Erica and I: A Photographic Battle with Perception

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Abstract

I photograph that which is closest and most meaningful to me: my family.

Focusing primarily on my 10-year-old sister, Erica, I project myself into her childhood to inform my own perceptions and memories. Photography assists with negotiating my role within the family and securing my overwhelming need to belong. The frame grants distance and control, and by looking through the camera, I am comforted.

As Erica's identity is obscured, I merge in. I question my past and her present, revealing her sweet oblivion with my indirect discernment. The resulting pictures manifest as a dance in which Erica and I unite in collaboration.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my younger siblings—Wayne, Tyler, and Erica.
Acknowledgments

Thank you so very much to my mother, Lynne Foltz Vanvorhis, for allowing me to do this project and share these photographs, no questioned asked. She is very brave and unassuming.

Thank you to Erica Powell for her spirited enthusiasm and participation in the project. She is the window into my childhood.

Thank you to Larry Vanvorhis for welcoming me into his home with my mother and occasionally appearing in the photographs.

Thank you to Tyler Powell, my 14-year-old brother, who was living with grandma during the project, but has been no stranger to my camera.

Thank you to Anna Renee Staebler for many good meals and discussions. She is a godsend, and so too is the rest of the Staebler family.

Thank you to Shirley Newsom, my grandmother, for taking me to the art museum when I was little, and then when I was bigger.

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Introduction

My sister Erica was born at 4 a.m., and mom made giving birth look easy. I photographed as Erica made her way out of my mother. I cut her umbilical cord and was the first to hold her. This is when I gave her a name, though she didn’t get to keep it. And she peed on me.

When people photograph, they typically photograph things they wish to remember and things that are important to them. I have not yet been interested in photographing anything except my family for this reason. Ten, twenty, thirty years from now, I don’t expect to care for photographs of strangers or random objects. Therefore, I don’t waste my time capturing them.

I have photographed my sister, Erica, in my mom’s home, off and on, her entire life. Being photographed by my camera was the first thing that ever happened to her. I was 20 years old when she was born. And currently, my older pictures of her are the ones I cherish most. Childhood is a beautiful, fleeting thing.

The more I learn about my photographing and the more I do it, the less I seem to like doing it. It is difficult. With the aide of the camera, I have been confronting painful issues of emotional neglect, longing, anxiety, and discontent. I use the camera to cope; therefore, this project has been emotionally draining and difficult.
I spent a little over a year photographing my sister. I had little expectation and allowed my instincts to guide the project. Photographing became a way to interject myself back into the family.

Erica and I have worked together. I have allowed her to have her own ideas of what to photograph and how, in addition to allowing her to use the camera to photograph myself. I wanted her to be invested in this project and take her own sense of ownership with it. Although she has not made any editing decisions, I am sure that in many ways her feedback and responses have guided my selections.

As part of this process, I have also looked and talked about the photographs with Erica and my mother. Some of the comments are quoted in this thesis. Others are collected in the appendix. Talking about the photographs with each other has helped me to develop new understandings about my life and the way I perceive the world. It has also helped me to develop meaningful connections with my family.
Chapter 1: Installation Description

My work in the group MFA show at the OSU Urban Arts Space consisted of ten 25½ x 29½ color inkjet prints and a book of proof prints, or contact sheets. The wall images were scanned from 6x7 medium-format color film negatives. The final images were displayed double hung, in two rows of five. I choose white wooden frames with shadowbox, and no mat.

Figure 1. Installation Detail, 2010 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition, OSU Urban Arts Space
Narrowing the number of photographs down to ten images was difficult considering the scope of the project: I shot over 1500 negatives between November 2008 and February 2010. Taking pictures is very easy and intuitive for me, whereas editing becomes a bit tricky. This is because photographing for me is a mostly unconscious act, and editing is the opposite, a conscious act. To edit and make selections, I had to first digest my entire body of work: I recognized reoccurring elements and analyzed how the camera functioned.

