IMPOSSIBLE SCIENCE:

PHOTOGRAPHING THE UNPHOTOGRAPHABLE

by

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A THESIS

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This thesis consists of a series of photographs alongside a conceptual introduction to the work, connecting the photographs to my inquiry into representing the passage of time experienced through the body. I draw on photographic theories of trace and punctum to explore how people navigate time, mortality, and family through the photographic medium. The photographic work consists of portraits, landscapes, and a repetitive series of hands. The photographs were created for an installation in the Laverne Krause Gallery, and they were printed in color at varying sizes. The work is grouped into two parts: a series of photos of my grandmother's hands, printed at 11 x 17" and hung in a grid, and a select few portraits and landscapes printed at 45 x 55.5" to accompany the hands. This thesis elaborates on the intentions behind the work and documents the photographs included in the exhibition.

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Introduction

Conceptual Background

My thesis work is inspired by photographic theory, especially the paradigm of trace which has long fascinated photographers. Photographs have been described as traces of "the real"[1] for their capacity to interact with reality in a way that is distinct from other visual media. The very act of producing a photograph sets the medium apart from other fine arts from its inception. According to American writer and critic Susan Sontag, photography reflects and transmutes reality, making it "the only art that is natively surreal…"[2] Photography is not surreal in the way that surrealist painting is. Photography is surreal in the sense that it facilitates "the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree."[3] In my thesis, I investigate the traces of time upon the body from the perspective that the surreal is inherent in photography.

The paradigm of the trace has transcended eras of photography. Photograms, the earliest types of photographic images, are made by a process that brings objects into direct contact with light-sensitive surfaces to fix their outlines. They are literally traces of objects. Their physicality makes it easy to theorize the connection between photographs and traces of reality, seeing as a photogram presents viewers with true traces, outlines, of the objects that touched the paper. However, at its core this theory applies to all forms of photography. As American art critic and

1 Geimer, Peter. "Image as trace: Speculations about an undead paradigm." Translated by Kata Gellen. Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, vol. 18, no. 1, 1 May 2007, pp. 7–28, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-021.
2 Sontag, Susan. On Photography. Penguin Books, 2019, 52.
3 Sontag, Susan. On Photography. Penguin Books, 2019, 57.

theorist Rosalind Krauss notes, "...the photogram only forces, or makes explicit, what is the case of all photography. Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface."[4]

Trace is invoked more commonly in analog processes than digital, again because of its assumed materiality. It's easier to understand the concept of trace in photography when alchemical processes are involved, and silver crystals are exposed to light and chemical changes fix that light into a permanent image. But even digital photography utilizes light, albeit via sensors and mirrors rather than light-sensitive film processes, to make imagery. Trace applies conceptually to every form of image-making, physicality aside. Though much of the classic writing on trace in photography relies heavily upon, and can even fetishize, the alchemy of analog process, the theory is still relevant today.

Roland Barthes — French philosopher, social theorist, and semiotician — provides some of the most influential writing on photography's relationship to trace, mortality, and memory. In his iconic text *Camera Lucida*, he uses his personal narrative about searching for a photo of his mother in her youth (the "Winter Garden Photograph"[5]) to introduce his audience to his theories about photography, death, and trace. Barthes describes photographs of people as a sort of magic imprint, in the sense that they transcend time. By preserving someone's likeness in a physical object like the photograph, the photographer transforms the person by creating a duplicate version of them. The magic happens the moment the shutter is released, and the subject is

4 Krauss, Rosalind. "Notes on the index: Seventies art in America." October, vol. 3, no. Spring, 1977, pp. 68–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/778437.
5 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 73.

transformed into a person who is both alive in the real world as well as in the second, timeless, world of the photograph.

In this popular passage, Barthes describes photography as such: "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceeds radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a Star."[6]

The medium's unique ability to transmit someone's being, or at least their "emanation," is special to Barthes and theorists like him. Deceptively simple, this is a key property of photography: photographs offer us possession of the real, and the past, all at once. But therein is the paradox. A photograph can attempt to capture someone, to capture the past, and all it can offer is a surrogate for this person and the time spent with them. Thus, Barthes' claim that "...realists do not take the photograph for a 'copy' of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art"[7] reminds us that all a photograph can give us is proof of past existence, proof of trace.

