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Rotting from Within

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Abdulhamid Kircher

Committee in charge:

Professor Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Chair
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2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Rotting from Within

by

Abdulhamid Kircher

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Chair

The title *Rotting from Within* refers to a feeling I can only describe as the unearthing of my father or the generational trauma that exists within the patriarchs of my family and subsequently the task of uncovering and contrasting my own self amidst the things passed down. It titles a body of work made with and surrounding my father spanning the 8 years I made my reconnaissance with him beginning in 2014 between Berlin, where my parents met and I was born, and Turkey, where my father's family lives. It deals with my struggle to define him as a father and a human, to process the events that led to his life path and to search for the places where I can attempt at reconciliation.

Rotting from Within

You cannot recreate a photograph once it is made; it has become a singular representation of that one moment. Every time you look at it, it is immutable. Whereas with memory, every time you recall something it actively changes. Am I experiencing a brief respite from consciousness through photography? Or does my pursuit of memory drive me further still from the present? As soon as my finger causes the depression of the shutter on my camera, the instant captured becomes a part of the past. The light from the sun, the moon, or some fluorescent light source burns for a fraction of a second into a piece of film. The shutter closes and that moment has now turned into a memory. The film then has to undergo a laborious process before I am able to visit it again. When all the frames on a roll have been used, I reel the moments back into a small metal canister and there they sit in the dark waiting to be fixed. The chemicals swish back and forth along my memories, drawing and corroding them to the surface.

In the past, I never made much sense of the photographs I was taking. I would shoot them, develop them and put them in a box. I felt too overwhelmed by the possibilities of meanings and interpretations. Making sense of them felt like a task beyond my control and thinking, so all I could do was accept them, put them away and move on. The majority of my work dealt with a constant agony of attempting to capture and hold onto the present, striving to create an archive of my lived experiences. Aware of my terrible memory, photography slowly became an extension of myself and I grew obsessive with holding onto everything I could observe. While my memories are under constant construction, a photograph remains unchanged, containing the ability to revisit it infinitely. It was this aspect of photography that pulled my fascination: The idea that I could revisit these moments infinitely. How and what was I thinking at that time?

Now at this point in my life I am not necessarily trying to dissect these instances or images, but I am trying to familiarize myself with what the present means to me because understanding does not reside in the photograph, but within myself and within every viewer. How is it that we can get so close to the present, and yet it is something we can never grasp?

My fascination with people and their environments has always drawn me to the shared experiences between people I love and the world around me. My early teenage years took place in the streets of New York City, and during the summers, abroad in Berlin where I was born. My friends and I walked the lengths of these city blocks, meeting the people who crossed our paths, letting these places expand with each new face. When I was given a camera at the age of fifteen, I found that photography allowed me to form an even more deeply rooted relationship with many of the people I met. I could approach someone I gravitated towards and start up a conversation, but the photographs increased my ability to learn their stories and devote myself to understanding their experience. My documents grew exponentially outward and inward at the same time that the friendships I made continuously unraveled my notion of humanity and myself. Unraveling the city like a roll of film, the synapses of the mind unraveling each memory trace

But I think I have become, in a way, deliberate about what determines my lived experience, what could be included in a memory and how objects can become something beyond themselves, by deciding where and how to look. The act of raising a camera to my eye became a very natural and unintentional movement, because if I think too much about what is happening in front of me, I could end up missing the physical moment. These implications I was unaware of as a teenager, but as I grow older, my tendency for reaching out to strangers has dwindled. It is an incredibly complex way of working. Even if my intentions were to make something beautiful and the relationships I built are of great meaning, I grew more self-conscious and aware of

others' feelings when approaching someone based on their appearance. I began to be more considerate as to how I navigated the idea of the subject.

This new energy directed my focus to my family and close friends for inspiration. The growth of my little brother through puberty, my great-grandparent's relationship, the personality of our family cat, the ebb and flow of my relationship with my father, or grasping at how and what determines home. My technique developed rapidly into a meticulous investment in process, dedicated to developing my own film, and learning how to print in the darkroom. This dive into the mechanics of photography also drove me into exploring as many cameras as I could get my hands on. Each camera and its necessary skill set determines the way I make a photograph.

* * *

Rotting from Within is a body of work that was made during visits with my father over eight years between Berlin, where my parents met, and Turkey, where my father's family lives. My father and I had only spent the first few years of my life together, during a period of time my mother and I lived in fear of his constant abuse. He was a drug dealer, selling cocaine and weed, often violent, impulsive, and unreliable. My mother finally managed to get away and bring us to safety by fleeing Berlin to another German city called Hannover. She gave us false names to hide from him and we started going by Anouk and Noah. During this time, my father was flipping Berlin on its head in search of us. He threatened to kill my mother's family and showed up at my grandfather's door with a gang of armed men. We were nowhere to be found, and so he resorted to fleeing Berlin himself, fleeing his own misery. Of course, the violence and drugs followed and within weeks my dad took over the drug market in Munich. He became known as Atilla from Berlin, the mysterious short man that everyone feared. His stint didn't last very long and after a

few months of making the most money he'd ever made, it all came to a halt after he stabbed a man seventeen times in an altercation at a nightclub and landed himself in prison for seven years.

When I began taking photographs at fifteen, it was the first summer we spent time together after he had been released. Part of my process in developing this relationship was keeping a diary alongside making photographs. It became a space to vent about our struggling relationship and process the things I was witnessing. I've included pieces of this writing throughout, as I see it going hand-in-hand with my creative process and visually very much a part of how I present and organize this project.

Moments of rupture are present within the photographs, moments where we can feel this build up unpacking. The fabric deteriorating on a cushion chair, fraying at the edges, or the guts of an animal coming undone. His parents, whom I call *Babaanne* and *Dede* are devout Muslims, every inch of their culture embedded with religion and tradition. This is the life in which my father grew up, yet how did he end up walking the path that he now leads? Everyone in my father's family is aware of what he does, the world he traverses through and the dangerous material his life depends on. Secrecy. Is it secrecy or forgetting? At what point does forgetting take place? What do his parents really think? Of course, they disagree with his lifestyle, but how does it make them feel?

7.15.2017

Dede, how does he feel as his body is rotting away, his teeth slowly disappearing and his foot decaying. I can't help but wonder what he thinks of himself when he looks in the mirror. How does he as a Muslim cope with knowing that his son's world revolves around cocaine. His face excruciates signs of defeat and failure, what a shame my father is to the family. But I am proud to walk around with my father, as people greet and praise "Legendary Stone." But someday all this will fade.

9.13.2016

Everyday I worry about his health and safety, there are sadly only two paths for him, prison or death. At other times, I can't stop thinking about how similar we are, how tough we pretend to be, yet how soft we are within. And then I imagine myself in his shoes, leading this dead-end life.



Figure 1: This is a photograph of my grandmother praying in her bedroom. When practicing Islam, a person must pray 5 times a day. The 5 daily prayers include: *Fajr* (sunrise prayer), *Dhuhr* (noon prayer), *Asr* (afternoon prayer), *Maghrib* (sunset prayer), and *Isha* (night prayer). Each prayer has a specific window of time in which it must be completed. These timings are based upon the positioning of the sun. There are times when I wake up at 5am needing to use the bathroom and will see the light on in my grandmother's room.

While my thesis has become a documentation of my father and the people in his life, it is also very much about my development as an image maker. My obsessiveness with his world was driven by this newly found medium. I did not have any interests before photography, I never had this drive before, to continuously dig at the world around me. I wanted to be everywhere and meet everyone, unravel as many stories and worlds as I could. I was so fixated on capturing

people, creating a photograph that would strike at its viewer, but I did not spend time trying to depict the subtlety of the details around them in their environments, to fill out a narrative or tell the full story. It was always about creating the starkest, or most provoking portrait, trying to encapsulate a person in a single image.

I remember stumbling across Nan Goldin's work in my teenage years while roaming the internet, but my relationship to her work really changed once I was able to experience her *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* slideshow in person. It showed me that images did not have to just live inside frames and can also be displayed in a much more intimate way. The slideshow consists of 9 carousel slide projectors projecting different photographs over a forty five minute interval as a selected musical soundtrack plays alongside the photographs. Something about the sound of the machine moving to the next slide allows me to feel close to the artist. Knowing that she physically had to piece together the slides in the carousel slide projector.

Photographs can have a removed feeling due to the technical processes that occur after an image is taken, and then handled by a photo lab, mounters, framers and installers. Which is what always saddened me about photography, knowing that I would have trouble pulling the viewer into my world and allowing them to feel the way I feel and ultimately feel close to me.

Throughout my time in grad school I also felt drawn to Lyle Ashton Harris' *Blow Up* series which consists of site specific mixed-media collage installations. A work of art becoming site specific feels intimate, knowing that an artist was physically present in the space and handled the work we are seeing with their own hands. I am more attracted to this physical nature of installation, rather than works of art traveling the world being installed and taken down with no need for the artist's hand.