Through the process of editing, the images were divided into many groups, and some were able to fulfill more than one category: outside looking in, inside looking out, reflections, obscuring/merging, reaching, self-comfort, neglect, perceived danger, and myself pictured by Erica. For the group show, I selected images to best represent these categories.

It was not my choice to put the images into a grid format on the wall, and I would definitely prefer them to be viewed individually. Originally, it was agreed that I could hang a row of eight or nine images, but I later had to consolidate due to space issues in the gallery. My other option was to cut the work down to just five images, which was an even less acceptable option than putting them into two rows of five. Cutting down to five would have forced me to remove too much content. My main problem with the presentation is how the images become one large composition together on the wall. The images do have a strong presence displayed together in rows, but I would have preferred them to be viewed individually, with much more space between them.
With the two rows of five, I organized the images to mostly balance formal issues. I was considering color, repetition and rhythm. I did not want one side to be too heavy with only individual images of Erica. I wanted to spread out the images with myself, establishing shots, and other characters such as my mother or the dog.

Although people tend to read from left to right, I didn’t consider that the rows would be read with a linear progression, and rather thought they would be viewed as a whole. I viewed the rows as one entity, not as something with a beginning, middle, or end. This might have been naive on my part.

I placed my mother and the unidentified male, both looking into the composition, on opposite corners, to keep the viewer within the grouping. I thought that placing the dog image next to the dog feces image would be too obvious a decision, and therefore put them on opposing corners as well. I didn’t consider that the dog feces image might be viewed as an ending. Had I thought I was ending my work on a sour note, I wouldn’t have put it there.

If I could change one thing, I might switch Lights with Dog Feces, or leave Dog Feces out altogether. I tend to walk on a fine line between the familiar and the awry, and that image is clearly not walking a fine line. Despite how I meant for it to symbolize neglect, using it may have become more about my stubbornness to include the image even when many told me not to. It was the only image I was worried about my mom being upset with at the opening reception, and though she seemed to be unfazed, I probably won’t use it again.
In addition to the ten photographs in the group exhibition, I also included a book of all the contacts sheets from the yearlong project. The book, *Erica and I: Proof Prints*, displays all of the photographs that have been taken since the start of the project. The main purpose of the book is to show how large and complex the project is. Ideally, I would like to have a solo exhibition with about seventy images.

It is important to show the way that I photograph. Every image is important because I am trying to make decisions about how I think and feel, about what is seen. I am trying to make decisions about how I remember my own past. Many images can be seen as sequences, and from one image to the next, they can read very differently. My
first selections, as chosen for the group show, are tinged with an inner turmoil, but to
complete this project and have a solo show, I will have to go back and look for images
that are more lighthearted.

Figure 3. Contact Sheet #1, excerpt from *Erica and I: Proof Prints*

Contact sheets are typically thought to be a private thing for the photographer, and
something that shouldn’t ever be viewed. I don’t think it would be fair for me to have
that kind of privacy; I surely haven’t given my family any privacy. In addition, I am
concerned with perception and how to change it. My photographing is indecisive
because it is as if I’m trying to negotiate with the way I see and how I feel. For myself, working with film is a perk. I cannot instantly make decisions about what I see. I need time to look at contact sheets later, when I’ve had months to sit with them. A digital camera would allow me to instantly see and question the images, which could potentially ruin my process.

Figure 4. Contact Sheet #2, excerpt from *Erica and I: Proof Prints*
Figure 5. Contact Sheet #3, excerpt from *Erica and I: Proof Prints*
My most recent images weren’t at all considered for the group show. They are too fresh. I need time to allow them to resonate with me.
Chapter 2: House and Van, Dog Feces

*House and Van* is an establishing shot. It acts as an anchor to give the rest of the pictures a sense of place and belonging. This photograph sets the stage. I have photographed the exterior of the home, from this vantage point, during all of the seasons, many times throughout the year. I chose this one, however, because of the morning light. I also selected it because of the van, which has been driven up into the yard. Side by side, the van makes the house look tiny, and I appreciate the play of scale. The house, however, is much bigger than it appears.

