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Oakland, Summer 2015: Working on this book for the last year has been extremely difficult for me. I'm sitting in my studio at nights, looking at Sharon's pictures, and I can't take my eyes off her—how beautiful she is and how much I miss her. She brings a smile to my face and warmth fills my heart. But, then I look at my text and my smile disappears. The warmth in my heart turns into heartache, reminding me of all the unbelievable frustration we've gone through.

Now, with this book, the raw emotions are coming back. I'm missing her terribly, but she needs her own space as much as I need my own. I still worry about her future very much, but fortunately, she is not aware of my anxieties. She has plenty of her own.

It appears most of this work is medium format, film/gelatin silver prints. What do you like most about this process, and generally has your process changed over the years?

This project went on for thirty-some years, so I have used different cameras. Most of the time, my Hasselblad was my camera of choice. I love the square format and the twelve frames [per roll] is perfect for me—I do not like to shoot too much and then hope to find something interesting later. In the studio, I used a 4x5 view camera with Polaroid 55 P/N. This was a wonderful combination—getting prints and negatives at the same time. I knew immediately if I liked the image and if I had the right negative. The negatives were just wonderful, so rich. Once Polaroid went out of business I stopped using this camera. The last few years I started using a digital 35mm camera. It is so

much easier.

After years spent in the darkroom, the digital process is very appealing. I [used to] process all my negatives and did all my printing in my darkroom. I have a tendency to be a perfectionist so I spent long nights in there, but it was so difficult to make identical prints. This isn't an issue with digital. Additionally, the manufacturers were changing chemistry and paper without informing photographers about the changes.

As a photographer, a father, or otherwise, what have you most learned as a result of creating this body of work?

How much I love Sharon. How much sacrifice there was during all those years. How much she enriched my life. From all the responses I received from around the world, I learned how important this project is. In this project I am giving voice to the voiceless: disabled people, parents of disabled children, and single parents.

In conclusion, what does being a photographer mean to your life?

A lot. It informs the way I view the world and sharpens my perspective on all things. I feel that I am able to read people's thoughts—[an ability] that comes from having studied the expressions and body language [of my subjects] for so long. I have honed a degree of empathy for others through training my eyes [as a photographer]. ♦

[For more, please visit leonborensztein.com]



When you reflect on your childhood, are there things that you can recall that would signify that you would eventually become a photographer?

I have always been a very visual person and therefore art has had a significant impact on me and plays a significant role in my life. I can't draw or paint, so I started [creating art] with sculpture. My pieces weren't bad, but I had the awareness that I didn't have enough talent to be a good sculptor. Photography was a great solution—the camera was a perfect tool for me: It not only enabled me to express myself artistically and emotionally, but it also allowed me to be a documentarian as well.

What initially drew you in to photography, and what still fascinates you about it?

When I was about nineteen, I saw someone I knew holding a very big print of a young girl who I assumed was his girlfriend. The print was extremely grainy—it needed tons of spotting—but it was something so special and enchanting. It got under my skin and right then, I knew that I wanted to know how to create images like that. I bought a small Russian-made enlarger and converted my closet to a tiny, primitive darkroom... The mystery of the image and process are pure magic, and the creative possibilities of using light are endless.

Your work covers a range of subject matter, but since the theme of this issue is "Children", I would like to concentrate on your photographs of your daughter, Sharon. I imagine it's difficult to encapsulate over thirty years of photographing her, but what would you like readers to know both about her, and your approach to photographing her?

As a photographer, I started to photograph her before she was born. In the beginning, I did not know that she was so disabled, so my approach to photographing her was [similar to how] every loving father would photograph his daughter. Soon after her birth, we started to learn more and more about her disabilities, so in addition to being a father-photographer I became a documentary photographer.

In becoming a documentary photographer, what challenges did you face in photographing such a personal subject as Sharon? In other words, how did you balance or navigate the personal versus the documentary?

Although both aspects of photography were overlapping, I think it came to me naturally; I was part of something unusual, I was a witness to something special and heartbreaking. I did not look for a nice smile; I was more interested in the quality of the lighting and the narrative of that particular moment. I was trying to find the right angle that would eliminate or de-emphasize the extraneous. Above all, I was trying to highlight the human element of what was unfolding in front of my eyes.

What are the extents of Sharon's disabilities?

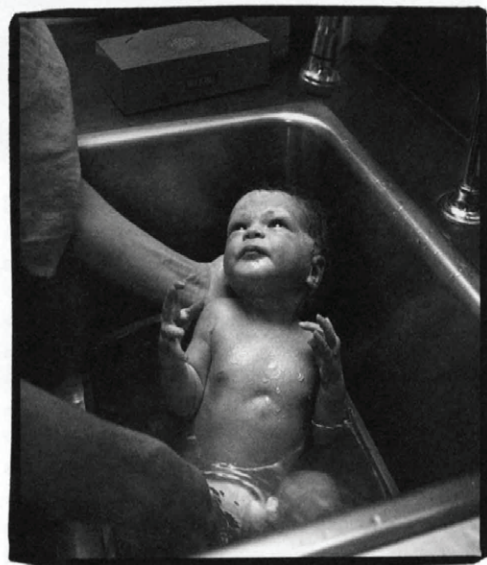
She is legally blind, has seizure disorder, developmental delays, autism spectrum disorder, low muscle tone... the list goes on and on.

Your new book, *Sharon* [Kehrer Verlag], is due this spring. What were the most significant challenges you faced in presenting your photographs of Sharon as a book?

The burning question was how to represent Sharon: Do I concentrate on her beauty or on her disabilities? I chose the middle road, neither emphasizing nor hiding either one. [In doing so,] I became aware of how very difficult it is to make decisions when working on a personal project. [I wrestled with] how much of the reality I should reveal, keeping in mind that Sharon has no voice to defend herself.

The book is obviously very personal, so much so that you included a selection of your journal entries in it. What led you to this decision, and would you share a couple of these entries with us?

It seems that all my projects are about giving voice to the voiceless. [In regard to my photographs of Sharon, I asked myself:] Who will I give voice to this time? Do I make this a very personal





project or do I make it more universal [in hopes that] it will resonate with a wider audience? Should I include text, excerpts from my diary that I have been writing most of my life? There were many people who discouraged me [from doing so], believing that it would distract from the visual images and might slow down the viewer. But the response that was generated as a result of my Kickstarter campaign was unbelievable and it convinced me that the interest in this project goes beyond the scope of a fine art book. [I received] email from all over the world [that expressed] encouragement and many people identified with this project. It opened the eyes of so many people whose understandings of disabilities were very limited. It also resonated with parents of disabled children, especially with single parents and

the issues they face. I do not want to limit my book, my story, or my message to artists and/or book collectors. I want to reach a wider audience.

Here are two short entries:

St. Malo, February 1985: *I earn my living photographing people. Often families, sometimes children by themselves. I enjoy kids; I am patient and get them to smile easily. There is only one exception, one little girl who won't look at me, let alone smile. This stubborn child is my daughter. I think that something must be terribly wrong.*

We begin the exhausting round of doctors' visits, looking for answers. Pediatrician, neurologist, ophthalmologist. She is fine, fine, fine, except for a "blond fundus"—a retina that is less pigmented than normal. Somehow I am suspicious that they are wrong.