The idea of the archive only came about once I was placed into UCSD and was left to dig through the photographs, prints, and writings I had accumulated over the past 8 years. A lot of my family photographs were destroyed in a flood, which made every picture I had so much more precious. My mother is a collector which is most apparent within our home where she creates a vibrant tapestry of her lived experiences displayed through art, keepsakes, and found objects. Every little thing has its own story and meaning.

She kept most of my childhood clothing and keepsakes. On the metal wall one can find my first fork, my childhood pillowcase, my pacifier, and a necklace that was made for me as a baby. As many children do, I ridiculed my mother's obsessiveness with holding onto every drawing I made and every piece of clothing I wore. And of course, as I think of this now, I am beyond grateful for her actions. In a way, I am pulling from my mother's archive rather than my own, as she was the one preserving all these things. My childhood presence is felt through the effort she made to build the world around me. In a way my effort as I grew older was to continue building and substantiating this existence in the face of so many of the powers at work to diminish. Each object I chose, embedded among the images, has traveled all over the world, from many cities in Germany to the US where they followed along to each place that makes up the story I am telling. This show brings my mother's archive and my own into one.

The photograph of my father and I at the center was the only archival image that was scanned and reprinted, all other prints are originals. By using the metal wall rather than a framed collage, it creates a certain intimate entrypoint for the viewer. By seeing smudges on the metal and the scratches left behind from the movements of the magnets, one can witness the traces that were left by the artist. I also think that framed photographs can feel weighted or precious, whereas the unframed pinned photos tend to feel more accessible. This accessibility is what

frightens me from displaying the original print of my father and I. A print that I even fear to touch or bring to light too often, especially as this is the earliest visual representation I have of the beginning of my life. It also gave me the opportunity to print this image large because it feels like the moment that started it all and is the catalyst for all the images/objects that you're seeing around it.

Going forward, I will continue to retrace and bring in archival material I can find within my mother's/family's archive while also continuing to make photographs of my family in Germany and Turkey. The archive is interesting in that it uses the past to create a new iteration of the present. It is being interpreted by the person you are now and how you are attempting to understand what has come before you and what has led you here. This happens twice fold when viewed by an audience who reads what has been curated making a third interpretation of this material. That is the beautiful thing about using magnets and metal, in that it doesn't carry the notion of being fixed/stable. Which allows the idea of evolution to flow more naturally as new iterations of this metal wall continue to be made and objects are removed or added.

Part of this archive includes the journal I kept. I struggled to find a way of introducing this other facet of the work, determining which pieces felt important, whether I wanted the actual pages hung or in pamphlet form to give at the door of the gallery. I tried different methods of photographing the diary itself, but I also toyed with the idea of typing and printing the writing so that it could be legible as a linear narrative. I landed on photographs of the actual diary hung alongside the images, intertwined and specifically illuminating certain groups of images with particular days I had written about. I liked the idea of including my handwriting as I think it is visually engaging as markings, but it also captures more information than the typed word, like the mood I was in or little mistakes in grammar. I thought it would be interesting to have the

writing be accessible if the viewer chose to spend time with it, but not necessary to understand each word, or of whom I am speaking about, to allow the viewer to relate these fragments to the images themselves and create these days or moments with the environments and portraits that surround them.



Figure 2: R.f.W. #1 (April, 2022), mixed media on sheet metal (chromogenic prints, gelatin silver prints, inkjet prints, drugstore prints, xerox prints, family photos/objects), 8 ft x 20 ft

9.13.2016

Bassam [one of my father's customers] lives in a rat-filled basement of his brother's cell phone store. "At night when I close my eyes, I try to think of another world. Because in my world I live without a door and am surrounded by rats. So sleep is the only time I can escape." If Bassam is hungry he knows he can always come knock at my father's door for help. My father says it's about loyalty, trust and respect, without these three he would have been in jail already. Very camera shy, I

*encouraged my dad to give Bassam a little extra when he showed up at the door.
After one month of my service, Bassam allowed me into his world.*

I have very few childhood memories containing my father. I often think about visiting my father in jail when the metal detector kept going off because I had a piece of aluminum chocolate wrapper crumpled up in my pocket. I do not remember seeing him or speaking with him. He tells me stories of us spending time together when I was little; he would lie to my mother about dropping me off at school and would let me stay home to play PlayStation with him; our closets were filled with garbage sized bags full of weed that I would drag behind me around the house and to his customers waiting at our door. Later this experience would be replicated as I helped him package cocaine and drive him around to deliver the goods to his customers, as a teenager after we reconnected.



