

“To Prove that I Exist”

Melissa Shook’s Daily Self-Portraits

1972–1973

Teacher Guide | Mar. 9 – Aug. 11, 2024

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

In December of 1972, photographer Melissa Shook (1939 – 2020) challenged herself to take a self-portrait every day for a year. The nearly 200 photographs that came out of her project are on view together for the first time in this exhibition. They document Shook’s exploration of herself as subject, an exercise that emerged from her struggles with an unreliable memory and an unclear sense of self-identity. In her daily self-portraits, Shook experiments with the formal, expressive, and documentary properties of photography to consider who she is as a woman, a mother, and an artist.



December 13, 1972

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

You will see 193 black-and-white photographs, all taken by Melissa Shook. The photographs are arranged chronologically by month, beginning in December 1972 and ending in August 1973.

The photographs all measure approximately 4 x 4 inches. Many of them are framed in groupings of four photographs, making it possible for two or three people to examine a grouping at a time.

GOOD TO KNOW

“To Prove that I Exist”: Melissa Shook’s *Daily Self-Portraits, 1972 – 1973* is on view in the museum’s photography gallery (L11). No exhibition tickets are required for entry. School group visits to the exhibition can be arranged by visiting nelson-atkins.org/tours.

School groups that are unable to visit the museum in person can also use this guide to engage with the exhibition online. All works can be viewed at: art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6416/to-prove-that-i-exist.

In addition to the exhibition, you may wish to visit the museum’s other photography gallery (L10) to view a selection of self-portrait photographs by other artists, including Ilse Bing, Claude Cahun, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Graciela Iturbide, and Cindy Sherman.

In many of the photographs in this exhibition, Shook depicts herself partially or fully nude.

BEFORE VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

The title for this exhibition – “*To Prove that I Exist*” – comes from Melissa Shook’s own description of the reason behind her self-portraiture challenge. Taking a photograph of herself each day allowed Shook to test and reinforce her memory, which had been damaged by traumatic childhood experiences.

Consider the relationship between photographs and memory in your own life. Does looking at or taking photographs call up specific memories for you? Do you remember an experience better when you have a photograph of it? You might also wish to discuss this related article on photographs and memory:

Daryl Austin, “To Remember the Moment, Try Taking Fewer Photos.” *NPR*, 5 Aug. 2021, [n.pr/3TUBFxW](https://www.npr.org/3TUBFxW).

In any portrait, the interplay between artist and subject is worth considering; that is especially true in a self-portrait, when the artist *is* the subject. Find a classmate or friend to partner with on a portrait photography exercise. Each of you should take your own self-portrait photograph to start. Then, take turns photographing one another.

Discuss:

- How was the process of photographing yourself different from photographing another person?
- Which part of this exercise was more challenging? Which part was more interesting?
- How does the photograph you took of yourself differ from the one your partner took of you? Why might that be?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE IN THE EXHIBITION



Repetition & Variety

Shook’s self-portraits evolved over time. Compare two groupings of Shook’s photos from different points in her project. How are her photographs from December 2 – 5 similar to and different from her photographs dating to June 9 – 13?

L to R: *December 4, 1972; June 13 (?), 1973*

Passage of Time

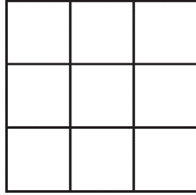
Since Shook’s New York City apartment serves as the setting for the majority of her self-portrait photographs, we can track changes to her space over the course of the project. What details can you find in her photographs that demonstrate the passage of time?

Self & Others

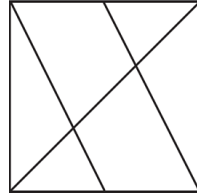
In most of her self-portrait photographs, Shook is the only figure shown. But several images include other people, most frequently Shook’s daughter, Krissy. Why might someone choose to include another person in their self-portrait? How are the photographs that contain multiple figures similar to and different from those that show Shook by herself?

Composition

Shook incorporated compositional techniques like the Rule of Thirds and the Golden Triangle into many of her self-portraits to enhance their visual interest. Use the viewfinders found in the exhibition or reproduced here to examine the way Shook composed her images.



Rule of Thirds



Golden Triangle



Example

February 17, 1973



Symbolism

Shook struggled with communication – she wrote of her frustration with feeling a “distance between what I really wanted to say and what I did say.” How might a photographer express that idea visually through self-portraiture? Take a look at Shook’s photographs from March 17 – 22 and discuss the approach she took.

March 22, 1973



The Body in Motion

View Shook’s photographs from May, many of which show her experimenting with exaggerated poses and facial expressions. How did she capture a sense of movement in these still images? Choose one image from this period and examine it closely – what mood, emotion, or impression is conveyed through Shook’s pose or expression?

May 27, 1973

AFTER VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

Use the museum’s online collection search (art.nelson-atkins.org) to explore other photographers whose self-portraits are included in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins. Examples:

- Wendy Red Star
- Claude Cahun
- Michael Bishop
- Will Wilson
- Jerry Uelsmann
- Ilse Bing
- LaToya Ruby Frazier
- Graciela Iturbide
- Cindy Sherman
- Annie Hsiao-Ching Wang
- Mike Mandel
- Tseng Kwong Chi
- Anne Noggle
- Anna Shteynshleyger
- Laura Aguilar
- Tomoko Sawada
- Zanele Muholi

Inspired by Melissa Shook's self-portraiture project, try setting a photography challenge for yourself. You might try to take a photograph of the same person, place, or theme every day for a given period of time. When your project concludes, reflect on:

- Was it difficult to be consistent in your daily photographs? If you missed any days, will you mark those omissions in some way?
- Can you see evidence of time passing in your photo series?
- How did you bring variety and visual interest to your series of photographs?

IMAGE CREDITS

All images are gelatin silver prints by Melissa Shook (American, 1939 – 2020).

December 13, 1972. 4 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.20.55.

December 4, 1972. 4 7/16 x 4 7/16 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.20.46.

June 13 (?), 1973. 4 5/16 x 4 5/16 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.20.216.

February 17, 1973. 4 3/8 x 4 3/8 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.20.117.

March 22, 1973. 4 3/8 x 4 5/16 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.20.151.

May 27, 1973. 4 3/8 x 4 5/16 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.20.204.