Photographs seem to be simple containers for reality and record-keeping on their surface, but their nature complicates that assumption. For what they contain is not a person or an exact moment in time, but only a gesture of attempting to parcel out a moment, to capture and preserve it. In photos of family and loved ones especially, photographs are just as much about the photographer as they are about the subject.

6 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 80-81.
7 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 88.

The decision to photograph a person we hold dear represents a desire to freeze them in time, to take them out of the fragility of their mortal body and preserve them forever. Our anxiety and love manifest in our collective drive to collect, preserve, and organize our loved ones into albums and frames where we can feel as though they are with us even when they are not.

"A photograph is a pseudo-presence and a token of absence," observed Sontag.[8] Speaking to the personal significance of the photographs that everyday people keep around, especially of loved ones, she points out that "... all such talismanic uses of photographs express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality."[9] In trying to hold on to our loved ones via photographs, we craft a space outside of reality, outside of the past, wholly its own. This space represents our desire to be close to others through photographs, it represents our longing to preserve the un-preservable. This futile desire and the beauty of that gesture is what I explore in my project.

Exploring the desire to freeze time and defy inevitable entropy, and ultimately death, has prompted my creative project and conceptual interests. The impossibility of it all, the tension between the futility of photography to provide us with anything real and the obvious truth that everyone still uses photography to connect, to remember, and to attest to the perceived reality of our own lives is what I explore in my creative thesis.

Portraiture, especially of family, has always been about preserving those we hold close through the alchemical medium of photography, a brief interruption of the flow of time. I'm interested in exploring how we use photography to deny and resist the flow of time. Though we

8 Sontag, Susan. On Photography. Penguin Books, 2019, 16.
9 Sontag, Susan. On Photography. Penguin Books, 2019, 16.

don't often realize it, photography can often be an expression of our feelings towards aging and death.

Barthes and Sontag both describe a link between the photographic process and death. We preconceive death in photographs by immortalizing someone's image, creating a version of them that will outlive their physical form. A preemptive token of remembrance, and a present assertion of life — an assertion made, subconsciously, out of spite for death. We want to prove our aliveness, to attest to the physicality of ourselves and our loved ones. Part of this is our underlying anxiety to stave off our own mortality. "All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death. This is the way in which our time assumes Death: with the denying alibi of the distractedly "alive," of which the Photographer is in a sense the professional."[10]

Barthes claims that photography fills spiritual holes in modern society with its magical, life-affirming properties. In our universal anxiety to find meaning, make sense of life, and outrun death, we seek transcendence through photographs. Personal photography is a nearly universal comfort. It structures and ritualizes life for many people, giving us photo-albums and milestones preserved to prove that we lived. The reason photographs have this hold on us, according to Barthes, is their ability to emotionally wound, or "prick" us, or their "punctum."[11]

Barthes calls a photograph's punctum "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)".[12] It is the personal aspect, the undefinable feeling of attraction to a photograph that everyone feels. We have all been attracted to photographs before that others have no affection for, because of our own personal punctum. But more than an enigmatic,

10
11 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 27.
12 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 27.

undefinable thing, a photograph's punctum is again its inherent reminder of the inevitability of death. "The punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this had been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake".[13] Such a simple, but true, thing lies at the heart of what makes photography a universal magic, a language of fear, comfort, and desire. In its attestation to life lived, photography simultaneously reminds us that we are all mortal. It reminds us that while we can fix an image, fix an emanation of someone dear, we can never fix time's relentless march.

At the heart of photography's relation to death is the aforementioned element of time. Photographs pull their subject out of the march of time and into a fixed, captured, state of preservation. This quality of photography to preserve, to make someone's image endure time longer than they themselves can, makes it the "agent of Death" that Barthes refers to. "This new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the noeme ("that-has-been"), its pure representation".[14]

This frustratingly simple premise that photography "wounds" us emotionally because it captures the "emanation" of someone, the referent, who inevitably will face the effects of time, will die, prompts me to examine time as a key factor in my photographs. I'm interested in the gesture of photography and what it means to try to catalog time. It is impossible to photograph time itself, so I turned to recording time's impact in a very direct way. By photographing my grandmother repeatedly in the same way, I set up not just a study of her, but an almost scientific exploration into the visible effects of time. Whether or not these effects are visible doesn't matter to me, it's just the gesture of looking, of actively considering time.

