

## Vestiges Interview

**Allie Haeusslein, Associate Director of Pier 24 Photography in conversation with Josh Smith and Vanessa Woods on August 15, 2020**

**AH:** You and your wife Vanessa have had three children over the last seven years. When did you start thinking about your family and your role as a father in relationship to your work?

**JS:** My interests as a photographer revolve around a world that is familiar to me. From the start, the photographers I admired elevated subject matter from their daily lives. Once I understood this was a viable way of working, my world became a fertile ground for picture-making.

The practice of photographing my own family is an extension of this understanding. In many ways, it seems I had been waiting to become a parent; it generated a great deal of momentum in my practice. We all think of our family lives as boring to outsiders, but, in reality, much of the greatest theater happens within our private spaces. These pictures are a family history of sorts; I know they will always be important to us. But they're also more than that—they are pictures with poetic intention. Photography is so generous in this way, where pictures can exist as both keepers and interpreters of your own history.

**AH:** I love the idea of the greatest theater happening quietly—or loudly, as the case may be—within our private spaces. How does this idea inform your process in making these pictures? Are all these scenes spontaneous or are some staged?

**JS:** With both Vanessa and I photographing at home, cameras are always within reach. My process follows the rhythms and routines of our daily lives. These pictures are made using 35mm, medium format, and large format cameras, the combination of which throws things a bit off-balance, forcing me to change my approach to the recurring subject matter.

These pictures are usually born from moments of opportunity where my instinct is not to intervene with what's in front of me. I am drawn to moments of stasis and transition, where I can tell one of my children has gone inward with their thoughts, and I would do anything to know what they are thinking. I am also drawn to moments when the whole operation collapses on itself—where limbs entangle, pajama patterns clash, and it's up to the camera to distill the chaos. The one time I don't feel the impulse to photograph is when something big happens; I am never photographing the bloody nose. Instead, I am attracted to moments that feel significant despite their "eventlessness."

As the years passed, though, I gradually began to direct the pictures more and more, often working to recreate a visual idea that originally occurred spontaneously. For example, I made an image several years ago of my son changing his shirt. The way his limbs entangled in the clothing and the impression of his face pushing through the fabric stayed with me. There was a struggle and transformation in this mundane moment, and I have been making images in pursuit of this motif ever since. This openness to how I create images has led to a lot of new possibilities, including a richer sense of collaboration with Vanessa and our children.

**AH:** The quality of light in these pictures is distinctive and striking. It almost feels like another subject matter in the work. Can you talk about the ways you've thought about light through the course of this project?

**JS:** The way I have utilized light has changed over time. Visually, I respond to the way different qualities of light describe the gestures of my rapidly changing family. Although I frequently use a flash, there is something extraordinary about the natural light that enters your home. Often fragmented and very directional, the light created by windows sometimes seems to generate the image for you.

Emotionally, I can't help but relate my personal experiences from particular time periods with the quality of the light captured. For instance, the earliest pictures are cloaked in very dramatic, specular lighting, with big areas erased by shadow. The light is brilliant and revelatory, but the shadows generate a tension and sense of the

unknown. It reminds me of how I felt in the early months after my first child was born. As the project has progressed, the light has become more abundant, more clarifying.

**AH:** Though your use of light can be abundant and clarifying, there is also an evasive quality in many of these pictures—faces obscured by clothes, leaves, towels, other body parts. What do you hope that obfuscation communicates to the viewer?

**JS:** As a viewer, I find the most meaningful pictures are those that leave enough room for participation. When a photograph suggests meaning but does not divulge it. . . that's about as exciting as it gets for me; ambiguous conclusions invite the viewer to provide their own interpretations. By inserting your own experiences, you become an essential part of the photographer's image—you complete it.

**AH:** Is that also why we rarely see straight-on views of children's faces in the works?

**JS:** Yes, that's part of it, but it's also connected to how the pictures relate to the larger, shared experience of family. As the project progressed, it became important for them to be "children," not necessarily "my children." The notion of family is universal, though we relate to it in very different ways, and the absence of individual identity amplifies that universality.

That said, I also feel very protective of my family; the visual obfuscation becomes a layer of protection so I can both celebrate and shield them.

**AH:** I find it interesting that in a project about your family, you don't appear in any of the photographs. Why is that?

**JS:** The pictures significantly transform the original loud, busy scenes, so, in that way, I am a part of each image. I'd also like to think I am present in the pictures because of the way Vanessa and the kids respond to me as the photographer behind the camera.