Figure 3: This photograph is of pre-packaged cocaine. The red plastic bags are from a local Turkish supermarket and are cut into little circles. The red circles are then placed onto a little digital scale and cocaine is slowly tapped onto the circle. Once there is enough made to last the night, we take each packet and twist it at the top like a bonbon and hold a lighter to the plastic to seal it. I'm very bad at this last step and always burn the tips of my finger, trying to twist the melting plastic before it cools down again.

1.13.2017

I hate being the first one awake in the house, it means I have to work the door. The doorbell doesn't ring enough during the day to keep you in motion. All the souls come out at night to destroy our doorbell. Anxiety shoots through me every time the bell rings knowing I have to answer the door alone and no packys are prepared. The packys are usually made in two sizes: "0.4 and 0.2." One is forty euros and the other is twenty, occasionally people ask for ten or five euros worth of stuff. If the packys aren't prepared, it means that I have to pull the scale out of its hiding spot and get the bag of stuff out of the back of the mini portable radio and then cut the red Turkish supermarket bag into little circles.

The coke keeps getting stuck on my fingertips as I try to crumble the remains of the rock onto the scale. It says 0.20 one second and 0.26 the next. This is when I begin to sweat and remember that a customer is waiting outside our door. I turn the scale

off and obsessively repeat the weighting process, making sure that I'm not short nor too generous. After pouring the coke from the scale onto the red plastic circle, I wipe the white remains off my fingers onto the back of my pants, my dad says I can get high if I leave it on my fingers too long. I then twist the plastic circle into a ball and burn its tip while squeezing it closed, making sure the plastic glues back together, sometimes burning my fingers. I quickly run to the door, unlock it, and stick my hand out, drop the bag into the customer's palm, and quickly lock the door. I rush back to the bathroom to wash the gasoline smelling residue off of my fingers. Ever since Dilo told me that I could get high from shoveling this stuff from the bag to the scale with my fingers, I've been excessive with washing my hands. Yet, I still don't like using the shovel my dad makes out of paper filters. My dad's trademark is the red bag the stuff comes in, we cut the circles out of Turkish supermarket bags. Everyone knows that if their stuff comes in a red bag, that it's coming from Stone.

Initially, I was fascinated by documenting my father's world in awe of his life; the people he was surrounded by, the characters that were enamored by him, the countless faces he sold drugs to and the places they called home. He slept through most of the day. At night we would stay awake to serve customers that came to his door. Sadly, this desire to document was one of the driving factors behind me wanting to be a part of my father's dark life, but as the years went on our relationship started to dwindle.

We do not get to choose the life in which we are born. Most of us are not given enough, or not in the right way, and we struggle in how to grow into ourselves and whether or not we can maintain sometimes harmful relationships with the people we love. I tried over and over again to speak with my father and try to understand why he treats the people close to him so terribly but there was no way to have a serious conversation with him. I also wanted to understand why I became so fixated on believing that he could change if I did not give up on him, regardless of how terrible he made me feel. Eventually, I needed space from him to really understand what I was trying to uncover.

7.28.2018

My voice has become soft and quiet. I look at my father and understand his pain, I truly do love him. He tells me he never learned to love, his father never told him that he loves him, he only beat him. I constantly yearn for his love and despise him for never hugging me and telling me that he loves me. Maybe I am the one who has to love him first. But when I look at him I just feel anger and disappointment. How can I make room for this love? He says I'm wasting my time with school and photography, that what I'm doing isn't making me any money. I try to brush these thoughts aside and forgive him for being so close minded.

8.15.2018

When we first started spending time together, I felt whole and warm, now I just feel like shit when I see him. He's always negative and complains about any little thing I do. If I look at something the wrong way or make a photo of something he gives me this degrading look. Everything that leaves his mouth irks me, a frustration boiling up inside of me. He doesn't appreciate my presence or my love for him, he takes it all for granted. I can't love him.

My father and I got into it today because I told him I have to be back in Berlin by the 24th. He lost his mind, he says this will be my last 24th with him because he never wants to see me again, he also said that he hopes I die, Dilo says otherwise, but I clearly heard him say, "Ich hoffe du gehst drauf." I told him I had the same plan, I no longer want to see you after this summer. Maybe when I'm gone they'll appreciate the time we spent together, probably not.

