

Forever Farther

Lili Huston-Herterich
07 May – 06 June 2021

Dear Lili,

It feels anachronistic to work in a darkroom. Lots about it has a tugging backwards-ness: working with an antiquated medium, squandering sunny days in a dark room, rifling through your negative binder from 10 years ago. Admittedly, I started this project doubling down on chronological inconsistency. I had you in mind: I thought I might be able to make a fuller picture of you with your photographs. I tugged backwards in your direction in other ways, too: this month I found some rings I started wearing like you do, and I rediscovered Broadcast and Cibo Matto and Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

The space I'm working in is nothing like the darkrooms you're used to. I'm in there alone, so I can listen to music out loud. I don't have to announce to people when I'm walking or turning a corner like you do. I can't walk much at all in there really, it's tiny. I squeeze by enlargers and have to make sure I don't hit them with my hip, but I always do anyway. I'm very clumsy, big hips like you. After I hit the enlarger I need to spend time refocusing the negative. You've got bad eyes and aren't very good at that, and I'm still shit at it too.

Something happened in that little room I wanted to share with you. It was early on in the project, and I was slow, still trying to remember how you do things. It was a long day and I was feeling that dizzy excited feeling that I know you have, the one that usually results in a day with too little water and no food. This day, the image started appearing, and then kept appearing. As it got darker, the dizziness found new forms as a lump in my throat and a stone in my belly. I turned angry hungry, and the paper turned grey.

I blamed myself for the fogged print, just like you would. You are much more precise than I am: you would cringe at how I hold negatives, how I return them to the wrong plastic sheets you have so meticulously organised. Who taught you to be such a good archivist? I know who: dad, who also introduced us to the music I'm listening to. I tried to channel your precision, but I fucked up. I became a girl who wasted her day, and a whole bunch of expensive paper, in a dark room. Some days, you become this girl too. I ask myself a question that resonates loudly alone in a dark room: why?

You ask that question to yourself, too. I can see its effects on you in your binder: the more frequently you ask it, the less images you take. I know you find it hard to hold a camera in public, and I know it gets harder as years pass. I know how annoyed you are when someone asks you what kind of lens you have, what model of camera it is, whether you're pushing or pulling the film. You don't like to be noticed when you make images, and the apparatus is one that people notice more and more. An anarchistic feeling: girl imposter. You aren't a gear head, so in lieu of this you forbid yourself to print sentimental images and instead print only architectural abstractions, birds in the sky, still lives in the kitchen, fences, brick walls, old cars, the basement, street poles, puddles, shadows, until you slowly stop shooting entirely.

To repent for the fogged print, I made the next one entirely without light, placing the equipment in memorized positions for a choreography performed in darkness. My stomach hurts as the image appears, and this time, thankfully, it stops appearing. Having gained a little more confidence with this small victory, I dig a bit deeper on what happened. With the help of a friend, we find out the "safe" light isn't safe after all. It wasn't me in the end.

I have been working in dark rooms for as long as you have. Why do we doubt ourselves in this familiar place?

I wasn't able to get a fuller picture of you this month. Instead, I've memorized you again, lived you and every day you photographed. I listened to the same music, made the same mistakes, got the same amount of craved starved as you do. In the end, I decided to retroactively uncensor your work. You never print your sentimental images: the in-betweens, moments with people you trust, the last couple shots on a roll, the trip with friends where a camera goes unnoticed, the photos you take in your bedroom to see what you look like. I think it's because you don't take them seriously. They aren't worth the expensive paper, the sunlight sacrifice, or the hunger. These are the images I've printed. I've printed them big, bigger than you've ever printed.

You aren't horrified or embarrassed or trespassed. Quite the contrary: you gave me your consent. This is a world you imagined, built, filed in a binder neatly for me to find, labeled and chronological, with the best images marked.

Here is an alternate world, one where you look your camera straight in its eye.

Love,

Lili

Thank you:

Ghislain Amar, for his support and continued conversations about photography; **Mariana Aboim**, for her support and patience, and her collaboration on the dyed rug; **Werner Herterich**, for my first camera, for encouraging me to work in a darkroom, for passing on his archival intuition, and for all of the music I fell in love with and to; **Meg Huston** for sharing her studio with my spatially dominant storage; **Alexandra Schmidt**, for her life drawing sessions and her consent with using her image; **Rose Lenahan**, a now distant friend who also consented to her image being used; **Eloise Huston-Herterich** for her eternal downness for being a muse; **Lou Lou Sainsbury**, for sharing her space; and **John Opera & Melanie Schiff**, who taught me to use both black & white and colour darkrooms during Early College Program classes at the Art Institute of Chicago from 2002–2005.

For more text on individual works:

