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Rewrite

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of the Master of Fine Arts in Photography/Film at Virginia Commonwealth  
University.

by

Jamie Lynn Lawyer

BFA Photography/Digital Imagery 2009

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## Abstract

### REWRITE

by Jamie Lynn Lawyer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

Thesis Director: Sonali Gulati, Associate Professor Photography/Film

“Rewrite” is a photographic project that utilizes the domestic space as a stage for emotional projection of a traumatic memory. The work considers the relationship that exists between an individual and the rooms and objects within a home space in an attempt at understanding an individual’s mental state. “Rewrite” explores the ways in which we exist through our home and how a juxtaposition of objects and materials can create meaning. The photographs are a visual interpretation of the emotions surrounding sexual abuse/assault/rape as they have related to my own personal history and conversations I have had with women close to me.

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### **Personal History**

I am a white American female, raised in a middle class family in a suburban town. I was adopted by my grandparents at the age of four. Being raised in this family structure, I realized that I wasn't educated with a progressive ideology. I was racist, homophobic, mistrusting, a skeptic, before I entered middle school. I learned quickly that the best thing I could do was pretend, and to behave how I was expected, even if it wasn't truly how I felt. My parents had looked down on people who were not happy, or stable, and I never wanted to displease them. If there were any problems, they were not addressed and instead returning to "normal" as quickly as possible was the only thing that could be accepted. This daily performance was especially important outside the home and being seemingly normal was the best you could ever strive for. When I came home from school, everyday, I found myself still performing. My family was ever present in my life. There were rooms in my home I considered public such as the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, and at times the office area, where I had to perform. When I was in my bedroom, the bathroom, the closet even, I was able to drop my walls. I could feel without inquiry.

As I moved through my teenage years, I was the person everyone trusted. I was level headed, compassionate, always understanding to others' problems. My friends never knew of my own demons, in some cases establishing long friendships where I knew every intimate detail of their lives and they knew nothing of mine. What I realized was that what I had in common with my friendship circle was our misery, which inevitably saved my life. They could share their stories with me and I could realize my own emotions. I could provide advice, support, and further understand my own emotions



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by talking with them. The only places I could express true feelings were in two rooms; the bathroom, where I was giving into my vices, or my bedroom, reflecting on my emotions, or previous negative actions.

When I reached my college years, I was hoping to put the past behind me. I met my first love the summer before going to college and for once thought I could separate from the feelings I used to have. What I discovered is that this openness to someone would allow me to be vulnerable. I had no clue that I would spend the next six months experiencing flashbacks of sexual abuse that I repressed. Additionally, for the next two and a half years I would experience panic attacks whenever I felt threatened or believed that I had done something wrong. Unlike in high school, where everybody understood each others' problem or had similar ones, I was having thoughts that I did not know were real. I had no idea what a flashback was and had never known of anyone who had experienced one. I began researching flashbacks related to sexual abuse to find that I was not alone. The more I knew about the subject, the more I called into question my emotions, my feelings, what I remembered. Everywhere I turned, I seemed to be reminded of something that I never wanted to dredge up. Since I did not have a way to prove if I was making this up or not, I quickly suppressed my thoughts.

As I transferred colleges, moved to different areas, I met new people and had newer people confiding in me. What I found out at one point was that most of the women in my immediate circle of friends had been raped or sexually assaulted. It seemed that when I would explain my own feelings of depression, my self- destructive behaviors and discussed my flashbacks they shared similar feelings of despair. Even if the stories were different, the feelings were the same. When discussing these personal stories, there was a

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sense that they felt alone and nobody else had ever felt this way. Therefore, to meet someone who understood and shared my feelings, came as a both relief and a shock. Since at least one out of 6 women have experienced some sort of sexual abuse, it should not be shocking to meet victims of abuse (Valenti). In fact, everyone that I had encountered kept their assaults a secret and never reported them, so the statistics are missing a large percentage of women. I realized that these discussions that I kept having, allowed me to recognize things about myself through someone else. I would be the one to articulate the feelings of someone else through my own experience, in some cases, providing an epiphany for the individual. They may not have been able to pinpoint how they felt previously, but now both of us were staring at our reflections.