Figure 6. *House and Van*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5
I have shot almost exclusively at the home where my mother and Erica live. Typically, I go over to visit and photograph. A lot of the time, Erica showers and packs a bag. She spends the weekend with me at my home where we do things other than photograph: I take her to friends’ cookouts, to the library, to campus, grocery shopping, etc. It is important to me that our relationship isn’t defined by our photographing together.

![Image of Dog Feces](Figure_7.jpg)

Figure 7. *Dog Feces*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

To photograph *Dog Feces*, it did not take special photographic capabilities or knowledge. There was no difficult lighting situation or careful composition to consider. I have a tendency to make unbeautiful things look beautiful, and this photograph rejects that tendency. Anyone could have taken this photograph. What struck me was how the
backyard was not a fit place to play, and that’s what Erica and I were trying to do back there when I took this picture.

Dog Feces is a detail image. It is rather extreme due to the quantity of dog feces, but it is also familiar. Anyone that owns a dog deals with dog waste in his or her backyard. Dog Feces, however, is not necessarily about the dog waste, or what appears to be a significant amount of it. One day when Erica was flipping through my contact sheets, she rested on this image, and with a laugh exclaimed, “Ut, Amy, why you photograph poop?!?” My response at the time was, “Because it was there.” What I’ve since realized is that this image belongs to a group of images determined to signify neglect.

Neglect is found in the pee-stained bed, the debris in the yard, the overgrown weeds, the peeling paint, the torn wallpaper, and the fungi filled pool. It is in the isolation, where Erica often appears as the sole figure amusing herself in boredom. It is in the multitude of self-comforting poses in which Erica is embracing herself. Whether I found it by accident or directed it, I’m curious to know why I focus my attention this way when I work intuitively.

The Dog Feces photograph is one of many to show evidence of a cumulative perception and assessment of inattention and lack of care. When grouped together, the photographs demonstrating this highlight a feeling of neglect that is alive within myself. What I don’t understand is if I ever had a valid experience to warrant feeling this way, or if it is only an issue of perception. Regardless of whether my feelings of neglect are warranted, my photographing Erica and spending time with her is a way to show her the
affection, love, and attention that I believe I lacked, because when my mother photographed me as a child, I felt loved.
Chapter 2: Airplane Dog and Birthday Cake

The beagles were unavoidable—Sandy, Cassie, and Brutus. They always wanted to be a part of everything. When we were taking pictures I’d have to push them out of the way or lock them in a room somewhere else, but their persistence grew on me. The beagles wanted so much to be a part of everything that they became a welcomed and desired component in the photographing.
The dogs are a symbol of comfort, companionship, and unconditional love. In the photograph *Airplane Dog*, Cassie is at Erica’s command, willing and happy to comply in the unconventional pose she is stretched into. It positions Erica as a caregiver.

Sometimes it’s more difficult for me to find the comforting moments to counterbalance with the somber ones. *Birthday Cake* is intended to be an uplifting moment. Birthdays are associated with happy, joyous celebrations.
My mom and her identical twin were turning fifty, and they had no plans to celebrate. You could hear the sadness in my mom’s voice when I asked her about it. I simply could not let her turn fifty unnoticed. I felt that I had to do something to mark the occasion, and so I bought a simple cake and candles, and we sang. We went through the ritual together, but even still, this photograph is tinted with sadness. This celebration was a nice, but a mostly inadequate gesture. When I think about what a 50th birthday celebration is supposed to look like, this doesn’t compare—and one likely assumes that this celebration was for Erica.
Chapter 4: Cuffs

Diane Arbus once said, “I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.” I have always related to this statement. It is a challenge to work only with what I’m provided, what’s available, and to discern the moments which can be exploited. In a lot of ways, I feel that working within strict limitations reflects the limitations I had to overcome as a child. Growing up in what was once commonly described as a “lower-class” background, I was limited by not having reading material in the home, pencils to do homework at times, or cultural experiences such as travel. When photographing, by not taking liberties such as providing props, having planned ideas, or working with a lot of gear, it reflects these limitations.