She can't breathe at night, all her insides come up, I can hear her cough echoing through the courtyard. He is so greedy with his money. Instead of helping his son pay for college, he snorts it all up his nose and tells me I'm wasting my time with school. Whenever he gifts me something, it disappears within a few days, saying he needed the money. He sells the gifts he gives. He says his gift to me was bringing me into this world. What a shitty place he brought me to.

8.16.2018

He told me to never yell at him again in front of his parents, he's going to rip my head off. His fist passed by my head leaving a hole in the door behind me. I've reached a tipping point. I've never felt so much stress, I feel like ripping my head off. I hate his guts. All I can spew is hate and filth. I want to hop on the next flight back to Berlin. Maybe I just need to spend a few days away at Babaanne and Dede's garden up on the mountain.

8.17.2018

One good thing we have in common is that we can't hold grudges. Last night I told Dilo that I may go insane but today everything is holy. He's scratching my back to get my blood flowing while I take my nap.

If he only had a loving father, friends he could confide in, a mother he could talk to, maybe he wouldn't be the person he is today. For this reason, I wanted to spend more time with the people he grew up with and spend more time with his parents in Antalya, Turkey. We went to their local mosque, spent time in their countryside home, and participated in big family meals where the conversations often revolved around their Muslim faith. The juxtaposition between the values of my father and the traditions of my grandparents was all the more jarring. Spending time with my grandparents in Turkey is a very quiet experience. We start the day off by having breakfast together, honey, cream cheese, *kaymak*, shredded ginger, black tea, goji berry jam. We sit and eat in silence. After this, they set out a task for me to do that day, collecting walnuts off their walnut tree, watering their trees, and preparing food for their chickens. At night, we just sit again in silence.



Figure 4: This is the insides of a sheep. My father's family slaughtered this sheep as a religious sacrifice for my grandfather, who survived a near death experience, an aneurysm. The hands reaching into the frame are my father's and his brother's.

8.21.2018

Today we sacrificed our sheep. My grandfather, father, and I had to wake up at 5:30am to go to the Mosque and make our prayers for Bayram. I wore my Dede's oversized button down and a vest Dilo bought me in Istanbul, I looked like a real Haji. Only old Turkish men dress in this combo. I sat in silence in the Mosque and used my peripheral vision at all times. I had no clue what I was doing, whether I should repeat or not.

My freshly shaved head made the tattoo on the back of my head clearly visible, so I kept scratching the back of my head trying to hide it. All the Hajis were sitting behind me "Kircher" in their face, can't get more cynical than that. As soon as we

got out of the Mosque, a goat's head was getting hacked off right across the road. Our sheep awaited us in the garden.

8.23.2018

I love watching Dede watch TV. It's the only time I've ever seen him smile. He looks like a little kid in his huge sofa throne. The men on TV are smashing things onto each others' heads, an old film filled with ridiculous sound effects, but it makes him happy. When he laughs he looks around to make sure no one notices his jolly face.

In a conversation I had with my mother about her childhood and relationship with my father, she told me: "I was in eighth or ninth grade when I had you. While Sedat and I were pregnant, his parents still brought him to see other girls, and brought other women to the house, so he could potentially marry them. Your grandmother hated me, your grandfather wasn't so bad, but she was very evil to me. They did not like that I was German. When I think back to my time with his parents, they treated me like an animal. Sedat's room was very small like a storage closet and when anyone came to visit they would tell me to stay in his room and not come out. When you turned forty days old, your grandparents had a celebration for you and invited people over. Instead of me being able to sit and enjoy this celebration with you, she took you and made me serve all the guests. I was told to stay in Sedat's room when I wasn't serving."

While my grandparents have definitely mellowed out in the intervening years, there are moments of outbursts that remind me of how my father described them. Whenever my father and I would get into an argument, I would be furious and hurt by the way he treated me. By getting to know my flaws and tracing them back to my childhood, I began to attempt to do the same for my father. There is no way I could ever forgive my father for the things he has done to me and my mother, but by learning about the environment that he grew up in I was able to release all the hatred I felt towards him. He did not grow up in a loving home; he and his siblings often had to fend for themselves, and when their father was home, they were under his rule. Shifting away

from documenting the crazy things he does and people surrounding him, I began directing my attention towards capturing his origin with my grandparents, as well the environments and still lifes that communicate the critical fabric of his world.

