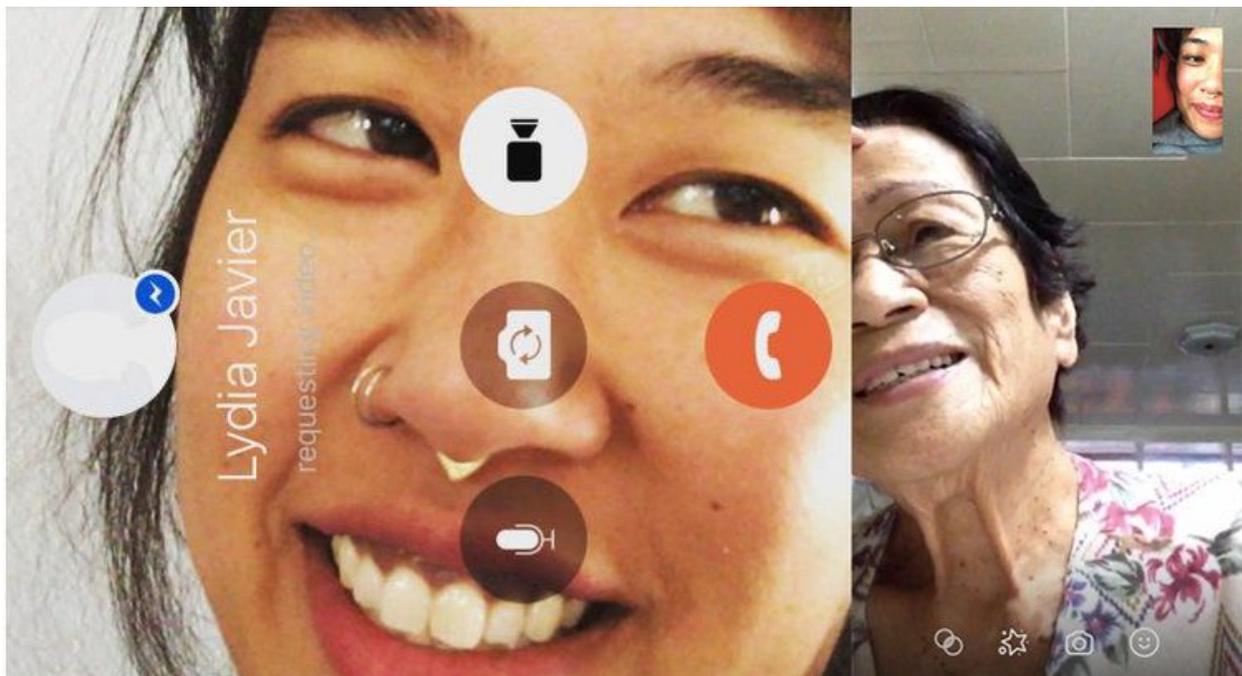


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PHOTOLAB - October 1, 2018
By Scott B. Davis

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Tell us how you first got started in photography, and what motivates you to share your passion with so many others?

My awareness of photography started really young because my Mom took pictures of us all the time. All. The. Time. So much, that by the time I was a teenager, I grunted everytime she tried to take my photo. Being a military child in San Diego, my Dad was gone a lot, so my Mom obsessively photographed and videotaped me and my older sister. Images that were for my Dad because my Mom knew he missed us and it was something that just curbed the distance. I have really absorbed her need to document these memories which has fueled my own need to archive, collect and share images. I attribute much of this obsession to her.

I picked up photography more formally as a student at Humboldt State University, while I was a teacher at the campus preschool. I started college as a Early Childhood Development major and one of my duties was to document the children. During parent teacher conferences, the photos were used to show the progress of each

child and act as proof of their developmental growth. For example: "Child can grasp and throw a ball." During my meetings, parents would ask about who took the photos and if they could keep them. They liked seeing their kids so candidly, they would say, they aren't like the pictures that you typically get from school. So I started taking portraits of them and their families outside of work, I enjoyed it, and decided to enroll in a photography class. My very first roll of black and white film were of these children and I still have these prints in a box in my room.

