

Shadow & Light Magazine

The Art of Photography



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Showcase Portfolio: Discovery

Soomin Ham: *Frozen Moments* • by E.E. McCollum



Lost and Found: First Birthday Portrait.
The photo was found in my mother's belongings after she passed away. I remember her feeling sad when she thought she had lost the photo, as it was the only picture of her first-year birthday.

I am often asked about the value of portfolio reviews. My response is always, "If you believe in your work and feel very strongly about, you should do whatever you can to get to a highly-rated portfolio review."

Last fall I reviewed for Review Santa Fe hosted by Center. One of the people I reviewed was Soomin Ham. She struck me with her passion for the subject and her images, as well as our discussion, enabled me to mark her down for future consideration to be published in Shadow & Light Magazine. I called on E.E. McCollum to contact her for an interview. (-ed.)

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EE: Tell us a little about your background - your life and your art training.

SH: I am a fine art photographer and multimedia artist based in the Washington D.C. area. I received a Bachelor of Music from Ewha Women's University in Seoul, Korea and my Master of Art in Photography and Multimedia from New York University/International Center of Photography in New York City.

I was born in Seoul, Korea, and I am the middle child of four siblings. I was on the shy side but very active for whatever made me excited and inspired. My parents, who were enthusiastic about art, music, and education, always supported our interests and dreams, and we were surrounded by music and art. This experience had a huge impact on us. While all my siblings majored in fine art, I studied classical music, playing the oboe, and eventually went to music school where I got my bachelor's degree. However, my passion for art didn't stop me; I was busy taking art classes during my college years and later I moved to New York City to pursue studying photography after finding that it was my true passion.

EE: What was your first exposure to photography?

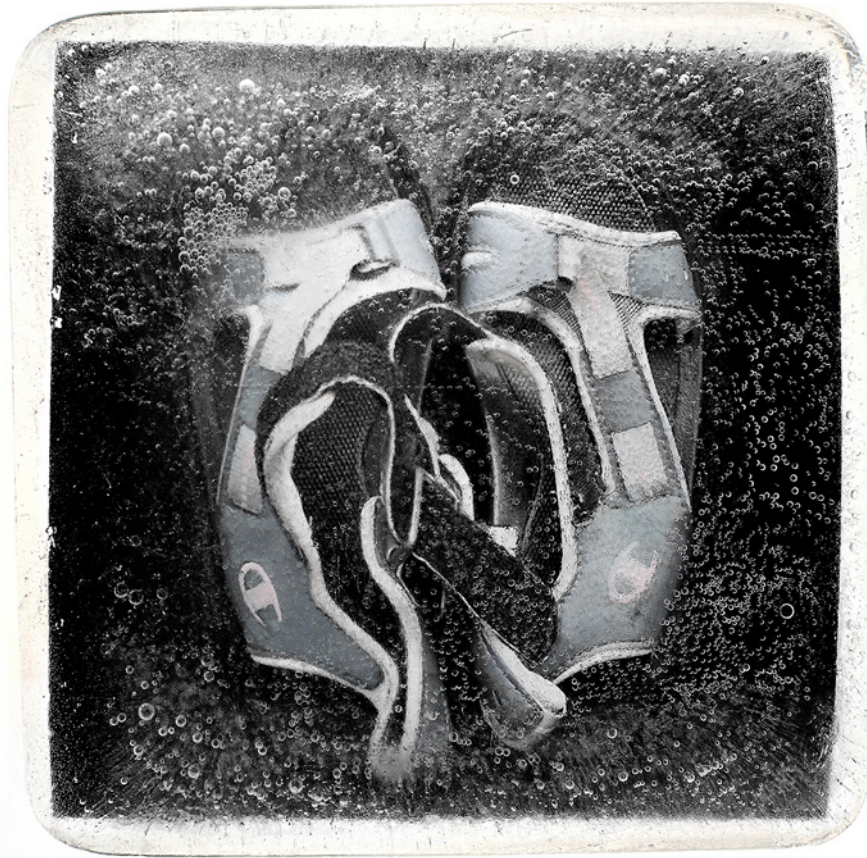
SH: During my college years, I started playing around with an old Pentax film camera that my father used to use. I would photograph my friends, family, and anything that interested me. I enjoyed spending a lot of time in the darkroom to process black-and-white prints; it was like magic for me to see the images appear in the tray. The camera was a perfect tool for capturing the moment, and later it became a new instrument to express myself through the lens.



Frozen Moment.

This watch was one of my mother's favorites. She would frequently use the alarm to remind her to take her medication.





Journey.

This pair of sandals was one of my mother's favorite footwear. She would always bring them along with her when traveling. Following the steps of the Korean tradition, they were burnt on the 49th day after her death so that her soul could take them with her for her new journey.

EE: You trained as a musician in college. How did you make the transition to visual arts?

SH: My career path changed in 1992, following a trip to Rajasthan in India. It was my first time seeing the desert, and I was overwhelmed by its infinite, timeless space. I was feeling uncertain about my career at that time, but the desert allowed me to open my eyes. I would say I was able to find myself and what I really wanted to do. By the end of the trip, I decided to follow my dream and moved to New York City to study photography in 1994.