## The Home

The physical space that defines our habitat shall be called the home. It is our shelter and according to Maslow, one of our main needs in his hierarchy of needs. In understanding the home, these places often contain a variety of rooms effecting how we interact within each space. Depending upon our amount of wealth, we may have a varying domestic landscape, from a shack to a mansion. However, for all intensive purposes, we will be discussing a home that consists of a work space/office, dining room, living room, kitchen, bedroom, closet and a bathroom. This particular domestic landscape is up for discussion due to my own personal interaction within my dwellings of the past. I found myself residing or passing through these rooms in my day-to-day routines.

The home is the physical space we return to at the end of the day and functions in the private sphere. The home, at least my own, becomes a fortress in shielding me from the public realm allowing me to relinquish a facade. The public self disappeared, fake

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smiles turned to frowns, and a more authentic version of me was revealed. However, due to my living situation, my mother took a job that allowed her to spend the most amount of time possible at home with me, therefore, I found myself maintaining a front even in my own home. When I stopped performing my roles, the home space is the one that allowed emotional breakdowns and emotions that were typically deemed unacceptable in the public domain. I deemed expressing emotions unacceptable, because publicly displaying emotions raised questions. It allowed individuals to begin to inquire what is behind the mask.

These emotions may strike in the quietest of moments when my brain stops being stimulated and I am left with myself, coming down from the day, which may be in the shower, laying in bed at night or zoned out on the couch. Sometimes even in my own space, depending upon my physical location, I still may not be able to entirely unwind. However, the process of the unwind, opens me up for the reveal and in some cases may be Pandora's box. Once I begin to allow emotions to pour through me, they may seem bottomless. However, depending on my living situation, as was my childhood one and in some parts of my adult life, I've been surrounded by family or partners that made me want to cap my emotions, still fulfilling a role, an ideal, the façade, and ultimately avoiding questioning.

The home provides, with each room holding memories and a specific set of relations creating a "universe" for its inhabitants (Foucault). The rooms in homes seem to work together, but are also isolated, with each room acting as its own entity. When we live in these spaces, we affect the spaces as much as they effect us with the depth of our experiences "hiding on the surface of things." (Maffesoli 78). If we think of this in

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relation to our home, understanding our relationship that exists with our possessions, and our treatment of these objects and our home environment, we become to see how we are represented through these spaces. “Our homes hold the stories of our lives that were never lived.” (Papastergiadis 72).

The spaces themselves as far as the functionality of each room affects us based on the objects that are located within it. These objects become signifiers of the space and cue our behavior. By understanding these cues, we assume a bathroom provides a different purpose than a kitchen space. These objects within these spaces reinforce our social expectations of the spaces and when chosen by us or accepted as part of our domicile become an expression of who we are. Objects and spaces may become emotionally charged and as Berger says, “our homes become bricolage of the soul” (Papastergiadis 73).

Aside from a surface understanding of objects and spaces serving as a relic of memory, simple arrangements become a fingerprint of our social identity (Papastergiadis 72). We may potentially be able to understand how an individual functions by looking at the arrangement and condition of the home. Together these objects/spaces themselves help create an atmosphere for experiences to unfold. The home becomes a stage for the individual to perform within, but also represents the individual when they are not present. Homes signify us.

### **The Home and Traumatic Memories**

Within our home, different rooms may provide utilitarian functions but are also places for memories to unfold. We may physically experience the memories in the place

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or carry over the memories from the past and relocate them to a new home because we are triggered by a specific object or room. According to Bachelard, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us (14). The rooms become places for us to transfer past memories. These rooms become a placeless place, an arena where experiences and associations can flow in and out. For example, if something happened in my bedroom of my childhood house, a new bedroom may potentially trigger thoughts of the past. Old possessions, architecture, smells, anything that can stimulate the memory in new spaces are the leftovers of the past and are experiences that we may transfer into new spaces. We bring a previous history to our homes.