My formal darkroom training was under Professor [Don Gregorio Anton](#), who still remains one of my mentors and close friends. It was his class that showed me how to use photography as a creative tool for learning. His assignments weren't about shutter speed or aperture, his projects were called: *Who am I? or Three things that are important to me*. For the first time, learning in the Art Department became less about technique and more about content. He would ask me questions like: *How is your soul today?* His projects asked us to bring our own stories to the classroom, and instead of him teaching us, we all taught each other. He cultivated this very inclusive space for learning that asked us to be participants in our own education. I think this is why I use the camera as a participatory tool in every class that I teach. I can admit that my time working with Don shaped my skill, teaching philosophy and passion for education. He was also the only teacher, in my history of teachers, that asked me to consider my place in photography and art as a woman of color and educator. He asked me repeatedly in school if I would ever consider teaching, and I would just giggle, entertaining the idea. Today I still feel lucky that he believed in me, and that is one of the reasons you will find me teaching in any capacity that I can.

You're work involves mastering a number of different analog processes, and shows a deep understanding of chemical based photography. How did you first get interested in this and is any of your creative work born digitally?

I think I really transitioned into photography because of my interest in ceramics. In high school, ceramics was the only art class offered. I did it every year up until my Junior year of undergrad, until I was introduced to photography by my ceramics TA Joshua Unterman, who also happened to be my TA in the darkroom. I thought he was so cool because he made this glaze using the recycled fixer from the darkroom. The silver from the fixer actually appeared in the glaze after it was fired and I was amazed. After that, I enrolled in a glaze calculation class that required me to learn about a ton of different materials to produce my own clay bodies and glazes.

I learned a lot of other things from ceramics that I brought into the darkroom. Wheel throwing was all about meditation for me and working with the clay, glazes and kiln taught me about patience. This is really why I felt so at home in the darkroom. I am a busy person and the darkroom is one of the few places that can slow me down. There were many aspects about ceramics that helped me to really appreciate photography. I was really drawn to the reaction of materials and enjoyed the surprise of taking objects out of the kiln.

If I had to describe myself, I wouldn't call myself a photographer, I would call myself an artist that uses photography. The different processes I use are always dictated by the content I am exploring. Sometimes I know what I want to do, and most of the time, I have to try and learn something new that helps act as the right vehicle for the work. It's the problem solving that I have the most fun with because it requires me to prototype, experiment and work towards the unknown. I often share these processes with others to encourage exploration.

I do make work that is born digitally that doesn't always end up looking digital. Like the flip books from my [Move\(meant\)](#) series. Those books are produced using video files that I break up into several thousands of images. When I shoot digitally, I am inclined to ask myself the same question: *What is the purpose or meaning of this process?* In projects like [Transnational Family Portrait](#) (working title) where I taught my grandmother how to use Facetime, I explore the evolution of family portraiture. While it's not historically traditional, we no longer have to be in the same room to take portraits with each other in real time. The images are not shot with a fancy camera, but it's not about that, it's about photography and its impact on my life.

What's your favorite printmaking process and do you feel that there's any one of the analog processes that are too often overlooked?

I would have to say that cyanotype is one of my favorite processes because it's simple, immediate and relatively inexpensive. I tell my students it's a feel good process. When I teach classes, and I find that students are having a particularly hard time in the darkroom, or if the energy is just off, I'll stop everything and show everyone how to make a cyanotype. It's one of those processes that I just turn to over and over again when I get lost because it reminds me how much I have fun with photography. I think the nature of working with alternative processes makes image making more tactile, giving you a stronger connection to the materials.