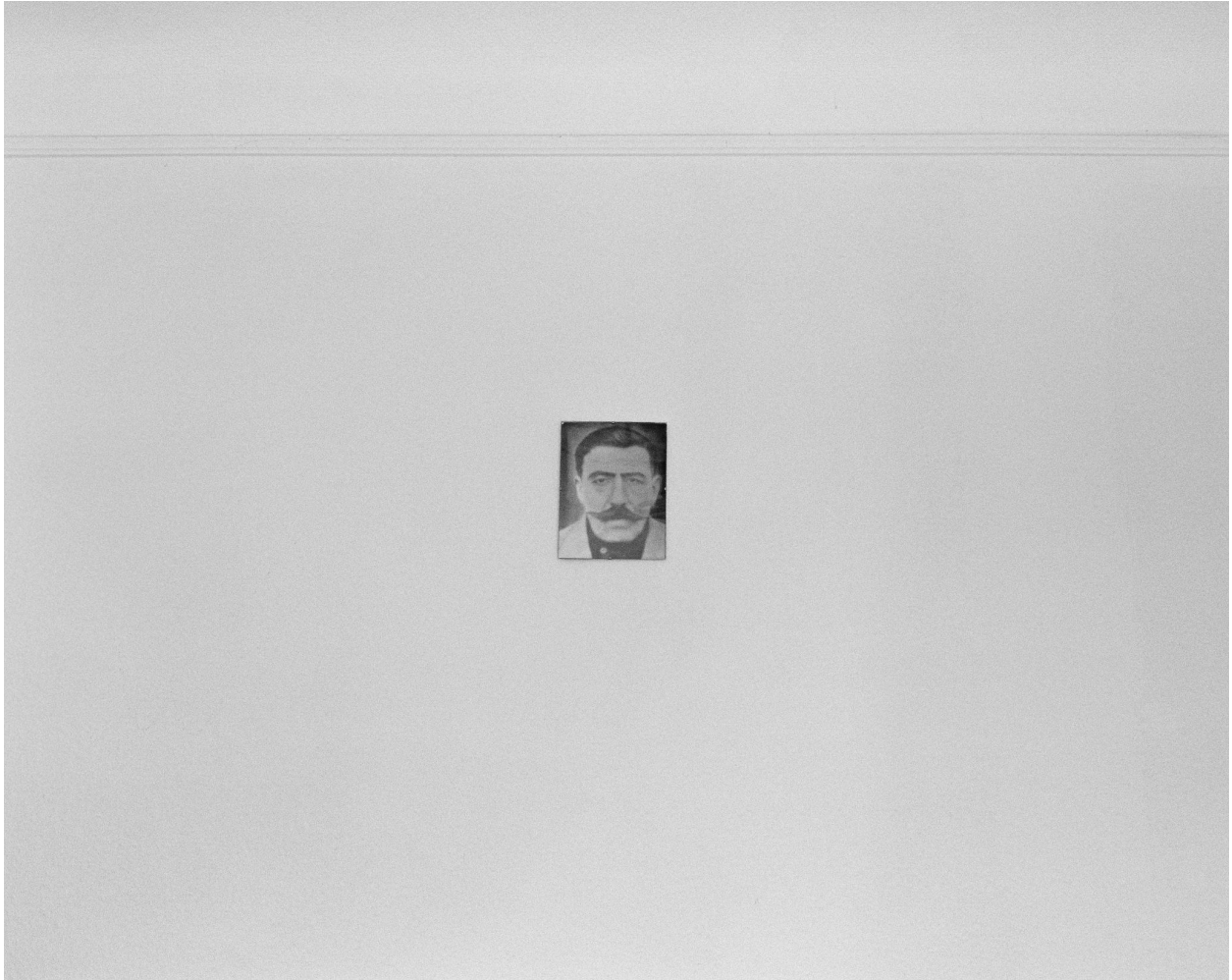


Figure 5: When I look at this photograph of my great grandfather, I think to myself that he is to blame. I've never seen the man that came before him, so he is the one I blame for who my father has become; he raised my father's father. This 8in x 10in picture hangs up very high on my grandparent's wall, nearly touching the ceiling. This is the only photograph hanging on a wall in their apartment and in this way he has almost become a mythical figure to me.

8.1.2016

I was with my dad last night as he tortured three other men for stealing seven thousand euros worth of weed from him. I couldn't lift the camera from my side. I woke up this morning and all I did was abuse myself mentally for not making photographs of the fight. But when people are crying and being hurt in front of you it's hard to look through your viewfinder and pretend. It is as though the subject has just become another piece of hidden history, tucked away in my drawer.