13 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 96.
14 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 96.

Time is the main component in all photographs, whether we are conscious of it or not. In my creative project, I bring time to the forefront of the work. Ritualistically documenting my grandmother's hands week after week was a method of accessing the physical and conceptual elements of time. By displaying them together in a large group and using seriality as a structuring element to the work, I began constructing a narrative about the impossibility of representing aging or the passage of time through a photograph. The project became about the act of trying to document the time and aging as a bodily experience, but always finding the photograph insufficient. Photography only offers us a slice of the fluid thing that is time, showing its limitations more than anything. The notion of time as a "wound" or punctum became just as much my subject as my grandmother.

"Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print".[15] Each photograph is a meditation on the nature of photography and the corresponding nature of aging. Freezing time is impossible in both cases. A photograph only offers a sliver, an attempt at preservation, and in the real world time marches on. In this way, my project is a celebration of aging's inevitability. I take comfort in the promise of aging, and I see photography to embrace rather than attempt to outrun our mortality.

I photographed my grandmother for this study because she is my oldest remaining relative, one of my closest, and I have so much respect and admiration for her. It started as a Barthesian project of trying to preserve her image to ease my anxiety about her impermanence — a less avoidable topic the older she becomes — and an inquiry into the idea of the photographic as preservation. It transformed into an act of embracing her old age — and everyone's — and my own preemptive anxieties about losing her. By exploring my own feelings

15 Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, 1996, 92.

freely, I attempted to find and focus on the core of what makes photographs emotionally resonant. I explored Barthesian notions of trace and punctum through repetition and a time-based process. Finally, I used my photographs to slow down and ask viewers to think about how we experience time through photography. This project is an appreciation of human impermanence, and an attempt to come to terms with it through photographic theory and practice.

Artistic Influences

Many artists helped me generate ideas for this project. The first was American artist Roni Horn, specifically her 1994-96 photographic project *You Are The Weather*, which uses time and repetition to engage viewers.[16]

You Are The Weather is a conceptual project that presents viewers with 100 color portraits of Horn's friend in various pools throughout Iceland. Tightly cropped around the young woman's face, with only a bit of background revealed, the portraits force viewers to slow down and look for minute changes in the subject's expression. Horn's work is about the changeability of people and of nature, and it asks viewers to think about faces as surfaces that can conceal and reveal our changing states.[17]

While Horn uses time and repetition for different ends than mine, her project inspired me to think about both of those elements as ways to structure my own work. *You Are The Weather* helped me think intentionally about how to display the passage of time and how to foreground small details and changes through repetition.

16 "Roni Horn Paintings, Bio, Ideas." The Art Story, www.theartstory.org/artist/horn-roni/. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.
17 "You Are the Weather." You Are the Weather, 28 Mar. 2024, www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/you-are-the-weather.

Figure 1.

Roni Horn, You Are the Weather.[18]

