

Medicated for your Protection: Portraits of Mental Illness

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Harbor View House sits on a hilltop overlooking the bay in San Pedro, California. Formerly a YMCA since 1919 for Army and Navy personnel and longshoremen, it is now a Board & Care home to the indigent and chronically mentally ill adults. When I visited there one afternoon while working as a psychiatric social worker, I saw the anguished faces of the residents, smoking cigarettes, bored and in need of something to do. Instantly I knew that this would be a worthwhile project for documentary portraiture. My focus had always been on street photography and urban decay. I wanted to challenge myself by taking portraits, and I was looking for a way to combine my skills as a clinical therapist and as a photographer. Despite their mental and physical deterioration, abandonment by friends and family, and their pathology, my aim was to capture the subjects' humanity, dignity and any traces of normalcy. I was not trying to present them as "crazy". I shot in a straightforward manner without unusual angles, blurring, or other tricks to create madness "effect". I was less interested in photojournalism or in making a social statement about the conditions of institutional living. What I was after was to convey the subject's estrangement, isolation, and unique personality. With my theater background, I found that each resident I photographed was like a character in a play, with his or her own eccentricities, personal stories, desires, goals, inner life, and outward presentation.

I used 35mm and medium format film shooting with a Canon AE-1, Mamiya RZ-67, and a twin-lens Rolleiflex from 1954. With the use of old film cameras, I hoped to create a more naturalistic and gritty quality. I shot on weekends and nothing was pre-arranged. The residents understood fully what I was doing, however their cooperation often depended on their mental and emotional stability that day. Most of them were friendly, helpful, eager to participate, and lacking in the usual self-consciousness and inhibition of models and other "normal" or "sane" subjects. They never composed themselves for the shot. They just *were* themselves - unaffected, raw, and honest. They appreciated my attention and the time I spent with them. I have included their biographical stories so that they would have the opportunity to share their hopes, dreams and desires.

My goal is that these images and accompanying narratives will give a voice and a face to a small group of individuals who would otherwise go unnoticed. On a daily basis, they are faced with managing their own psychological and physical deterioration. Many of their mental disorders - Schizophrenia, Bipolar, and Major Depression - are life long, have no cure, but can be managed. I worked with a range of residents from their twenties to their sixties to further mark the progression and effects of mental illness through the years. In their personal narratives, some of the facts and timelines may not make sense, due to their delusional process, defects in memory, or general confusion that is symptomatic of psychosis. However, what they believed to be true was more important. I recorded their statements at face value.

