, and almost said something to him. I forgot that he didn't know me and we weren't friends (it's easy to believe otherwise when you spend a long time with someone's work at an impressionable age). A few years after that, I attended a lecture he gave in Oakland in which he screened his short video *Shoulder*, which we discuss here.
—Carmen Winant

BLVR: I first saw *Shoulder* in 2010, when you came to give a lecture about your work at California College of the Arts, in Oakland, where I was a graduate student.—Had you made videos before that point?

LEIGH LEDARE: Yes. I initially started making videos when I was a teenager. I would shoot things and edit them with two VCR decks, although these were quite crude.

BLVR: Is this the first video that you have shown as an adult, and in this capacity?

LL: Actually, *Shoulder* was part of a triptych; there were two other videos that served as counterpoints. *The Model* is composed of a static shot of my mother anesthetized in a hospital bed and breathing very shallowly. It's nearly still,

except for one point when a noise in the background interrupts the silence and her eyes open for a brief instant. The audio from an interview I had made with her the night before—in which she discussed the differing agencies of the model and the photographer—is dubbed over the top. The third video, called *The Gift*, is a reedit that I made from a soft-core spanking-fetish video that my mother shot with family friends. The footage was too flawed for them to use, so she sent the raw tapes to me. It arrived unsolicited with a note that read: "This is a gift. Now it's your obligation to make something out of it." My edit revealed a portrait of the two men directing my mother from behind the camera, and her playing to and resisting that direction. It's disturbing, but there's also an incredible sense of amusement.

BLVR: I didn't know that this video had companions.

LL: Oftentimes the videos are shown separately. But as counterpoints to each other they reveal a series of shifting roles and complicate the notion of the gaze within the photographic transaction. *Shoulder* differs in that I created a prompt—to offer her a shoulder to cry on.

BLVR: Can you describe what happens? *Happens* is not really the right word—it's a nine-minute single take in which there is very little action, though a lot of narrative.

LL: It begins with me behind the camera filming my mother. She's seated on the couch in her living room, addressing both the camera and me with a sardonic, clipped humor, self-reflexively speaking about the film that we're in the process of making. She explains that her boyfriend, because of his lack of appreciation, doesn't offer her permission to access this creative side of herself; similarly, she doesn't appreciate his tastes because there's nothing emotional there that she can relate to. I walk into the frame and sit down on the couch facing her, my back to the camera. Peering into the camera, she asks if we're ready to begin. I say yes and ask her if the light on the camera is

blinking. She nods in acknowledgment, then asks me what that means and I say, “It’s filming.” Over the course of one single take, the emotional atmosphere shifts, vacillating from guarded conversation to vulnerability to a kind of cathartic crying. At one point she comes very close to me on the couch, almost mounting me in a way. This recalls the sexual tension in earlier works we made, but here it seems like an almost childlike embrace. After several minutes of crying, she thanks me, and I walk out of the frame. Her eyes follow me as I leave the room, leaving her alone to reflect on the situation. The camera is used to mediate the act we are involved in, but the visual field it creates is also a mechanism that grants her a certain agency and reflection. In other words, we see ourselves through being seen, always taking into account our own projections and the projections of those around us.

BLVR: Your work is often spoken of in terms of the entanglement of intimacy, desire, and fantasy. Your Wikipedia page describes you as “a fine-art photographer who uses photography and video to document his highly eroticized relationship with his mother.” What do you think of that sentence?

LL: It’s heavily simplified. The project tries to complicate a simple understanding of her, and show how she was using her sexuality toward many different ends: to find companionship, to deny the fact that she was aging, to gain an intimacy with me and my brother, to find a benefactor who would support her, and as an antagonism aimed at my grandfather, and, by extension, society, which dictated expectations of how she was supposed to behave as a daughter, mother, and woman of her age. So there are these social, economic, and psychological dilemmas embedded in the work. The work serves to map these relationships.

BLVR: Do you consider work you made with your mother as one discrete body of work or a series of interrelated projects?