More recently, I have begun to include my *actual* self in the pictures, which feels like the project's next step. I'm excited and a little nervous to see what it will open up. It feels good to be a little uncomfortable though.

**AH:** This could easily have been a more documentary-style project. As you edited the work, what steps did you take to eschew that documentary lens in favor of something more abstract and lyrical?

**JS:** In some ways, the edit might be the most crucial part of the process. The project is shaped by the selections I make—how the images relate to one another, what they show, and, most importantly, what they leave out. I tend to shoot a lot of film and it's through a heavy distillation process that I uncover the work's potential. Editing also influences the way I shoot the next time I pick up a camera. When I look through the contact sheets, I'm hoping to find something that contains a presence and tension made from the in-between moments of our lives, which is where we spend most of our time. These kinds of pictures stimulate my sense memory more than my intellect, acting as a lifeline back to the way it felt to be in the moment—an emotional history to live alongside a factual one.

**AH:** You and your husband Josh have had three children over the last seven years. When did you start thinking about your family and your role as a mother in relationship to your work?

**VW:** In 2012, when I became pregnant with my first child, Wyatt, my work really shifted. I experienced a life growing inside me while two important people in my life passed away (one close to my age). I thought a lot about how mysterious and arbitrary life can be, this constant sense of the invisible or unknown. When I gave birth to my son via C-section, my body was draped in blue hospital cloth, and it made me think about burial shrouds. I began to see fabric as symbolic for both the beginning and end of the life cycle; life can be born out of cloth or disappear behind it. This led me to create *(In)Visible*, a body of collage work where identities and bodies are rendered partially invisible through draped fabric.

During my second pregnancy, we shared our baby Oliver's heartbeat via Facetime with Josh's grandmother who was across the world in her own hospital bed, soon to pass away. The human heartbeat—an invisible strand of life and existence—was so palpable in that moment.

It has also made clearer the multifaceted roles a single body may inhabit over a lifetime. Over the past seven years, I have witnessed my body change in both function and appearance. Ultimately, becoming a parent has hugely influenced my interests and direction.

**AH:** In addition to new interests with respect to content, how has the birth of your children changed the way you make work?

**VW:** I've always strived to use materials and techniques that best drive a particular idea. In graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute, I started as a photographer who dabbled in collage and came out an experimental filmmaker, making short, animated 16mm films. For my animated films, I used my own photographs as starting points to be drawn on, collaged, torn, etc. Eventually, though, life, work, and motherhood made it challenging to find the dedicated and uninterrupted lengths of time essential to entering into the rhythm of animation. So, around 2010–11, I committed to developing my collage work, which is still very connected to my filmmaking sensibilities.

**AH:** The 49-panel grid collage—*Each One of Us Was Fastened to the Other* (2020)—seems like a good example of your relationship to filmmaking. I was also reminded of Ray Metzker's composites. Can you talk about the way the work can be read as both a compilation of individual vignettes, but also as a sequential whole?

**VW:** Exactly! The movement across the individual panels of this piece mirrors how 24 static film frames create one second of moving picture; static images in sequence become kinetic. I love Metzker's work and was actually looking at a lot of his grid pieces (and Imogen Cunningham's *Flora*) when I made this! The idea of this piece was to use the grid to abstract forms and render singular bodies/genders unrecognizable. I wanted to emphasize the continuity and overlap between my children's bodies and my own. In the swirling chaos of daily life, it can feel as though there is never a fixed beginning or end to things.

**AH:** You include additional collages and traditional black-and-white photographs in *Vestiges*. Did you make use of both mediums throughout your work on this project?

**VW:** I began making the works for *Vestiges* using exclusively found/sourced material. The work began by exploring the male gaze and male-dominated depictions of the erotic female form. I was interested in reconfiguring these bodies to be de-sexualized sculptural forms that explore the multitudes of roles the female body can have as maker of life, mother, and partner.

But as I was making this work, using only found material felt limiting. I finally had a realization that I could create the source material myself. I began photographing Josh and our children in an effort to have full control over the final pieces. This marks a significant departure in how I'm thinking about and executing my collages.