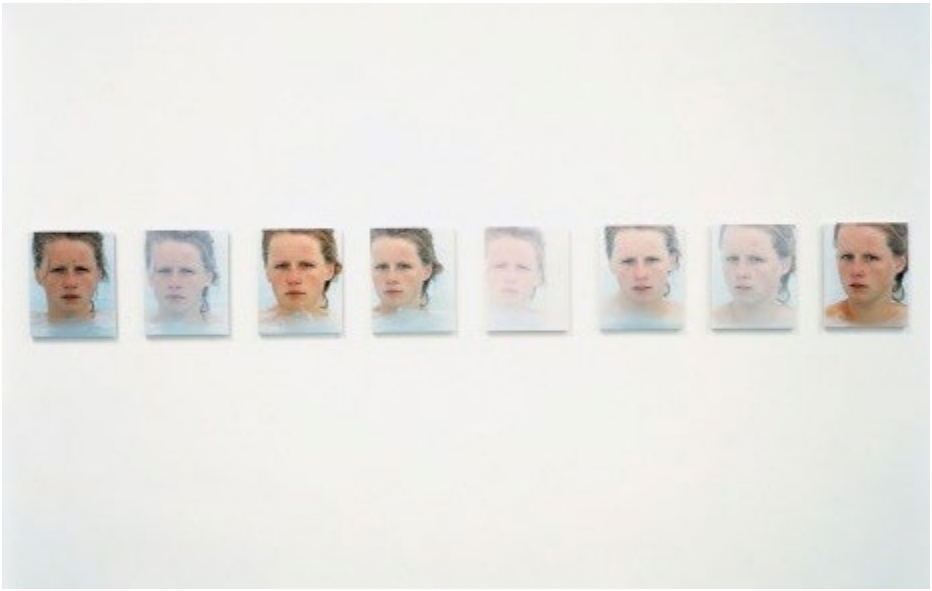

Figure 2.

Roni Horn, You Are the Weather (detail).[19]

Nicholas Nixon's iconic photo series *The Brown Sisters* exemplifies contemporary photography that deals with family and the passing of time in a straightforward way. Nixon

18 Terri. "Fondation Beyeler: Roni Horn 'You Are the Weather.'" World Art Foundations, 12 Oct. 2020, worldartfoundations.com/fondation-beyeler-roni-horn-you-are-the-weather/.

began this work in 1975, taking photographs of his wife and her sisters every year thereafter. He used an 8 x 10 inch view camera to document the women and the time passing.[20] Nixon's simple approach to documenting aging and the durational nature of his work are very close to my own interests. His use of photography to examine the passage of time and its visibility on our families is obviously conceptually close to my interests and it's an inspiring body of work. Nixon also uses an 8 x 10 view camera to make his images, an enduring format that necessitates deliberation and careful decisions. Again, like Horn's, Nixon's work's success lies in its straightforward, documentary simplicity.

19 Vogel, Martin. "Learning from Art: Roni Horn at Tate Modern." Vogel Wakefield, 23 Aug. 2019, vogelwakefield.com/2009/03/learning-from-art-roni-horn-at-tate-modern/.
20 Kaplan, Howard. "Nicholas Nixon's the Brown Sisters." Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 9 Mar. 2016, americanart.si.edu/blog/eye-level/2016/09/358/nicholas-nixons-brown-sisters.

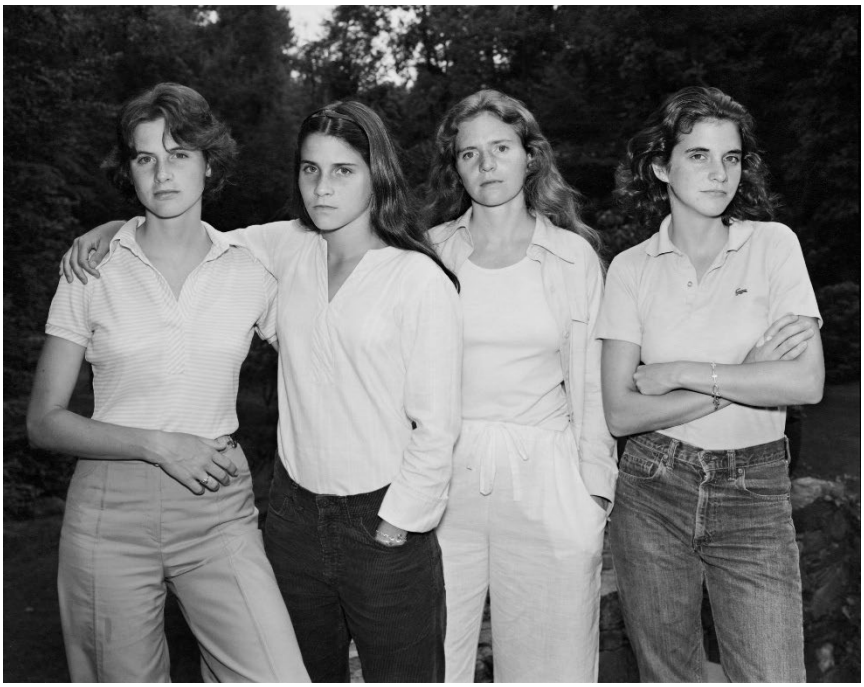

Figure 3.

1975, New Canaan, Conn.[21]

Figure 4.