LL: In a sense the project with my mother became an index that I worked back into in subsequent projects. But all these projects—including the many where other subjects appear: my ex-wife and her new husband, the collector, the viewer

of the work—unfold, and fold in on, each other. Each functions as a lens that complicates the other bodies of work. One example would be the project *Personal Commissions*, where I contacted women who had placed personal advertisements that alluded to a romantic exchange in return for financial compensation. Treating them as surrogates for my mother, I answered their ads and, instead of photographing them, asked them to direct and photograph me, in effect inverting the relationship with my mother. It was a way of proposing a female gaze, withholding the identities of these women, while at the same time intervening in a preexisting social framework into which these women were describing themselves through the form of the personal ad, in ways dictated by the marketplace and a specifically gendered, sexual economy. It was also a way of placing my mother’s actions, which might be read in an isolated way, within the context of a common cultural practice.

BLVR: Your mother—as we know from your previous work—has been a performer her whole life, first as a dancer for the New York City Ballet, later as a stripper, and finally as the subject of your work. She is no stranger to staging. This leads me to wonder even more about her “performance” in this video.

LL: The video is a scripted experience. But that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a fictionalization or theater. The emotion that underlies it is very concrete, even if as viewers we can’t see its source. By staging this situation, I was attempting to break through a protective distance and reconfigure an intimacy with her. But there’s also an attempt to question the overdetermination of meaning that we assume documentary photography carries. Even if we don’t admit it, I’m convinced that our realities are scripted in similar ways. One doesn’t have to look beyond the family vacation, the classroom, consumption patterns, even marriage, for that matter, to see the role of ritual within our social lives. Our realities are actively constructed.

BLVR: You believe that we stage experiences so that they might become real.

LL: Right. It’s how we set intimacies into play. By creating a scripted experience in *Shoulder*, I tried to foreground the

negotiation between the photographer and the model, and the model and the audience, while pointing to the limits of any notion of an authentic subject.

BLVR: Your work has been written about a fair amount in psychoanalytic terms. Have you read any Melanie Klein? In particular, I am thinking about this section from her 1964 book, *Love, Hate and Reparation*, where she writes: “As baby boys we turn away from our mothers in a dissatisfaction which leads us as it were, to split her in two and separate her nipple, her milk-giving function, from itself... So it is by turning away from our mothers that we finally become, in our different paths, grown men and women.”

LL: I'm very interested in psychoanalysis, and Melanie Klein. As young infants, we have a sense of the world in line with our interiority. Once we start to have an understanding that things exist outside of us, the transitional object—a blanket, or stuffed animal—becomes a stand-in for the mother's breast. [Psychoanalyst] Donald Winnicott has written a lot on this as well: in order to form a subjective identity, we have to assert difference through the negation of the other. But I'm especially interested in how we use objects to mediate our relationships with the world, both internally and externally. Very importantly, in *Shoulder*, my face is never directly seen; there's always this withholding of meaning. By not being allowed to see the registration of my reaction, the interaction with my mother is telegraphed outward to the viewer. It becomes the viewer's job to add it.

BLVR: But you do turn away, eventually.

LL: At the end of the video, I stand up and my mother watches me walk out of frame. This eventual act of withdrawal from the situation echoed the question that she would ask me later: will I continue making work with her? In a blunt way, she wants that.

BLVR: Have you ever seen the Sophie Calle video of her mother's final breaths before dying? She showed it at the Venice Biennale in 2010. I heard Calle give a lecture once in which she discussed the piece, and then fielded audience questions about exploitation and complicity. She said the funniest thing, and in such a causal, French way: that

her mother was a performer, and would have loved all the attention. In that sense, she felt the piece was a homage to her mother rather than an instrumentalization of her body. She was shocked when other people responded to it so intensely. I wonder if you can relate to that?

LL: Well, I began photographing my mother when I arrived home on holiday and she answered the door entirely naked, as if to announce what she was up to at that point in her life—take it or leave it. There was a form of masochism inherent within the extremely sexualized persona she was putting forward... my mother becoming a stripper and dating promiscuously through the personal ads, but also exposing herself sexually to me and enlisting me to photograph her. By submitting me to that, she placed herself in a subjugated position as well as asserted a kind of dominance. It's a kind of topping from the bottom. I responded by mimicking this persona that was being projected onto me.

I see myself as trying to raise these ethical questions, and I think that art has to be allowed to serve this function as a negative diagnostic tool. While I consider myself as working out of a feminist legacy, the idea that we are allowed to express ourselves only “correctly” becomes equally problematic. There's a stake in showing these parts of our culture that we don't deal with, that we're inured to because they are so ever-present, or that we relegate to a cultural blind spot because we're afraid to be identified with them. I am implicated. And we are all implicated, whether we choose to address it or not. It's important that we continue to discuss this on a real level. ★