As I continued making work for *Vestiges*, I created an array of source material—shooting 35mm film, as well as 4x5 film and 4x5 paper negatives—that I could draw from to best execute the work. By making and printing my own material, I'm also no longer limited by size; my collages have typically been fairly small (the size of a magazine or book). Now, I can scale up, shrink, duplicate, or mirror the images, upending the previous limitations of “the original.” A bonus of this process is that some of the individual photographs ended up being strong enough to exist as singular pieces. The next thing I want to do is create some much larger collages from the photographs.

**AH:** As you've just described, reconfiguration of forms—typically bodies—is central to the work. For me, that reconfiguration often manifests as significant abstraction of the human form. What do you hope that abstraction communicates?

**VW:** Throughout art history, the female body has been mined and objectified. Abstraction for me operates as a means to de-sexualize and remove desire from the female form as designed for male consumption.

For this body of work, I was interested in using the female body as a place of interrogation—where the female form is revealed, obfuscated, and fractured. The

resulting collages subvert the male gaze, reclaiming representation of the female body from a woman's perspective.

**AH:** Can you talk about how this idea relates to your incorporation of breasts—often separated or fragmented from their associated bodies—in the project?

**VW:** As I was making this work, I revisited Lee Miller's subversive photo of a severed breast on a plate, set on a table. It's such a bold photo. We know that the eroticized, disarticulated body was a common theme among the male Surrealists, but here Miller challenges that eroticization so directly. This image influenced how I wanted to show breasts in my own work. I should also add that relentless breastfeeding has been a beautiful and draining part of motherhood. My aim in the collages was to deemphasize the breast as a sexualized object and reemphasize it as a giver of life.

**AH:** I also noticed that foliage repeatedly appears in the work. Is there any symbolic significance to that imagery?

**VW:** The foliage functions as a symbol for the life cycle, specifically life unfurling, growing, and decaying. All the shooting happens in our backyard, so the foliage also allows for more variety and control of the frame's content. The foliage helps to abstract individual bodies while simultaneously confusing any visible boundaries. This blurring of boundaries has been one of my foundational discoveries of motherhood.

**AH:** This confusion of boundaries seems to come up in a number of works where you play with a tension between confinement and breaking free of restraints.

**VW:** Being a parent "boxes you in," but it also opens up new ways of seeing and navigating the world, with/for/through your children. I was interested in exploring the dissolving boundaries between my own body and the bodies of my children. Visually, there are barriers or boxes that I create, but the forms break out of, push through, and disrupt them. The body is always in visual flux. This was intentional.

**AH:** Is it significant that there are virtually no faces visible in this selection of works?

**VW:** The origins of anonymity lie in *(In)Visible*, the first body of work I made as a parent. I have always liked my subjects' identities to be ambiguous/erased. A figure without a visible identity can be anyone and no one. The metaphoric and literal erasure of identity also relates to the experience of parenthood.

**AH:** You two have very different practices. But by presenting these two projects together, similarities in your approaches and outlooks are revealed. How much do you think you were informed by the other's work, perspective, or aesthetic?

**JS:** Vanessa and I met at the San Francisco Art Institute 16 years ago in a critique seminar and have been working alongside one another ever since. I don't think we considered ourselves collaborators until seeing all the connections between our works in this context. The dialogue between our bodies of work is a direct result of our shared experience both inside and outside artmaking.

**VW:** Over the years, we have evolved as artists and as a couple, sustaining our creative lives as our children have arrived and our lives have moved forward. Though our approaches to artmaking are vastly different, being one another's primary editors/viewers has created a kind of echo chamber. Our interests and experiences have also slowly become more aligned. Some themes that have emerged and evolved throughout our relationship as artists are the reshaping of identity, the physicality of parenting, and the use of light and dark as symbols for mortality.

That said, we are both always hungry to make work, so sometimes the similarities are a byproduct of what's practical. If I create a set to shoot in the backyard, Josh will inevitably shoot his own version of the scene and vice versa. More recently, I have also begun to explore the idea of collaging onto his photographs to make our collaboration intentional.

**AH:** I want to return to Vanessa's thought about the reshaping of your identities as an implicit part of parenthood. In my conversations with each of you, you both discussed feeling like parts of yourselves were lost when you became parents. How is this loss communicated in your works? And in what ways has this reshaping, in your opinion, been different between mother and father?

**VW:** Being a parent is an exercise in surrender and forces a reassessment of your identity. Your own needs and desires are made secondary to those of your children. As a mother, there is a societal implication that the more you sacrifice for your children,



the better. I've had to push back against this idea in order to maintain an identity as an artist that is separate from my role as a mother. When I make collages, the original image is decontextualized through the act of cutting, its meaning then re-contextualized through new associations. In many ways, this is similar to parenthood—where the process of becoming a parent erases the pre-parent identity and reassigns it as something else.