When I first began photographing Erica, I didn’t credit myself for anything and insisted that my photographs looked the way they do because that was just how it happened to look at my mom’s house. I work with one camera and one lens, no tripod usually, and only available light. (One time I did try using lights, but that’s beside the point.) I kept getting comments from professors and classmates about my lighting and its quality, and how beautiful or Carravagioesques it is, but my lighting was truly a result of working within those limitations. I had to work with available window light.
In my photograph *Cuffs*, I took advantage of the lighting situation that was present. I did not tell my mom to get into her underwear. I did not tell Erica to put handcuffs on. She was playing with them. My mom bought the cuffs for her the previous day, as a toy. Using only what’s available to me sometimes allows me to not feel accountable for what is seen. I attempt to not take credit for it, though I know I must. Not wanting to take credit may be a way of saying, “this has nothing to do with me.” This is a game I have played with myself, because, in actuality, these pictures have everything to do with me.

Figure 10. *Cuffs*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5
When I take photographs, I don’t think about or know exactly what I’m doing, though I am confident doing it. The personal meaning of the images develops much later. Only after they sit with me for a while, and only after creating such a large body of work, have I been able to begin understanding them and my motivation for photographing my family. It’s been over a year since the moment I was in my mother’s bedroom and photographed *Cuffs*, and it’s quite apparent that when time passes, and when an image has aged, it becomes more significant and develops applied personal meanings.

Although I am uncomfortable sharing what my photographs mean to me, for fear of affecting their interpretation and being too revealing, *Cuffs* has become about the notion of freewill, or the lack of it. Growing up, I assessed my environment to identify things that I did not want to become. To some extent, I’ve been fairly successful, but there have been many things I cannot shake. Parts of my personality are so deeply rooted, and though I’d like to change, it appears to be futile. We are born with specific genes and into specific environments, and we are influenced for years until we finally fly the coop. When we do leave, there is only so much we can leave behind. Our childhood experiences, things we had little control over, dictate who we become and who we are for the rest of our lives. I question how much choice I have in simply being the person I am. Even when it comes to the photography, I feel like it’s something I have had to do as a chore.
Chapter 5: Lights

My photographs are psychologically driven. Though I am conscious about some of the ways in which the camera is functioning for me, I mostly use it intuitively and unconsciously. When I visit the family and photograph, I never have any preconceived ideas. In psychology, Freud’s psychoanalytic view is that the unconscious is a force that can only be recognized by its effects. Freud further believed that unconscious thoughts are not directly accessible, that they must be interpreted by special methods, whether through dream analysis, meditation, or verbal slips. My photographs are often a symptom of my unconscious mind.

I use my photographs to not only uncover my psyche and attempt to understand it, but to also extract an unwanted, dark feeling. It becomes a ritual to banish an unknown, foreign, unexplainable discomfort. My photograph *Lights*, demonstrates this. Erica was playing with the Christmas tree lights. I intervened by intentionally using a slow shutter speed and asking Erica to wiggle the Christmas tree lights in front of herself. By obscuring her, the photograph becomes less about her, and more about myself. The lights scratch her out. Although this act was intentional, I did not know why I was doing it.
I cannot pretend to fully understand this image. I am not a psychoanalyst, but by capturing it and lingering within this image for months, I have begun to attribute personal meanings to it. To me, *Lights* reignites the metaphysical crisis I had at 10 years old, and it only makes sense that I have photographed Erica, as she is of the same age. At 10, I became highly concerned with the nature of my existence, and the existence of those around me. I would sit and think for hours trying to wrap my mind around the truth that I would die some day, and I had no skills to rationalize this on my own. Into my twenties, I gave up thinking about these things, finding theoretical thought to be a fruitless
endeavor. This picture tells me that my concerns about existence are still present, but in a repressed form.

