

PERSPECTIVE  
&  
PERCEPTION

PEARL E.



I use photography as a means to express the hidden qualities of the world, to better understand reality, and to show my interpretation of what is around me. I take pictures that call attention to things other people overlook. As a photographer, this helps me engage more deeply with where I am in space and time.

My idea for this project came from my research on how our life experiences connect to our perception of the world. By examining the ambiguity and origination of people's individual viewpoints via retakes and variations, I tried to increase the dynamic between audience and author by objectifying emotions and investigating the duality that develops through different interpretations. These images are meant to evoke the passage of time.

I experimented with different development processes to show how memories can affect our view of an object by putting a filter over it. By including text, I hope to present an example of how experiences in the past can affect our view of an object in the present...sometimes without us realizing it.

These photographs are an investigation into representations of (seemingly) concrete images and situations, as well as depictions and ideas that can only be realized through photography. The photos do not reveal the complete object, and the stories are also not complete. As a result, the viewer can discern their own interpretation. I encourage the viewer to think about how these images remind them of an experience in their past.

Pearl E

*How do our life experiences connect to our perception of the world? When we have a sensory experience, our reaction to it shapes our perceptions going forward. As a result, there are no pure or absolute experiences because everything filters through our own individual sensibilities, emotions and history. There is a branch of science that explores this dynamic, and that is known as the Information Processing Model. Through the lens of the Information Processing Model, I explore how my thoughts have been shaped by strong sensory memories, in order to understand more deeply how we are shaped by experience, and how we can develop awareness of this unconscious process enough to begin consciously shaping the world around us.*

Searching for a life experience that shaped me was not difficult. I was first introduced to horseback riding when I was very little by my aunt. She was an avid equestrian and she successfully passed the passion for it on to me. We rode when we were together, and I started riding regularly at a stable near my house too. I had the typical young girl obsession with horses, which she helped to fuel, and riding became the highlight of my week. I enjoyed everything about it, the way the horses always smelled of new hay, the emotional calm I felt riding through trails in the woods, and the sound of my breath connecting with the horse's breath.

My aunt died when I was 12. When she passed away, I was young enough to not fully process what had happened but I was certainly aware that she was gone. Around this time, I stopped riding as much. Eventually I stopped altogether. I told myself I was growing out of a phase and horseback riding just wasn't for me anymore. It took me a while to connect the fact that I had stopped riding to my aunt's death.

I continued to love horses, and I still love horses, but the way that love, unique to me, fits into my life has been changed. Horses mean something different to me than they used to. They were the connection I had with my aunt when she was living, our shared passion, but now they are my reminder of her, my connection to complex feelings about her. When I am around horses and I smell their distinct smell, and hear their breath connect with mine, I think of my aunt coming to my competitions, of watching her work in the barn, I hear her voice quietly talking to them. My aunt's death changed the way I connect to horses.

For my research, about how an event or experience can change our perspective, I chose to dig deeper into the subjectivity of what we perceive as real.

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“Seeing color is one of the simplest things the brain does and yet even at this fundamental level, context is everything,” says neuroscientist and artist Beau Lotto.<sup>1</sup> The Information Processing Model is a framework used by cognitive psychologists to explain and describe the way our individual mental processes affect our experience. In this view, the human mind functions like a computer, taking information in, organizing it and storing it to be retrieved at a later time. In the human mind, the “input device” is the Sensory Register, a host of organs like the eyes and the ears through which we receive data about our surroundings. As information is received by the mind, it is processed in the Working Memory or Short-Term Memory. This is where information is temporarily held so that it may be used, discarded, or transferred into long-term memory. Information that is not currently being used is stored in the long-term memory, and can be kept for an indefinite period of time. The result of information processing is exhibited through behavior or actions - a facial expression, a reply to a question, a response to an object, or body movement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Enayati, A. (2012, April 14). The power of perceptions: Imagining the reality you want. Retrieved April 20, 2017, from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/11/health/enayati-power-perceptions-imagination/>

<sup>2</sup> "Information Processing Model." *Information Processing Model definition | Psychology Glossary*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2017.

The Information Processing Model suggests that the same stimuli can lead to very different reactions among people, because our minds make different connections between the stimuli and our experiences. For example, one person can see a teddy bear and think of their favorite stuffed animal as a child, while someone else will think of a fight they had where they threw a stuffed animal and got in trouble. Our experiences influence our views on objects, and at the same time, the objects we are exposed to influence our behavior and views. Ruha Benjamin, professor of sociology and African-American studies at Boston University, calls on people to become aware of how our habitat forms our habits.