Within my work, I view the home as an everyday place that we are familiar with and understand its functioning. If we remove ourselves from the spaces we live in, we exist through material means. We have an implied presence in the spaces that we inhabit even if we are not present. In my work, I am interested in the way memory, more specifically traumatic memories can be triggered and expressed through the home space. I use a single female figure to become the “main character” of the narrative or the inhabitant of the home which happens to be a woman in a cross between a sexualized/vulnerable state. The anonymous female figure becomes representative of my mirrored self. I use this figure as my reflection, a fusion of my own emotions and interpretations of the emotions of women who have confided in me. The viewer may sympathize, empathize or objectify the figure in question. The figure that is either physically present or implied becomes a reflection that is both self and an “other”. When I view a reflection of myself I understand that I am looking at myself, I understand my own physicality, and I understand the people-pleasing, generally happy self that I attempt

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to perpetuate. When I find negative aspects seeping in and throwing off my equilibrium, such as feeling sadness, vulnerability, self-destruction in some cases, my reflection no longer seems as though as me. When these feelings are realized either by myself, or because I can relate to other individual's emotions, I find that my self is an "other." These emotions leave me disoriented as I search within me or externally through my life situations, to find their root. The figure in this work experiencing these emotions that I would identify as disorienting becomes a physical incarnation of the self and an "other."

I utilize an anonymous female figure to lead us through a traumatic memory. She is found in an absurd state, atop a mattress surrounded by dirt and book pages. The figure/my mirrored self is projecting emotional experiences of a memory which are feelings of alienation, melancholy, mourning, loss of control and self into the spaces surrounding her.



(Fig. 1)

### Visual Triggers

The photographs in the series "Rewrite" become an emotional projection of a traumatic memory inspired by my own life and women who have confided in me.

However, the way the emotion materializes and varies is based on the room itself. The

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loss is now inscribed into her social space. Our spaces become entrenched with our personal history (Pennartz 95). Each room retriggers different emotional representations of the same sensation. The original understood meaning of the space is highlighted and the rooms are transformed to express emotion. We carry our history with us and are unable at times to escape it. The emotions in the photographs all relate back to a vulnerability, defenselessness, alienation, and confusion in relation to an experience. The experience itself is never shown, and the viewers are left with the aftermath similar to the way we experience our day to day. An incident may happen and we are left in the emotional wake, perhaps employing coping mechanisms, stages of grieving, trying to come to terms with something that may have happened in a split second. We may not be able to understand our emotions/feelings but sometimes looking at someone else's helps us understand our own. Someone else may help individuals relate to what we cannot understand about ourselves. We may not have the same experiences, but we may have similar emotions. Therefore, the photographs do not need a specific incident but speak to a emotional sensation; a visual representation of the emotions that I found resonating within myself that allowed me to create a connection to others. They speak to a way of feeling that in my own life has been a way to relate to others. Through discussing feelings of alienation, melancholy, vulnerability, I was able to relate to other individuals and have them relate to me. The figure is only present in one room, that of the bedroom, and the rest of the images show a barren domestic landscape. The viewers are left to piece together the history of this individual without their immediate presence. The figure is implied in these spaces through the aftermath found in the rooms. The figure remains only in the bedroom in a cross between a possible point of identifying where the trauma

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first took place, and as if left reflecting upon the interpretations of the memory surrounding her, in her home environment.

Gordon Matta Clark once had his work quoted, “to convert a place into a state of mind,” (Jacob 8) which is exactly what is represented through these photographs. The photographs take functional spaces and transform them into the characters state of mind. The spaces in some cases experience a subversion of function, and employ an absurdity/theatricality to heighten the emotional effect. The viewer is automatically encountered with the fictive representation. When viewed together as whole, the series comes to life as visual similarities and an overall mood is produced as one carries the figure through space



(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)

### **Artistic Influences**

When creating my work, discovering how it fits into a lineage can be difficult. My work is influenced by the tableau style of Jeff Wall, the autobiographical nature of Tracey Emin’s work, and the use of objects as found in the work of Penelope Umbrico. The image “The Destroyed Room” was one of the earliest Jeff Wall pieces I had ever



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seen. The destruction that was found in this space spoke to me on an emotional level and aesthetic level.