One of the processes that I feel is overlooked is making silver prints in the darkroom. As an Instructor, it is one of the classes that has low enrollment, is continually cut or removed from curriculums. The students that I have always enjoy the class. There is something about seeing your image come up in the developer, that just hooks everyone. As programs become increasingly commercial, the darkroom takes a second seat against the technology. As people live increasingly faster paced lives, the darkroom offers refuge and time for people to think: *What are my reasons for shooting photos and what can I contribute from my specific point of view?*

This is important to me because I feel like the techniques we use shouldn't consume our images.

Can you tell us how your work with archiving began, and how you've used the unique language of photography to enhance that?

My work has always been about the archiving process: collecting memories, feelings, experiences. I wasn't really aware of it until 2013 when I started working on [42 Sinaguelasan](#), an archive on my family. The very first time I went to the Philippines, my grandfather ended up passing away, and I realized that my only living grandmother was the keeper of my family history. When I realized that stories about my family origin would die with her, I began to obsessively record the history of where my family came from. I didn't really know much about my family in the Philippines, for some reason it just never came up, which is another layer to my project. My grandmother is known for her excellent memory, so I jumped at the chance to learn everything I could. Until today I continue to ask her question after question about our family.

During this time, my sister also had her first daughter, beginning the cycle of the next generation in my family. Her name is Lydia, which is the same name as my grandmother and I always thought that one day when she gets older, she would ask me about her name. I wanted to ensure that I could give her as much information as I could. I knew that if I didn't document our history, that the people, places and things would not be there in the future to share with her. Every year since, I've been going back to the Philippines obsessively documenting and reclaiming my own history. The history that I cannot find in books, media or internet. Now if you look up Sinaguelasan on IG, you'll find pictures of this small barrio, and most of them were images created by me. This community is now visual thanks to this documentation.

You've done a lot of work with your family in the Philippines, bridging memory, personal histories, time and distance. Did you move to San Diego from the Philippines, or were you born and raised here?

I was born and raised in San Diego and I never visited the Philippines until I turned 30 years old. It was never a place that my parents offered to bring me, it was never a place that my family considered returning to. In fact, when I told my Dad that I wanted to go, he said **"You're chasing a history that doesn't belong to you."** Which really scared me, because I didn't want him to be right. As a first generation Filipino-American, this experience was important because growing up I faced many questions about my cultural identity. There is something that happens when you are thirsty, and for me, I realized time was running out. So I quit all my jobs, packed my bags, and left for the Philippines not really knowing what I was looking for. All I knew was that I needed to go "home" and I wasn't sure where that was.

This distance my family faces, that many families face, is somewhat remedied by technology. I love to think about how photography evolves to meet the needs of how we use it in our daily lives. I am becoming really interested in this because technology brought me closer to my family. It brought my grandma into my life on the daily, and consoles me when I can't get over the feeling of not being able to be in two places at once. One of

my recent archives is almost four years of screenshots that I have collected of me and my Grandmother talking over the phone using our Smartphones. My collection [Transnational Family Portrait](#) (working title) is challenging the norm of the traditional family portrait. The project is still new, not sure where it is going, but looks like its turning into an photo-essay. I have even started to ask others to share their screenshots of people that miss and cannot see easily.

How has your family heritage informed your work?

Making work about my family heritage has changed the way I think about and teach photography. Now I think more about representation and why I feel it's so important to have images out in the world that help define who I am. I grew up watching television shows like *Full House*, constantly asking myself: *Why is my family not like this one?* Now as an educator, I don't want my students facing those issues, and through my assignments I make them responsible for producing this work. This is important because we are the ones that know our stories best, so my personal mission, is to teach media to help others find and appreciate their voice. To take pride in their story in hopes that sharing it will relieve them from a feeling that has constantly haunted me--the feeling of being alone.

When I first started to make work about my family, I didn't see it as art. I didn't think that people would want to see pictures of my family in an exhibition. I still question this. I was really blinded by the perception of others and what they think is art. But working with local organizations like *Pacific Arts Movement* and *The Aja Project*, whose mission is to empower youth with storytelling, I knew that I could not ask my students to engage in this type of learning without doing it myself. The more I started seeing my family work as art, everything started to fall into place, I have no shortage of ideas. I actually have so many years to look back on, which is why I have so many projects going on now at the same time. What my students have helped me to see, what they help the community see, is the importance of our stories in a broader context. That the work that we make is for others to learn more about who we are, and to comfort those who share similar experiences.