Around this time was when my feelings towards photography became really conflicted. I could feel reality slipping past me as I fought the urge to make photographs of everything around me. It was this obsessiveness I couldn't escape. If I attempted to live in the moment, I would beat myself up afterwards for not putting photography first. In a way photography allowed me an attempt to remove myself from traumatic and heartfelt situations, but I wouldn't take it.

7.24.2017

My grandfather Abdulhamit had an aneurysm a few days ago. Our name ties us together. I'm the first son of his son, so I received my grandfather's name, servant of god.

I'm sitting here next to my grandfather's hospital bed, it's just us two. Yet I can't get myself to make any photographs of him, it doesn't feel right. I hate to see people I love suffer. Every time I raise the camera to my eye I feel a backstabbing feeling, as if I were betraying him when I click the shutter. When he got out of the operation room my grandma brushed her hand along his head and he just looked at me with his droopy lifeless eyes and as I raised my camera, I felt like shit. How could I miss this beautiful eye to eye moment for a silly little photograph.

Truthfully, I did not have a purpose in mind when I started documenting my father's life, but as I got older I could begin to see his world more clearly. Respectively, my work became a potential means of understanding the person who was absent for most of my life, how we were connected, if we were similar, and if we could love each other. My struggling relationship with attempting to create a 'perfect' representation of each lived moment causes me to not be present, yet my

purpose for taking photographs is to hold onto these memories. I am stuck somewhere in the middle of trying, but never really being able to grasp onto anything around me. Much in the way that I struggle to hold onto the relationship that I would like to have with my father. My effort to find the beautiful and joyful moments with my father opens up a space to do the same inside myself. Yet, allowing myself to be vulnerable around him also opens up the space for me to be hurt by him. It is this dichotomy, the fact that I cannot ever paint him as a villain or a hero that makes him human.

9.13.2016

There is one thing that I keep tracing over in my mind when I think of his sweet side. It happened a few summers ago, in front of my grandmother's home. My dad was dropping me off after a long night and told me to ask my mother if she would like to join him for a cigarette downstairs. I am sitting on the balcony as I begin to hear muffled sobbing. I slowly creep my eyes over the railing. To my deepest surprise, I see my dad's face buried in my mother's shoulder. I have never seen my dad cry, I had no idea that my dad was even capable of crying. I have always seen him as this fearless godly figure, a man of few emotions. Every possible idea began to scramble in my head: he has to turn himself in, my Dede died...I sit there brain fisting myself, now all I can do is wait. After a half an hour of mind games, my mother finally enters the room, acting like nothing happened. She whispers to me, "He yearns for my love and presence and for what we once had. He begs for my forgiveness and for a second child, he has gone mad."



Figure 6: Prior to this moment pictured, I had never witnessed an intimate interaction between my father and his dad. When my grandfather was first admitted into the hospital for the aneurysm in his brain, they placed him in the intensive care room, where none of his family members were able to visit him. This picture was made on the first day of him being out of intensive care. We anxiously sat in the waiting room as my father cried into his mother's shoulder. My grandfather doesn't get spoken about highly from members of his family, everyone just vents saying that all he does is complain about everyone around him not doing things "correctly" and ordering everyone around. Yet when someone falls ill, we forget about all these horrible things they've done to us and just hope for them to survive. My grandfather laid there still, no words erupting from his mouth. The AC wasn't working, the air was sweltering in his room, and so my dad blew cold air on him through his mouth and kissed him on his arm.

I feel absence when I think of my father—not only his absence in my life, but also his father's absence of love. My father and his siblings grew up in a very strict religious household and were beaten and shunned for any little mistake they made. My grandparents often left for trips around the world and left the kids to fend for themselves. They were the first generation to grow up in a big city like Berlin, whereas my grandparents were raised in a small town in

Turkey. How can I expect a man to love me if he was never loved by his own father, and my grandfather never by his father, lovelessness trickling down from generation to generation?

The 8ft x 20ft metal wall was created in order to explore an eight-year-old archive of personal work and archival family photographs/objects. I never spent much time trying to understand the work I made with my father and family until coming to grad school. I really wanted to create something that would make the viewer feel as overwhelmed as I do when I look at this eight-year-old archive, hundreds of rolls of film and diary entries. I wanted to anchor the wall using a photograph of my father and I in the hospital shortly after I was born. When my mother and father split up, he stole all of our family photos and hid them in his basement, which ended up flooding, so this is the only photograph that remains of me as a newborn. This is the closest thing I have to our first meeting. All the images burst out of this one larger image and feel like a scattering of memories.

