

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 41 – Amy Herman – Image Maker

Our Experiencing and Remembering Selves

And now a personal word,

Before my conversation with Amy Herman, I looked at the photographs she created that had been exhibited at the Ross Gallery at Central Piedmont Community College and are available for view on her personal artist website. I was immediately drawn in.

Amy's work explores themes of identity and memory. Her series called "apartofme" is a collection of photographs that Amy took of herself in which she used a Snapchat feature called Face Swap. Amy employed the feature to swap faces with old photographs of family members creating various versions of Amy that are strange and compelling. These photographs ask who exactly are we? Who might we be? What are the many possibilities within us?

Her exhibit called "it wasn't important until it was" are photographs she took of staged moments with her family that she projected onto the walls of a new home under renovation and photographed again. Her photographs of photographs ask: What exactly is real? What do we choose to remember? How is the memory of something different than the experience of living it? How does memory inform the life we value?

The images Amy took are weird. Disquieting. Very meta and postmodern. I thought of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, where the main character, Antoine Roquentin, stares at a stone and has this "odd feeling" about existence. The stone as he knew it "disappears" as he begins to "see through it." He senses that nothing is real in itself, but everything is simply the meaning we give it.

Amy's photographs compel us to "see through them," to see that nothing is fixed, that reality is fluid. Sartre would say that existence precedes essence. He meant that individuals have no inherent identity but create identity by how they act and project themselves. We might say we can be today whoever we want to be.

Amy embodies her photographs. She shifts her identity by projecting different versions of herself: artist, business owner, facilitator, director, advocate. She is all these projections at once. Layered. Fractal. Fragmented. Whole. We have many identities within us.

I have approached my life in the same way: student, lawyer, novelist, business owner, essayist, editor, publisher, professor, podcaster. And like Amy, I have taken my share of photographs. I have taken thousands of images that I have printed. Since my first year in college, I have arranged photographs into carefully curated albums. It is a ritual for me. Twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall, I carefully sequence and position favorite photographs of adventures my wife and daughter and I have taken, of the people who matter to us, of the places we've seen. We can go back to those moments at any time, and we do, turning the pages of the albums, reminding ourselves of how strange and odd and weird and lovely life is.

In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, the economist Daniel Kahneman talks about the experiencing self and the remembering self. The experiencing self operates in the present moment. The experiencing mind is fast, emotive, unconscious. It senses moments intuitively as events happens. The remembering self operates in retrospect. The remembering mind is slow, rational and conscious. It tells a story about what happened. The story it tells is what gives life meaning. A good life is one in which a person is fulfilled in the moment and satisfied in retrospect.

There is another element to Amy's work that draws me in. Amy works to create the community she wants to live in. She wants to live in a city that values artists like her and provides what artists like her need. I want to live in a city that values the humanities in its fullest sense, one with the mindful and physical design that allows all citizens to thrive.

So thank you for the good work, Amy, for turning your lens on identity and memory, and for revealing all the possibilities of who and what we might be.

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