Many of your works involve motion, both in terms of image capture and the presentation of the finished works. Was there a specific catalyst that helped you break free from the constraint of the still image?

Even in my early stages of learning in the darkroom, I always had a hard time with the constraints of the paper. I dove quickly into making double exposures and layering images. While I was working with Don, he asked me a lot of questions about identity, which I thought was more easily described in layers. He really fostered this idea to let me think outside of the box, which I still appreciate after all those years, because growing up I felt I wasn't allowed to do that.

My first serious project that visited multiple images was my thesis work from SDSU called [Anthro Optica](#). I was really interested in the history of photography and created a lot of pieces influenced by historical image viewing devices like the zoetrope and praxinoscope. At the time, I was dealing with a lot of repetitive thought and I was seeing a therapist about overthinking. The more I talked about it outloud, I wanted to see my images come to life, and this is something that I still try to retain in my work today. In my more recent series [Move\(meant\)](#), I borrow the idea of the flipbook to play with movement, but I also start to think more sculpturally, about the volume of images and how that also impact the viewer. I work a lot with memory, the way I see it in my head, is never really one clear image, its always about images all running together.

Some of your work includes the construction of interactive objects that encourage viewers to navigate photography in real time. Do you have a background in sculpture, or specific influences that inspired such a unique approach to the medium?

I went to school thinking that I would be a photographer but I left an artist. When I first started as a grad student I applied to the program with photographs, but no other students in the program were photographers. My first studio was shared with other painters and printmakers on campus, which I think fueled my interest in materials. I worked with Walt Cotten, who really encouraged me to explore photography as an object. When he passed

my second year in the program, my studio was moved to the sculpture building where I worked with Richard Keely. I think that's where I really started to see the potential of my work start to grow outside of photography.

I remember thinking: *Should I stay or should I go?* Teachers would ask me if I wanted to change programs to find one that better suit my needs. But I felt comfortable with photography, and I thought that I could learn what I wanted on my own, it was sculpture that was intimidating and I never thought that I would leave school knowing how to build. It took me sometime to see the two mediums work in a relationship, at the beginning, my work really just looked like 3D objects with images on them. There were not many people working in this way, so there weren't many examples for me to study, and I found myself with the same feeling that I had years before in ceramics: The unknown. At the time, one of my studio mates, Andy Hunter, who is a mad scientist also greatly influenced me. He introduced me to motors and gears, to make things move, I don't think I would be in the place I am today without both of their help.

Sculpture and installation have become integral parts of my work because the nature of my pieces are personal. Every piece I make feels like a little sliver of my heart and I don't want to give that out so easily. By making work that requires people to interact, I mimic the time we spend with people to learn about who they are. The time, touch and connection, even for a brief moment brings us together. I just feel like it matches my personality. I feel like I'm a really complex person, so I require someone to engage with me before they learned more about who I am.

Who are the artists you're watching today that are pushing the boundaries of photography as we know it?

Alanna Atrium
Morgan De Luna
Ann Le

What keeps you anchored in San Diego?

I have asked myself this question over and over again, and I am only seeing its clarity more recently, as I make the work about my family. As a teenager, I fantasized about leaving San Diego, I was bored. I didn't fit in and I spend most of my energy trying to leave. But since I returned home from the Philippines, I realized that I was back here for a reason. I currently live in Mira Mesa, in the house that I grew up in, and I am catching up with all the memories from my childhood. Producing stories about my history here, stories that I used to ignore because they didn't fit my cookie-cutter idea of what it meant to be me. Its special for me to get the chance to share stories about Mira Mesa, work with others in the community like students from Mira Mesa High School and talk about questions that I used to think about with students that are dealing with the same challenge today.