(Fig. 4)

The camera for me is a tool that I use to create, but I need to be physically involved in the work that I'm making in order to feel a connection to it. I wanted to create something that I could then put my subjective lens on. For my own work, I either worked in the studio to create sets or within my own physical space Integrating my process into my personal life was the next step for my work. The sets have a physicality to them and a performative aspect in their development. The sets become an aftermath of an action and by physically turning my home into a stage I had to alter my daily routines. Through these minor alterations, the sets may have unintentionally been effected due to the fact I was living in the same space as my sets.. I need to feel a deep connection to the work I make and being physically entrenched in the process is one way I fulfill that need.

Tracey Emin's, "My Bed", allowed me to see the way individuals can infuse the personal into their art.

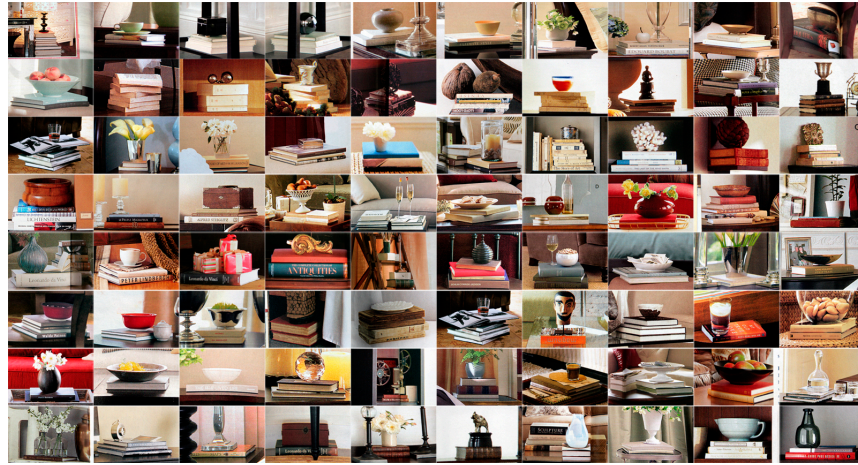


(Fig. 5)

Yet again, similar to the upfront in-your-face emotion of Wall's "Destroyed Room", Emin presents "My Bed" without the individual and just in a state of aftermath. We grow to understand this person's history through the objects that are left within her space. We see her demise, her breakdown, unfolding in front of us. Simultaneously, as I was viewing this piece I was questioning the emotional impact that objects had upon us. I begin to question if I died today and someone came in to look through my life to piece me together, would they be able to get a sense of who I was based upon my objects? I feel that we are all multifaceted when it comes to our personalities, but I know they would perhaps begin to make connections between my home space and the way I think and feel. Like Emin's bed, my home began to speak to me in the same way. As a result, I began to think of the ability and potential that objects may have in speaking to us, in conveying a sense of who we are, and what we may feel.

In Penelope Umbrico's work, she collects tropes in popular culture and re presents them to the art viewer. She has collected recurring images of books, pillows, mirrors in magazines, images of the sun from Flickr to examine these recurring themes.

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(Fig. 4)

Unlike the emotional connotation I was looking at through the Emin's work, Umbrico's work made me think of the meaning of objects. Just as in magazines where images reoccur, it made me think of objects and architecture that reoccur within our home spaces. I began to think of specific rooms, and how rooms can be established and understood based upon what is in them. I thought of rooms as having specific icons that often signify that space (Umbrico).

### Previous Artwork



(Fig. 6)



(Fig. 7)

For example, a series that I took at the beginning of my graduate school experience involved the use of photographing medicine cabinets illustrated this idea. By

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seeing a medicine cabinet, the viewer was drawn into the space of the bathroom. The contents that the cabinet held could potentially reveal the physical/mental state of the individual. As a photographer, my hope is that viewers not only observe the everyday notion of these objects, but more specifically they remember their own experience within those rooms. In these ways, I hope to draw the connection between the personal and the universal. Umbrico's work made me think of how objects affect our mental state, or actions etc. Once I realized that we approached objects through what they signify, I began to think of what happens if we subvert their meaning, if we present objects in a way contrary to how we expect. Obviously, different meanings arise by the re-presentation of the everyday as viewers attempt to take the quotidian and attempt to understand what the new configuration or transformation of the space truly means.