**JS:** Being a parent quickly erodes your individual identity because you have to give so much attention to others' needs. There is something liberating, but also deeply unsettling about this. The camera brings shape and visual presence to something that was previously invisible. For example, the absence of Vanessa's individual features in my photos points to this idea and is likely a projection of my own experience.

**AH:** As you both talk about how your work relates to your roles as parents, I wonder what kinds of projects might have inspired you when you first started making these bodies of work. Were you thinking about any other photographic projects about family?

**JS:** I have always loved work about family. When I was a young photographer, the pictures of Harry Callahan and Emmet Gowin showed me how visual invention and emotional connection could coexist in the same photographs. Their photographs acted as both declarations of love and laboratories for visual ideas.

These days, I think a lot about Ralph Eugene Meatyard, whose work I didn't used to think of as "family" pictures, and now, it's all I can see. His work felt entwined in the currents of his family life, the improvised sets found during some family adventure. He didn't see his family as a hindrance to his creative process, but as an extension of it. Meatyard's photographs seem to balance what he could and could not control. This combination of the premeditated and unpredictable is a good description of how I am working right now.

**VW:** Conversely, I wasn't looking at work specific to family. I was looking at a variety of artists/photographers who explore form, light, and the body including Hans Bellmer, Henry Moore, and Hans Arp. I was also looking at Ray Metzker's grids, Edward Weston, and Imogen Cunningham. In reading Cunningham's monograph, I learned that she began photographing botanicals at a time when she was often confined to her home and garden—she, too, was a mother of three young children—with, as she said, "one hand in the dishpan, the other in the darkroom." This resonated deeply with me and reminded me that internal vision is what drives the

success of work, not external environments. The camera and artist can transform the mundane.

**AH:** So how do you think these works speak to your day-to-day life as parents and artists?

**JS:** I think these pictures wouldn't be possible unless they were very much a part of our day-to-day existence as a family. If we were to wait for designated "artmaking" time, we would never get anything done.

**VW:** Over time, we have realized our different roles must coexist in a fluid state.

**JS:** But there are lots of ways in which the pictures are detached from the reality of our home life. Photographs are partially the result of our own intentions and partially an invention of the medium itself. This contrast between document and fiction is where the act of discovery takes place, and also where the work can feel separate from the reality of our lives.

**VW:** Starting our family seven years ago had a profound impact on both of our art practices. For both of us, becoming parents provided a means of looking inward and creating more personal work. It also forced us to become more creative within the context of our domestic space. With three kids, we are most often at home or nearby. Those confines require us to get creative, finding ways to use light, props, gesture, and composition to elevate the mundane.

Much of the work I made for this show is rooted in an examination of the female body. The functions and roles of a woman's body change profoundly through birth and motherhood. The body I move through the world in now is different than the one I had before becoming a parent.

**AH:** Turning now to the exhibition, how did you arrive at the title *Vestiges*?

**JS:** "Vestiges" refers to the fragmentation and ephemerality that appears throughout the exhibition. The experience of parenting—though intense in the moment—is ultimately lost to the passage of time and instability of memory. These artworks represent our attempt to hold onto something we know we can't preserve.

**VW:** In biological terms, a vestige is part of an organ or organism that has become reduced or evolutionarily functionless. I love this idea in relation to my body, that its

function as a reproducer of life devolves as I age. In the broader definition, a vestige is a remnant of what once was. Once you become a parent, the passage of time is made visible. From month to month, swift changes manifest as physical and intellectual growth, development of a child's persona, etc. In the last two years, for example, our daughter Luella, who just turned two, has transformed from a noodle to a walking, talking little human. So, in a sense, you are watching evolution at work. Each month is a vestige of the last. Our project examines, collects, and reassembles these fleeting fragments of time.

**AH:** And what do you think is gained by seeing both of these projects in one space?

**VW:** When looking at our work together, I hope the viewer sees two divergent perspectives of one shared experience. While both of our work gravitates towards the surreal, Josh's work is rooted in reality while mine is largely removed from it.

**JS:** The exhibition layout is a nice analogy for our working relationship— distinctly separate with lots of dialogue in between. I think our individual aesthetics are showcased through the way we each respond to shared experience and subject matter. In this case, the divergences may be more compelling than the congruencies.