I wanted to choose specific photographs that I feel communicate vital elements of the story and print them large on the surrounding walls. I decided to frame the photographs in chocolate-stained walnut wood with a rabbit detail to resemble old family frames and create a balance in the gallery space. I envisioned these photographs to be printed larger to allow the viewer space to wander through the image. But it also gives the viewer some breathing room from the overwhelming metal wall. I see this wall as a continuous evolution, something that will change each time it's hung in a different space, as the relationship with my father continues to evolve.

The outcome of the wall and its size will be reliant on the space in which it is hung. It cannot be assembled beforehand or mapped out for someone else to hang. I want the result of the constellation of images to rely on what I am feeling at that time. By having access to a large

inkjet printer I am able to change the sizes of prints for each iteration and create genuine interactions and conversations between photographs rather than just trying to tie together a set of images that have already been printed to an exact size. While most of the photos on the wall are darkroom prints that I have made over the past few years, all of those were either fixed to 8x10” or 11x14” pre-cut paper, by having access to an inkjet printer I am able to act on impulses and navigate the narrative not only using already made materials but also bringing in new ones.

The fifteen framed images are by no means a full narrative representation of this body of work but rather each represents an element of the work. Elements such as religion, drugs, Turkey, Berlin, my father’s life, my grandparent’s lives, and their immediate relationships. It is very important to understand what role each person plays in my father’s life and this just wasn’t possible to establish within fifteen images. This is where the metal wall comes in and functions more so as a book telling a narrative story. By weaving together diary entries, old family photographs, and objects from my life I was able to create the first visual iteration of the relationship between my father and I.



Figure 7: Photographs framed in walnut wood with rabbit detail. The photograph on the right is of my father sunbathing on his balcony in Berlin, Germany in 2017.

I've always grappled with the idea of this body of work feeling like a glorification of my father, especially because there is tension in regards to what role he has played in my life compared with the life my mother has been able to build for us. It can be difficult to paint an accurate picture of a person while shining a spotlight onto them with images. I think it can be hard for my mother and sometimes even myself, to look at this collection. However, I think even though I was so young when this began, subconsciously, it was an important journey to try and understand him and ultimately myself. My mother is everywhere within this work as well, because she is inseparable from my experiences with my father and because she provided me with the ground to safely explore myself in this way. I wanted her presence to still be felt when

looking at this show, so she appears several times in photos I made and archival photos of her. She is the reason why I am here today, but she is also very much a part of this path to understanding my father.

Rotting from Within is about the unconsciousness of who we are. I am ashamed of how my father treated my mother. How can I be so close to someone I don't really know? I didn't grow up with my father, yet my mother always reminded me when I did something that resembled him. Sometimes I remind her of the good but most times the bad. Something is happening inside of me that I have no control over. I don't want to be like him or act like him, but I can't escape him because he lives inside of me. I want to hate him and hurt him for abusing us, but I also want to love him and cradle him and let him know that I care about him. If I can't hate him, if I can't escape him, then I must accept him and try to understand—understand where he came from, why he is who he is.

A lot of the ways that we behave are beyond us. This is not to excuse our behavior but to try to understand it. If I can understand what he went through and what his father went through, then I can begin to forgive, not to forget, but to forgive. If he never experienced love as a kid, how can we expect him to love himself, his partner and his child. Now it is my turn to take control and break the cycle. This has all become like one big seven-year-long therapy session of undoing and retracing, every little moment can be traced to another and most of the reasoning is all there if we decide to spend time with it. I feel like I am rotting from within because of the little control I have over who I am; we think we are in control when in reality our mind and body do so many things that we are unaware of. I don't want to be like him and continue this bloodline filled with anger and lovelessness; I want those around me to know that I care and love them and that I would do anything for them. I wish there was something I could do for him, but I spent

many years investing time and love into him and rather than coming out with a healthy and loving father-son relationship, I came out with forgiveness. There are moments that I can forgive him for what he put me and my mother through. I can experience pieces of him that are good, all while seeing him clearly in all his flaws and hardships, all the things preventing him from being the person I hope I can strive to be. Humanity is so flawed, each of us contains multitudes and the more I have the ability to accept, the more love I have to give to those that I encounter and at times, myself. Much in the way someone uses writing, I see my task in my lifetime as building an archive of this experience of living, using images as a way to think and process.