Actually this year, in [Reel Voices](#), a documentary film program I teach through Pac Arts, I worked with Trish Lai who was a student at Mira Mesa High School. She produced a beautiful experimental film that had a couple of clips from my elementary school, when I saw it I cried, the feeling was so unfamiliar. It was the first time I ever saw my community in a movie, its was then I realized that I wasn't just a photography teacher, I was a teacher because I wanted to help other people in my community be equally represented in the media. I wanted her, I wanted all my students, to feel like seeing someone that looked like them on the big screen as the norm. We look forward to premiere her work, and the work of ten other students in the San Diego Asian Film Festival this November.

What advice do you give younger artists working in San Diego?

Don't be afraid to fail. I try to teach this in the classroom because so much of my education is about doing what is "right". If we teach our students that its ok to fail, these they become more resilient, less likely to not try something because they are scared. Experiment, prototype, be honest with your work and make lots of bad artwork. As a product of the educational system, I was taught through finished work, famous work, which removed one of the most important aspects of artmaking for me: The Unknown. If you know how every piece is

going to turn out? Why make it? Enjoy the journey of your work, even if it leaves you in your studio crying out of frustration, in a moment it feels a little crazy and that feeling of the unknown is you doing something different. It's a moment that many are scared of, but that is what really encourages growth.

Surround yourself with people that share your mission. Go to shows, events and travel, see what's out there. When you see something you don't like, don't just dismiss it, ask yourself *why*? When you see something that everyone likes, study its elements, break down why you think people are paying attention to it. What are the social, economic and political ideals that influence its popularity? Use your observations to help inform your own work. Think about your work and the places you don't typically see it, try to get an exhibition there. If you don't know what your mission is, surround yourself with opportunities to help refine those choices. Don't compare yourself to others. There is no right way to become an artist. In a field where everyone struggles to be unique, the best thing that we can be is ourselves, no one can do it better.

What's on the horizon for your creative work? Any teasers you can share with us?

I am juggling a lot of projects at once, more than I ever have before, so I am making lots of work but none of the projects feel "done" because I'm realizing that archiving includes a lot of time. Many of the projects I have been working on feel like they will be going on for years, so the work they people will see in upcoming shows are works in progress.

I just started collecting interviews for a project called *Balikbayan* / [Returning Filipino](#) which studies the tradition of gift giving for Filipinos that have left their home land. The tradition of packing gifts for loved ones overseas is practiced by the Philippine community with the *balikbayan* box. Named after the Tagalog words for "returning Filipino", this container serves as a means to transport goods from the U.S. to the Philippines. This project explores this symbol of the Filipino diaspora through interviews with the San Diego community about the contents of their balikbayan boxes. This interdisciplinary project makes visible the struggle of separated families, the want to provide and the need for consolation.

Currently in the studio I am producing work for an installation for the FilAm Fest which is scheduled for Saturday, Oct 27 from 10AM to 6PM. I will be reproducing a palengke (wet market) at the festival with handmade toys of all the seafood from the market. This is a place that I love to go with my Grandmother, and a way for me to reconnect with her while I am in the U.S. She will actually be accompanying at the event, which is important for me, to work on this piece together. My grandmother was the one that taught me to sew, and introduced me to the market, so it feels good to have the chance to be there together. I wanted to give the Filipino community the experience of going back to the Philippines, and to educate and share with those who have not yet returned to the homeland a slice of PI.

My newest idea (not titled), that is literally still wet in my studio, are these landscapes that I have constructed from images of Tijuana and the Philippines together. Growing up in San Diego, along the border, I have always felt a pull to Mexico, and this project is allowing me to explore that. Having transborder friends has helped me to think about the borders in my life, how I have dealt with them over the years and how I understand them as an adult. After traveling to the Philippines, I realize how much Tijuana reminds me of Sineguelasan and these images make me think of the space in between. These landscapes aren't about documenting real life, they are about documenting distance that I feel from my family how I yearn for the place that is not so distant, a place that bring us back together.