My new journey began with my graduate program at New York University and the International Center of Photography, where I found another new medium: video art. I was happy to introduce time and sound into my work, and eventually I was able to expand my medium by combining it with my background in music.

Thankfully, Peter Campus, who is one of the pioneers of video and new media art, was my professor. He helped me expand my perspective using visual narratives, as well as multimedia. I was then able to cultivate my voice and find my own vision through visual language.

EE: How does your musical training inform your visual work if it does?



Last Glimpse: Mother's ashes.
This photo captures the last glimpse of my mother just before her burial. The box, carefully wrapped in fabric, contains her ashes and was originally photographed by my sister who was holding them during the funeral.

SH: Being a musician and photographer has given me the privileged insight into how the two disciplines are interrelated and how the understanding of one field can be conveyed to another. My background in classical music has greatly influenced my creative life. I think that photography and (writing) music have a common compositional element and technique. The relationship between music and photography expanded my artistic vision and continued the development of visual narratives.

The process of making photographic work can be compared to creating a musical composition since I believe that they have common compositional elements and techniques. It has been my hope to make my work visual as well as audible.

EE: The images in this issue come from a series called “Frozen Moment.” Can you tell us how this project came about, the process of making those images and what the images explore?

SH: “Frozen Moment” is part of the series for Sound of Butterfly and was created with an experimental process to document and preserve moments and objects that would have vanished, or like memory, would have decayed and faded.

Over the years, I photographed many of the special possessions my mother had left behind: her favorite watch, a cream jar with a fingerprint, a wrapped box that held my mother's ashes, a pair of her favorite sandals that were to be burned at her memorial ceremony. I also created photographs of places and times in which the presence of my mother resonated after the funeral: the sign of the memorial park where her final place lay, the sky during the funeral, my mother's little garden...

I selected 33 images to create the "Frozen Moment" series. Each photo was placed in a 4-inch square box filled with water and then put in the freezer, producing an ice-encased print. The frozen prints were placed on a lightbox and then re-photographed.

The final works were completed by adding encaustic to the prints which are glued on 12x12-inch wood panels so that the viewer can feel the sense of ice through its texture.

EE: Frozen Moment is one part of a larger series – Sound of Butterfly. Would you talk about that series?

SH: In the middle of the night in August 2009, I lost my mother, who had a passion for art and music, and devoted her whole life to her family. However, she struggled with depression for the rest of her life and took her own life.

It took a long time to understand this tragic loss, but as time went by, I found myself feeling appreciation for the love, passion, and dreams she shared with me, and I decided to create a new body of work, "Sound of Butterfly."

The work presents an experimental, yet personal approach to understanding and interpreting memories and loss. It reflects on my mother's journey through life, depression, and death. Butterfly was one of my mother's favorite things, and it also symbolizes a new journey for me.

Sound of Butterfly consists of five series: "Back to Heaven," "Frozen Moment," "Ashes of Memory" and two videos.

EE: Much of your recent work seems to address loss, grief, memory, impermanence, and you use the fragility of photographic materials to do so. How did this use of photographic materials come about?

SH: Using ephemeral elements such as ice and snow helped transform this personal subject into an experimental and conceptual work, and the resulting works suggest a poignant metaphor for the fragility of life itself. "Back to Heaven" another series from Sound of Butterfly reflects on the ephemeral nature of the moment as old images were rediscovered and reprocessed.

In the last several years, I have used traditional darkroom methods to create black-and-white silver gelatin prints. "Lingering Glimpses," my recent work presents portraits of American soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. To reflect the loss of lives cut short, the film of a portrait was processed using an expired developer and no fixer so this method would gradually fade the print, exploring impermanence and the transitory nature of the photographic image itself, and an apt metaphor of remembrance.

EE: What photographers are you currently looking at whose work you find stimulating? How do other media influence you - books, music, painting, etc.

SH: When I was a child, Salvador Dali, a surrealist painter, had a profound influence on me by seeing art in a



Finger trace in the jar.

This photo captures the last glimpse of my mother just before her burial. The box, carefully wrapped in fabric, contains her ashes and was originally photographed by my sister who was holding them during the funeral.

different perspective. His surreal and dreamlike paintings, which greatly astonished me, allowed me later to expand my creative vision using a visual narrative in my imagination.

There are so many wonderful visual artists, but I have been most influenced by Bill Viola, a pioneer of video art. His works focus on fundamental human experiences such as birth, death and consciousness. I really like how he draws on the audience's imagination, their memory, dreams and subconscious. His work has helped me understand the cycle of life through a creative life.

EE: Is there anything else that you would like viewers to know about Frozen Moment and about your work in general?

SH: Since most of my work is deeply rooted in the family, the process of working with family archives is a moving and emotional experience. The process of creating Frozen Moment enabled me to understand and embrace my grief by tracing the path of my mother's life. I am grateful that photography not only preserves those precious moment but also transforms them into a new visual experience.

I am grateful to have shared my portfolio with such great artists and professionals at the 2021 Review Santa Fe. It was a rewarding experience to receive thoughtful and helpful feedback from the reviewers.