Often times I find the interpretation of ambiguous photographs to be more a representation of the person analyzing it, but interpretation by peers has been revealing. This was a difficult part of my process at first. It made me very uncomfortable that my images were exuding a sexualized nature or underpinnings of sexual abuse. Becoming aware of this severely affected my photographing. I did not want to harm my sister and I began questioning my motives, as this was something I was fully oblivious to and definitely not intending. Due to this being uncovered, and seeing my work as a whole, I have come to call images like this “perceived danger.”

**Mom:** I really like this one.

**Amy:** What do you like about it?

(Mom gathers her thoughts.)

**Mom:** You barely see the green extension. You don’t see strands of light. It just looks like… electricity.

(pauses)

They look like sperm. (laughing)

It looks like being… (pause)

Being attacked by sperm.

Now I want you to ask other people what that looks like, And I bet someone else will say sperm.
(Larry walks inside the back door.)

**Mom:** Larry, what does this look like to you?

**Larry:** Lights.

**Mom:** If it wasn’t a set of lights?

**Larry:** She thinks it's fairies.

**Mom:** Nope, far from that!

Should I tell him?

**Larry:** I know what your sick perverted mind is thinking.

**Mom:** Well what do you think it looks like then?

**Larry:** I told you. Fairies!

**Mom:** Nope!

Sperm.

Doesn't it look like sperm, Larry?!

**Larry:** Well, yeah, I knew that’s what your sick perverted mind was thinking.

**Mom:** But I wanted you to say it, because then there’s two people that would’ve said it Larry!
Chapter 6: Knife and Snake

Perceived danger is not actually a threatening situation; it is a situation that appears to be threatening. *Knife* is one of the many images that appear to be threatening, but is not.

Figure 12. *Knife*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5
Knife is a result of play. Erica and I noticed the ice frozen over the window and proceeded to interact with it. It was cold and wet, and Erica began to scratch at it with her fingernails. She ran to grab a butter knife and began to scratch more. I thought she was ruining the visual beauty of the ice, but I failed to stop Erica from scratching. Her natural reaction was to eat the ice that had accumulated on the knife. To capture this I interrupted by asking Erica to please hold still for a picture.

Amy: Do you remember that?

Erica: Yee es.

Amy: What do you remember?

Erica: (No response.)

Amy: What do you see?

Erica: It’s covered in ice.

Amy: What else?

Erica: I’m in my pj’s.

Amy: What else?

Erica: I see ice on my window.

I see a wall.

I see the wood.

And what is that, a handle?

Amy: To open or close the window.

Erica: I was closing my eyes.
Or looking out the window.

I see my hair.

I see my face.

And that’s all.

**Amy:** Do you think you should be allowed to do that?

**Erica:** Nooo.

**Amy:** Why not?

**Erica:** (No response.)

**Amy:** What’s going on here?

**Erica:** We took a picture.

I’m not going to talk anymore.

That’s all I wanna talk about.

Images that fall into the category of perceived danger, like *Knife*, have highlighted and allowed me to comprehend a problem I have with my own perceptions. I find benign situations, such as traveling in a car or flying, to be threatening. When walking down the street, I have a heightened sensitivity to strangers and am always looking over my shoulder to avoid getting kidnapped or raped. I could never live in a house without a basement due to a fear of tornadoes. For whatever reason, my brain conditioned itself to look for, avoid, and protect me from various types of catastrophe. Because nothing terrible has ever happened to me, I attribute it to this cautious, often paranoid, way of thinking. Caution can be helpful, but it can also be miserable. I was
taught to be scared, to not trust, and that there are a lot of weirdo’s in the world ready to snatch a young, pretty girl from her family.

This way of thinking may also be the result of growing up in a chaotic environment. I went to 13 different public schools and moved houses nearly every year, sometimes multiple times within a year. My parents filed bankruptcy twice before divorcing when I was 14, and there was very little communication in the home that didn’t involve arguing. Although I’m sure there were happy times when I was a child, I focused on assessing my environment for all that was wrong with it. I saw struggles that motivated me to seek education, independently support myself, and avoid crisis. I did not want to be like the people in my family. I wanted to make a better, more stable life for myself. I have done this, but what I need to do now is let go of the fight-or-flight response that was once helpful. It has become a burden and is no longer needed.