When considering the ideas of Umbrico, I started with the idea of the object serving as icon. My work for me functioned on two levels; I began to think about the objects themselves but also their underlying emotional meanings. I was not arbitrarily fascinated with medicine cabinets. Based on my own experiences, I had negative reactions with medications. Also, with the diagnosis of my mother having cancer, I realized the fragility of life and the medicine cabinet itself became a place where life was regulated. It became evidence of our mortality, our flaws, our obsessions even. Shortly after finishing the medicine cabinet series, my mother, passed away. This drastically shifted the direction of my work. I proceeded to think of not just the power that objects had, but began to think about how different arrangements, or presentations of objects could convey something larger. I began to make a series based on the concept of coping mechanisms. I began using objects as stand ins for the way an individual was coping with

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trauma. After culminating this series, I maintained a fascination by rooms, objects, trauma, and the way individuals re-imagined the same experience and re-expressed the same memory. I began to realize how different people coped with the same emotion in a variety of ways. This made me think about the current series. We may recall different details and feel different emotions, all surrounding the same feeling. When creating this series, I tapped into my own emotions and experiences of the past along with those around me who have experienced violations feelings of vulnerability themselves.

### **Personal Interactions with Spaces**

I was influenced by memories from my childhood home as well as the experiences I had living with partners after I moved out of my home. I began to look at different rooms in the home and examined their relationship to me. The bathroom, the bedroom, the closet and even the study were areas that were more private to me. It was in these spaces that I felt more alone, especially growing up. I could reflect on my day, engage in my own self-hatred, feed my vices, and hide from the world. As a child I would spend hours in the closet hiding and playing. I found myself safe and secure in smaller places. This space became my childhood sanctuary. When I reached my teenage years, the bathroom began to hold my secrets. I would stare at prescription bottles debating if I wanted to end it all, clean up the blood on the floor after cutting myself, dispose of the vomit in the toilet after purging. I fed my negative self esteem, and my obsessions, so rather than the bathroom being a place where I could cleanse myself, it became the site in which I would destroy myself. Not far from this space in my own home as a kid was my bedroom. Growing up, this room for me was one where I dealt with the after effects of what I had just done to myself.

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As I became sexually active, it also was the location in which I not only experienced sex but my first flashback of prior abuse and subsequent ones to follow. From that moment on, I had no clue if what I felt was real, and the scenes depicted in the flashback seemed to follow me wherever I went. As I was drifting off to sleep in bed, I'd be jarred awake by a terrifying image of a childhood version of myself being violated. For every piece of evidence that pointed to the fact it happened to me, I could justify another way that it never happened. The bedroom to me became the site of my vulnerability and trauma. It became the place where my memories were brought to the surface. The other rooms in my home space such as the study/office area was a place where I could isolate myself. Though at times, I still had to adhere to what was expected of me, which was a happy individual without any negativity. The other three rooms in the home that I attributed to a more self were the kitchen, the dining room, and the living room areas. In these rooms, I had to control my emotions, but still understand that they were ever present. If I expressed emotions at times it was received as a flaw in my personality so I learned to keep them hidden.

These rooms appeared to be the epicenter for dialogue. As a child, conflict would arise amongst my family, or when I was older and lived with partners, these rooms could remain calm but seemed to be the locations in which arguments would break out. I found that the way I had to handle myself within these spaces to be drastically different than I did in more private rooms like that of the bedroom or bathroom. In the more public rooms of the home, I felt I still had to hide my emotions, unlike in the rooms where I could isolate myself. These spaces created an anxiety within me because they tested my façade.



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## **Conclusion**

Throughout my life, I have felt a lack of connection to others, and in some cases forged the rift between myself and those around me. I have chosen to keep everyone at arm's length, trying to hide from them, and myself. I knew I was never alone and many other people felt the same way I did, but they too played the same parts day in and day out. My experiences influence the way I interpret the world, the way I connect with others, the way I remember. My work stems from unanswered questions about my experiences and emotions, a desire to understand, and a desire to connect. My work considers the psychological spaces of an individual, the ways in which they cope with traumatic experiences and a desire to connect individual's who share similar emotions. In my life, I attempt to embody an individual in which others feel connected, feel validated and through my practice, I embrace catharsis. It allows me to experience thoughts that lurk in my subconscious. I express my humanness. I breathe, I live, I connect.

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