A study was done with 88 elderly individuals who were asked to name personally significant objects and discuss their meanings. Their responses were sorted into categories: objects symbolizing relationships with others past and present; objects as symbols of the self; those serving as defenses against loss and other deleterious changes; objects of care; representations of the past; and objects as the focus of mature sensuousness. The study concluded “personal objects can play an important role in maintaining personal identity in late life and may function as a distinctive language for the expression of identity and personal meaning.”<sup>3</sup>

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Becoming conscious of the subjectivity of our perceptions is not easy. But human perceptions, and their ramifications, are very real and potentially life changing.

Perception can change more than our feelings, but also our physical state. What we believe we are taking as medicine can translate into measurable data. It plays a major role in helping patients improve their health in areas ranging from pain and depression to Parkinson's disease. This is known as the Placebo Effect, and is often misunderstood as less powerful than it turns out to be. Patients who think they are getting actual medicine will see their symptoms lessen, even if all they are receiving is placebo. “Though the placebo effect remains largely shrouded in mystery, researchers attribute some aspects to active mechanisms in the brain that can influence bodily processes such as the immune response and release of hormones.”<sup>4</sup>

So how might we harness the power of perception to live more conscious lives and, perhaps, to even recast the most dire situations in which we find ourselves?

An infamous example of mistaken perception is the different ways in which a majority of Americans see the agency of black men. Ruha Benjamin, professor of sociology and African-American studies at Boston University, says, “In certain contexts, like on a basketball court, we are perfectly comfortable celebrating them. But take those same people and place them in a different context -- walking down the street in a predominantly white neighborhood -- and that perception of black masculinity at the core

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<sup>3</sup> Rubinstein, R. L. (1987). The significance of personal objects to older people. Retrieved April 20, 2017, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25195721>

<sup>4</sup> Enayati, A. (2012, April 14). The power of perceptions: Imagining the reality you want. Retrieved April 20, 2017, from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/11/health/enayati-power-perceptions-imagination>

of our culture changes context. And in this new context, being a black male may suddenly become a life and death issue.”<sup>5</sup>

By “responding and not choosing,” in Benjamin’s words, in this context, we miss an enormous opportunity as a society to grow and improve.

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I’ve always felt a strong attachment to things that remind me of moments or people: the silver necklace that hangs off my grandmother’s dresser, which always makes me think of playing hide and seek in the summer heat. Or my father’s button-down shirts, imbued with the scent of wood smoke, that flash me back to getting tucked in at night. And now that I have researched why I think of certain memories when I see certain objects, I want to embody that idea in a connected suite of images and writing. Photographs of different objects, taken with a film camera, will be altered during the printing process. I will make two copies of each image and alter them differently as a means of establishing that from one concrete object, there can be many perspectives. Through the writing that I will display with each physical image, I will play with how we record our perceptions as mental images.

We don’t need science to tell us that our experiences influence and shape perception and vice versa. But we can use its insights to gain valuable perspective on that exchange, and begin to shape it intentionally. We do not see some absolute version of Reality, we see our very individual version of “reality,” which is created when stimuli in our surroundings are picked up by our senses and interpreted by the brain. I think of this as our perception filter, just like how in a photograph, different filters can change the mood of a photograph and how we view the image. As Beau Lotto says, “[n]o one is an outside observer of nature. Each of us is defined by our ecology. Ecology is necessarily relative, historical and empirical. We are defined by our environment and our interaction with that environment.”<sup>6</sup>

Understanding this dynamic in our own minds is only the first step, because we don’t exist alone. Our actions become part of the stimuli affecting other people’s perspectives, and as this ripple expands and interconnects, we shape the world and the future. This dynamic, at the level of culture and society, is known as ‘habitus.’ Benjamin, says learning to “see ourselves see” is the first step towards imagining a life and relationships and a social world that are happier, less anxious, more harmonious and more just.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Enayati, A. (2012, April 14). The power of perceptions: Imagining the reality you want. Retrieved April 20, 2017, from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/11/health/enayati-power-perceptions-imagination/>

<sup>6</sup> Lotto, B. (n.d.). Optical illusions show how we see. Retrieved April 20, 2017, from [https://www.ted.com/talks/beau\\_lotto\\_optical\\_illusions\\_show\\_how\\_we\\_see](https://www.ted.com/talks/beau_lotto_optical_illusions_show_how_we_see)

<sup>7</sup> Enayati, A. (2012, April 14). The power of perceptions: Imagining the reality you want. Retrieved April 20, 2017, from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/11/health/enayati-power-perceptions-imagination/>

I think it is also important to imagine the impact that the hundreds of events you have been through, even when you were a kid and can't consciously remember them, can have on your life right now. Becoming aware that our current feelings, personality traits and current behavior were shaped by the past events we have been through, even the ones that might seem irrelevant or insignificant, helps us appreciate how present actions shape our future selves. The alternative? If we don't become aware of the connection between our past and our future, they will continue to affect one another without our control. Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who spent three years during World War II living under unspeakable circumstances in Nazi concentration camps, wrote in his book, *Man's Search For Meaning*, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."<sup>7</sup>

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