My pictures have become a tool for introspection into my own nature, and therefore they are just as much a self-portrait, in addition to being a physical portrait of Erica. As evidenced in my photographs, Knife pictures a purely innocent moment that was in no way dangerous or phallic, though it appears to be. At first glance, it is a very calm, soothing image, but it treads with an underlying, fearful, anxiety. What I have found is that regardless of achieved stability and security, I cannot shake the feeling of living in chaos, threat, or impending danger, and my photographs sometimes show me this as fact. Seeing my perception in photographic form gives me hope that I can overcome this way of unnecessary thinking. I want to replace my thoughts with healthy statements, free of worry and fear.
Snake is another unsettling image, though it too is free of danger and is only perceived. The snake is a pet python. It cannot harm, but there is an implied danger. The snake is wrapped around a headless, unidentified man’s arm, but it extends its elongated body and face toward Erica. She reaches for it. In Christianity, the serpent is commonly seen as an evil temptress, but there is nothing evil here.

Figure 13. *Snake*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

In hindsight, I understand why I did not show the man’s identify in *Snake*, who is Erica’s stepfather and my mom’s husband. First of all, there was a fence that would not allow me to back up and get a wider vantage point, even if I wanted to. But the truth
is, I didn’t want him in my picture, and this act has shown my discomfort with men in general. This is not new knowledge to me, but it is present in the image. I do not know the exact root of this discomfort, but for sometime after my parents’ divorce, there was a revolving door of men that my mom would bring to the home, and sometimes they would live with us. She had children with two of these men, yet neither is any part of my siblings’ lives. I saw my mom fruitlessly try to depend on these men, and decided I could never do that. In a way, I see men as a temporary fixture, not something to be photographed, cherished, and kept. My own exes have complained that I rarely photographed them.

This image does appear to have disquieting sexual undertones, though it was never the intention. In fact, what I was concerned with was not the snake, nor the unrecognizable stepfather, but how impressed I was with Erica. Photographing this scene was essentially a show-and-tell for the camera. I was impressed by her fearless curiosity.

To be more correct, this is a photograph about Erica being fearless, and myself being the overlooking protector. I admit that I have worried unnecessarily that she may have been sexually abused, with only a lingering, unsubstantiated suspicion. Since my early 20’s, I have been suspicious of her stepfather, who is several years my mother’s junior. I’ve struggled to comprehend how a man could take in an older woman with two young, fatherless children, after a brief two-week introduction on the Internet.

My mother has now been with this man since Erica was a baby, but I was unsure of how my mom’s husband would feel about the presence of my camera. I didn’t know him or trust him, and therefore avoided him nearly the entire project. By
interjecting myself into the family, however, I can say that it has honestly put many of my concerns and fears to rest. With the risk of being intrusive or unwelcomed, I’ve used the camera to be part of something, to learn, and to negotiate how I fit into or feel about this family.

If people view my photographs and find them to be uncomfortable to look at, to me, that is a success, because I have been uncomfortable too.
Photographing Erica has been a collaborative process that gives us something fun to do together. She performs for the camera and often comes up with her own ideas for taking a photograph. She likes the attention. Other times she is completely absentminded about the presence of the camera.

Erica wanted to take pictures too, and I encouraged this. Photographing something is a means of acknowledgment and observation. It shows significance and importance, and as much as this is a project for me, it is also for Erica. I have attempted to make photographing together a positive experience for her, and one way I’ve done this is by relinquishing control, handing over the camera, and allowing her to give the work direction. It is my hope that Erica feels some amount of authority in what was created, and in some ways, that it was a project we created together.

This project has aimed to begin giving Erica the tools for understanding and analyzing her own life. In the past, I have asked Erica what she wants to do when she grows up, and she usually gives me a funny grin and just points at me. Our verbal communications are limited, and as happy as I am that she looks up to me, I’d rather her think for herself. I do try to promote dialogue. Regardless of topic, her response to basic conversational questions often results in a response of either, “I don’t know” or “I don’t
want to talk.” It’s difficult to speak to her because she is still a child, and also because she is not very communicative. I wasn’t either. Therefore, we take pictures.