The Brown Sisters, Truro, Massachusetts, 2016. Gelatin silver print. © Nicholas Nixon. Courtesy the artist and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.[22]

Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra is another portrait photographer making straightforward portraits with a large format analog camera. Her 1992-2002 project *Beach Portraits* is quite different from my work on the surface: her portraits focus on adolescents posing on beaches. My portraits focus on my grandmother posing in her apartment. Conceptually, though, they both emphasize bodily experience and ask viewers to linger and to experience the images and the time contained within them more slowly than usual. Dijkstra's portraits "implicitly refuse and subvert digital time by asserting the continuing reality of time as experienced in and through the body" according to art historian, writer, and curator Elizabeth Keto[23]. Dijkstra's series foregrounds our bodily experience of time, and her use of the 4 x 5 view camera reflects the possibilities of the medium to create stunning, large portraits.

23 Criticism, Journal of Art. "Rineke Dijkstra's Portraits: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Digital Time." JAC., 12 May 2017, journalofartcriticism.wordpress.com/2016/05/05/rineke-dijkstras-portraits-the-aesthetics-and-ethics-of-digital-time/.

Figure 5.

Coney Island, N.Y., USA, July 9, 1993.[24]

24 “Rineke Dijkstra: Coney Island, N.Y., USA, July 9, 1993.” The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, www.guggenheim.org/artwork/9407. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

Impossible Science: The Creative Project

I worked primarily with a large format, 4 x 5” view camera to produce this project, sometimes using digital photography as well. I photographed my grandmother from October 2023 to April 2024, making portraits of her, of both of us, and of her hands against a semi-visible background. The repetition of this process became a creative ritual through which I ultimately found my way to this small portfolio. Though I produced hundreds of photos through this process, I eventually settled on just four large prints for my exhibition, and thirty smaller photographs of her hands to display in a grid. I felt that the simplicity of this selection made the work more powerful than it would otherwise be.

The grid of hands directly references the concepts of time and repetition, showing the product of our ritual. The larger prints are looser, allowing me to explore visual metaphors. The eyes paired with the water echo each other and echo the fluidity of time and entropy. Together, I hope that this collection of photographs feels calm, celebratory, and human.

I printed the following two photos the largest, at 44 x 54.5”, for my exhibition in the Laverne Kraus Gallery:

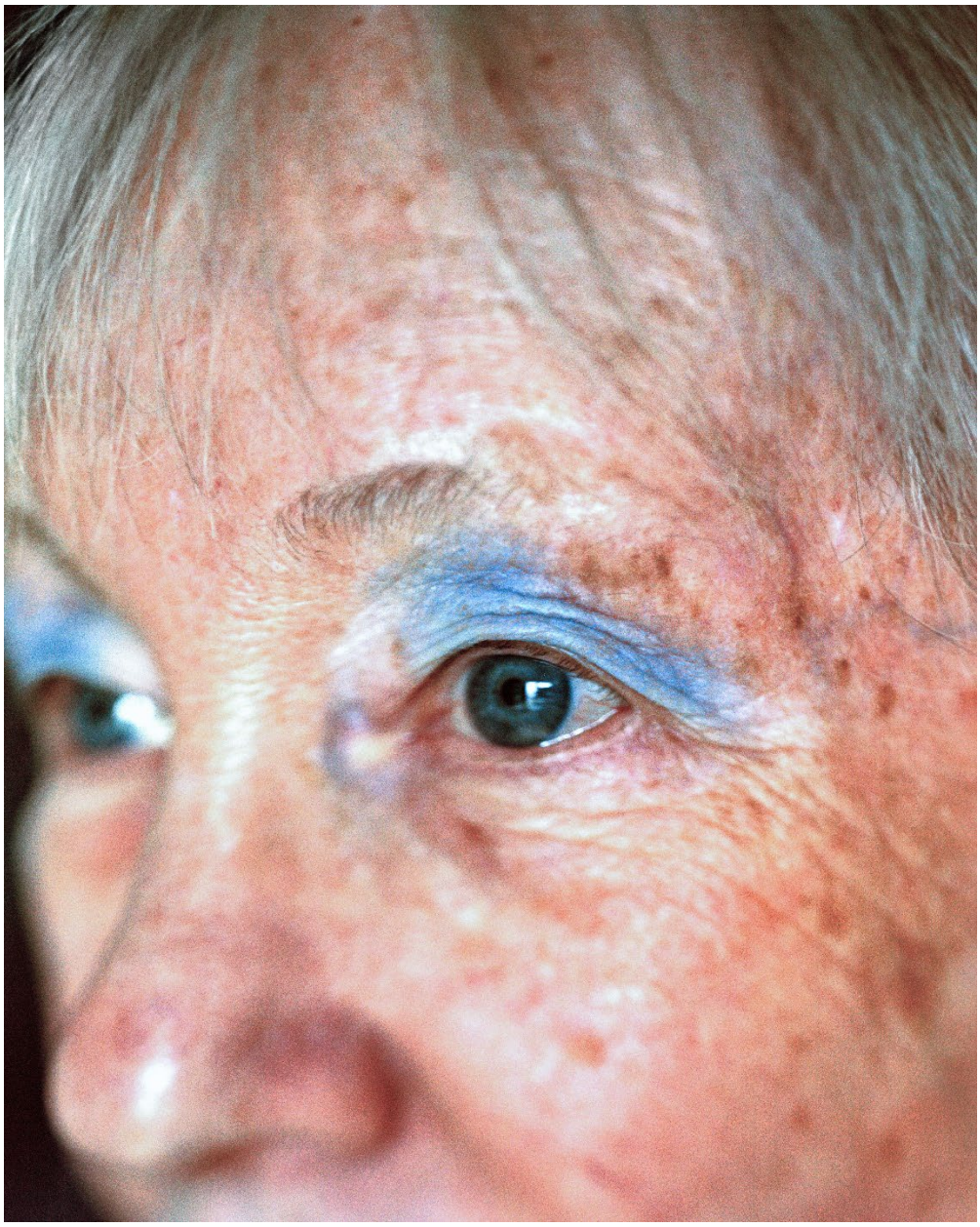

Figure 6.

Untitled 1, Ilka Sankari. Large format.

Figure 7.

Untitled 2, Ilka Sankari. Large format.

The following photos I printed at 16 x 22”:

Figure 8.

Untitled 3, Ilka Sankari. Large format.

Finally, I printed a grid of 30 photographs of my grandmother’s hands at 11 x 17.” Three photos from this series include:

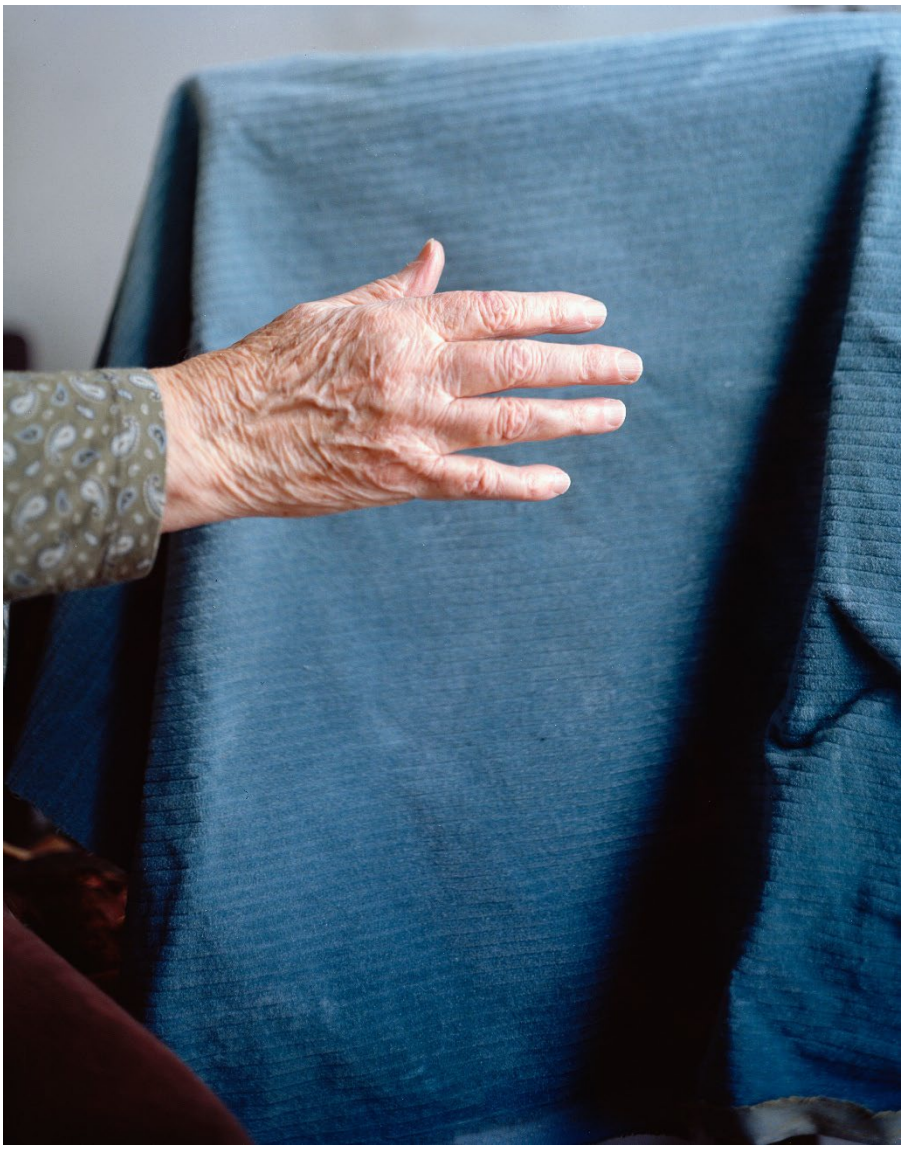

Figure 9.

Untitled 5, Ilka Sankari. Large format.

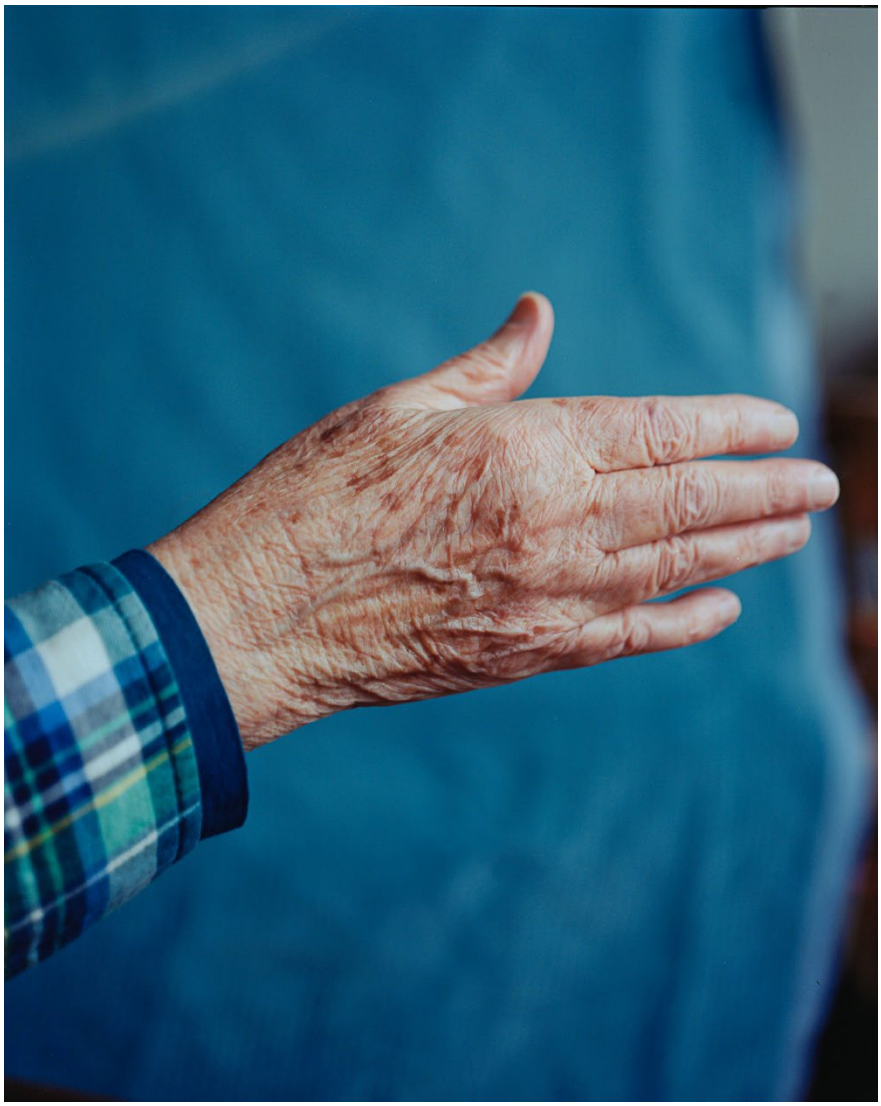

Figure 10.