![Image](image-url)

Figure 14. *Myself Pictured by Erica (Through Her Bedroom Window)*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

*Myself Pictured by Erica (Through Her Bedroom Window)* demonstrates one of the many times she has taken my camera into her own hands. She could photograph anything really, but she usually turns the camera on me. We take turns and reciprocate each other when we photograph. I certainly work with chance and instinct, not preconception, and if I didn’t allow Erica to turn the camera on me, I believe it would have been a great disservice to the project.
Erica cannot focus my medium-format camera. It is not easy, even for me, but Erica is a kinesthetic learner. Once I had walked away to use the restroom and returned to find her successfully taking film out of my camera and reloading it. I did not show her how to do this. She figured it out by watching me and attempting it on her own. These displays of learning and interest give me a sense of comfort. As her much older sister, I watch over Erica and look for clues that she will grow up and be successful in whatever she decides to do.

Neither Erica nor I is any different than Jacques Henri Lartigue, just born into different circumstances. If I had been given a camera at that young of an age, I would have been making pictures. It was all I wanted to do, but it wasn’t allowed. My mom was the family photographer. She showed us her love and affection by photographing us, but the camera wasn’t for a child to use. There were many times I got in trouble for running around with the camera, even when there wasn’t film in it. Film and processing was expensive, and it’s understandable that my mom was afraid I’d break the camera, but this restriction only increased my desire to photograph. With it, the pendulum had swung, and I saw to it that Erica could do as she wished with cameras. Erica has been given the opportunity, and it will be interesting to see if it is something she will continue to have interest in, especially if I am no longer influencing her.

At the opening reception, I pointed to *Myself Pictured by Erica (Through Her Bedroom Window)*, and asked, “Who took that picture?” and she said, “I did.” And that was all I needed to hear.
Chapter 8: Hug

Hug is a photograph that positions myself as an outsider looking in. I have discovered many photographs like this one, in addition to photographs of Erica positioned inside looking out. This door, with its windows and reflections, creates a barrier.

There is a tender embrace in this photograph. Although Erica is being given a loving gesture, her gaze turns to my camera and her hand clings to the door. She is inactive in the hug, but looking out. The smears and the reflection do not allow me to look beyond the embrace into the home. Instead, I see what is behind me, and my reflection is indiscernible.

This is a positive image joined with longing and despair. Images where I am outside looking in represent the conflict of my family involvement, and question the extent to which I should be involved. I have tried to negotiate where I belong in the family, what my role is, and how I fit in. I am unsure of how to participate, but have an overwhelming need to belong.
In the following dialogue, I find it very interesting that Erica comments that she can see me in the photograph:

**Amy:** Tell me what you think.

**Erica:** I see my mom.

I see my mom’s car.

I see my dad’s truck.

I see trees.

I see you.

**Amy:** You’ve told me before that this is one of your favorites.
Why do you like it?

**Erica:** Because I see you.

I don’t know.

I can see you taking a picture of me.

**Amy:** Do you like it when I take pictures of you?

**Erica:** Yes.

**Amy:** Why?

**Erica:** I don’t know.

**Amy:** How does it make you feel?

**Erica:** (shrugs shoulders)

And that’s all.

I’m done talking.
Generating and collecting discussion about the photographs is important to me. For one, I am curious about what my mother and sister think about the images. It’s always been accepted that I take a lot of pictures and there’s never been a discussion as to why. What I want to know is: Are they comfortable with what they see? Do they think they’re weird? Are they embarrassed for people to see them?

I am curious about how their thoughts are either similar or different than my own, and I have begun to allow their responses to feed my own feelings about the pictures. The pictures become a link bringing us closer together. They help us to remember and to tell stories.
Figure 16. *Yard Mattress*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

**Mom:** Thank God it's a clean mattress!

**Amy:** Lets look at this one.

**Erica:** No.


**Amy:** What are you doing in this picture?

**Erica:** Cuddling.

**Amy:** What do you mean?
Erica: I’m cuddling myself.

Amy: Why are you cuddling yourself?

Erica: I don’t know.

![Figure 17. Eye Blinks, from Erica and I, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5](image)

Mom: Her eyes look closed but they’re not.
Her eyes are closed.

Now this is a very good picture.

You look up really close and her eyes are open.

Insomnia.

She wants to sleep, but she can’t.

Or maybe, she sleeps with eyes open.
Maybe in their conscious mind, they’re afraid.

Of the dark.

You look from a distance and her eyes look closed.

But you look really close and they’re open.

But her eyes are closed.

That’s really interesting.

Look closer.

You see two different images.

And you see female and male;

His side of the closet and mine.
Figure 18. *Myself Photographing Erica Photographing Myself*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

**Mom:** This should be sentimental to you.

With all of your memories, and you showing her how to use the camera.

**Erica:** I see my camera.

I see your camera.

You let me take pictures,

And you take yours.

You always print your pictures big.

It ain’t fair.
I want mine big.

Can you get me more cameras again for Christmas next year?

Amy: Why do you want cameras?

Erica: I like taking pictures.

Amy: What do you like to take pictures of?

Erica: My toys.

Hannah Montana.

My mom.

My princess tent.

You got that tent for me,

And now it’s broken.

Amy: What else do you like to photograph?

Erica: I think that’s it mommy,

I mean Amy!
Figure 19. *Nude Curl*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

**Mom:** She looks like she’s… (pauses)

Being in the fetus position, in warmth.

It’s the warmth of the womb, a nice

cozy place.

**Amy:** Do you have a problem with the nudity?

**Mom:** Uh…no.

It’s nudity, but you can’t see anything.

Where is the nudity?

It’s not there.

She just looks like an angel.
The sun is like a blanket.

It’s keeping her warm.

Figure 20.  *Girl on Screen*, from *Erica and I*, 2008-10, archival pigment print from color film negative, 23.5 x 29.5

**Erica:** What is that?

**Amy:** What do you think it is?

**Erica:** I see a tv.

**Amy:** What’s on the tv?

**Erica:** A girl.

I see my suitcase.

I see a mailbox.
I see a light.
I see wallpaper with flowers.
You can see the inside of our house.

Amy: What kind of house do you have?

Erica: It’s happy.

Amy: How is it happy?

Erica: Because it’s big.

Amy: What do you think about the girl on tv?

Erica: Happy.

Amy: Why do you think she’s on the tv?

Erica: It’s a commercial.

Amy: What kind of commercial?

Erica: I don’t know.

Amy: Why else might she be on tv?

Erica: (shrugs shoulders)

Look at her smile.
Conclusion

At the beginning of Elliot Erwitt’s photographic career, he referred to his camera as a security blanket. He has been quoted saying, “It’s like a shield; it protects me. I find that looking through the viewfinder I can be put in almost any situation.” When I’m anxious, I find myself using the camera as a shield as well. The camera gives me something to do, a task to distract me from whatever is pressing at the time. For example, I recently took a flight lesson as an attempt to get over my aerophobia. I photographed the entire time to help myself deal with the intense, overwhelming anxiety. Photographing gives you an active task, inherently separating you from the surroundings as you hold the camera up to your face. It gives you a job and distracts you from what is immediate. The camera, however, is limited in its protective power when the resulting pictures are difficult to look at, and you must look.
My photographing has been used to cope, understand, and belong, but I’m not convinced about its positive degree of effectiveness. What I have learned is that I cannot continue to work the way I have. My photographing from here on out cannot dwell in dark places. I want to get rid of the darkness, not focus on it. More than anything, I need to complete the prints for this project and put it behind me. Maybe I have indeed gotten what I needed out of my system, because I look forward to photographing from the other, much brighter side of my being. I believe we’re supposed to enjoy this life. And much like Elliot Erwitt, I would rather be amusing than tragic.