Untitled 6, Ilka Sankari. Large format.

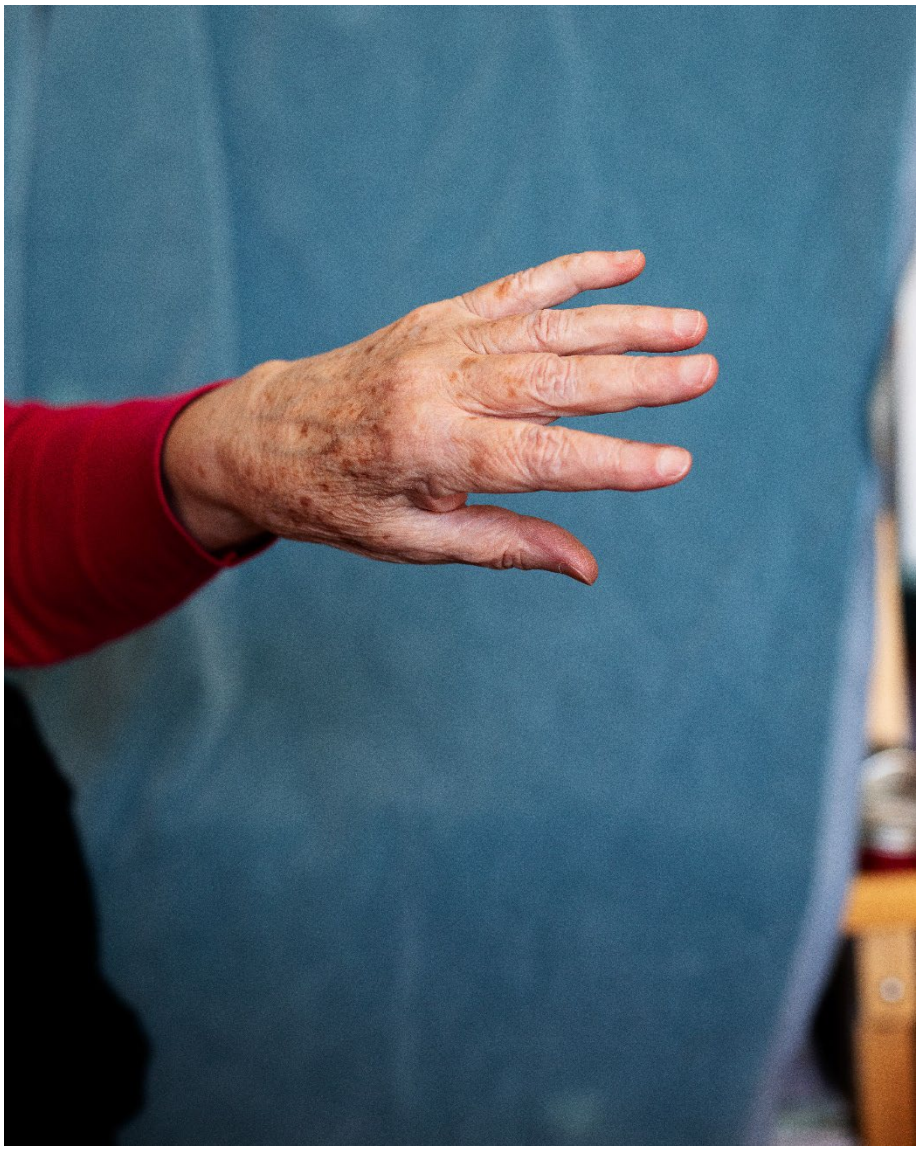

Figure 11.

Untitled 7, Ilka Sankari. Digital.

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