

Alba, tell me a little bit about your background, and how you came to be a photographer?

I graduated at DAMS in Bologna with a degree in cinema criticism; my thesis was an analysis of the visual representation of mental health reform after Basaglia Law. I knew from the beginning of my studies that photography was a language I could use to express issues that were incredibly important to me. Later I studied documentary photography at the International Center of Photography in New York where I explored social themes, including the widespread eating disorders of American society. I continued my studies in photography and visual design at the NABA in Milan. It was 2013 when I finished my MA, and I went to Iran where I started a documentary project on the vegetation of the Mesr desert. The images I started to take had a theme that became melancholic and unresolved, and with this I found that I could express my introspective intimate sensibility for people and environments through the eye of a lens.

What was the genesis for *The Y* project?

At the age of 25 I found out that I had different biological father to my Thai brother. Once the truth was revealed I began a journey in exploring my own identity with the sole purpose of finding my father. It all started with a DNA paternity test which proved that Weerachart, the man who had lived with us in Thailand until I was 4 years old, was not my biological father, in fact, he was the biological father of my younger brother, Agostino. The only thing I know about the identity of my father is that his name is Massad, and that was probably working for the Emirates Airlines - he could be from Iraq, Iran or Kuwait. From that day I felt the urgency to find out where I came from and where I belong.

***The Y* deploys a range of diverse visual material – DNA reports, family archives, objects of research, 3D avatars, self-portraits, and so on. Can you talk about the conceptual and aesthetic logic behind the content and the production of imagery?**

Every single piece of material present in the project was a tool to support my research, every image was useful in finding the truth and trying to reveal the identity of my missing father. With photography I questioned my memories and the history of my family, therefore encouraging me to look at my family pictures from a different perspective. The man with me was no longer my family and since I no longer had a blood connection with him I painted over photographs of him to create a silhouette in a bid to demonstrate a new interpretation of my memory.

My photographic quest has grown from the gaps of information. I examined my features and I compared them to my mother and grandmother using a physiognomic analysis. Using a process of elimination I noticed that my eyes, mouth, nose and skin tone could only belong to a man that I had never had the chance to meet; this helped me start to imagine what he might look like.

I needed to know the truth to accept the absence, so I did a DNA test to find out the ancestral origins of my biological father, from here came the title of the project. *The Y*. Women inherit two XX and in my DNA I am missing the Y chromosome, the element needed to find his ethnic origins. I had to work with the information I had that existed within my family. I collected documents and evidence relating to who could be my father, and I took portraits of Weerachart, my putative father, of Agostino my brother, and of Gary Labus - a man I had never heard about before, but nevertheless was the person that signed the paternity on my birth certificate. I travelled to Santa Barbara to take a portrait of him. All the portraits are silhouetted against a light blue setting, a popular backdrop for IDs in the 1980s in Italy. I needed to look at them from every angle to gather an organic perception of who he was and to explore his features further.

Like a forensic investigator I methodically started to look for traces of Massad, my father and so I travelled back to Bangkok. During the process I discovered that what I really wanted was to have an image of my father, thus I worked with the information I had, and with the results of the physiognomic analysis I created a 3D avatar with the program "Make a Human." I used a scientific approach to get the closest I could to the truth. A consequence of this method was that I formed an emotional distance, allowing me to organise my feelings. The project ends with a self-portrait in Bangkok with my eyes closed against a red background, portraying reference to blood and to an indissoluble bond in the face of my father's physical absence.

How did your thinking about the way memory functions in relation to your use of photographic languages influence the conception and presentation methods?

I couldn't seem to establish a bond with the memories of my childhood and with the pictures in my family album anymore. The images that I repeatedly looked at were no longer telling me the truth, the person next to me on my birthday party was not my biological father - I no longer knew how to feel. From the start of the project I couldn't help but feel that photographs were pieces of material that hold so many variations of what is perceived to be the truth. When I created the Avatar of Massad, I finally had an image of my father. In the last part of the project I realised that I had effectively created my own memory of him, but it was still only an interpretation of reality.

What are your thoughts on the balance between disclosing information versus allowing for the puzzle to come together for the viewer? I'm thinking here in the sense of narrating for others while coming to terms with the complex realities of this highly-personal story.

The Y starts with a missing piece of information, it begins with a question that will be present throughout. I believe that the unanswered question keeps the viewer interested in the project, and with every closed door and ill-fitting puzzle piece, the aspect of the unknown remains and the interest strong. I believe that exposing yourself and speaking about your personal grief is a way to allow people to empathise and get closer to something, regardless of what it is.

Photography can also aid in creating a version of reality that helps others to understand and become closer to the subject. This project speaks about identity and belonging and with coming to terms with the absence of my father, accepting the reality as it is after conceptualising and ordering it. Using scientific methods helped me to work through this deeply emotional journey, every discovery and failure got me a step closer to finding my missing father. I think anyone that might follow my journey can relate to the feeling of the grief of having a parent or someone you love missing in your life.

To what extent do you consider photography to be an adequate medium and framing device for such a project (wherein the subject's identity ultimately eludes visualisation)?

I used the medium of photography in a way that allowed me to treat the research of my father without rhetorical feelings. I needed to collect evidence, facts and scientific reports. I needed to organise and keep the right emotional distance in order to deal with the pain of not knowing who my father was. I thought of using the scientific approach adopted by Lombroso while I was studying the features of my maternal line, allowing me to potentially create part of the answer by giving me a visual representation of what he might look like. What I wanted more than anything was to have photograph of my biological father, I was not able to find his identity so I recreated his image with the Avatar to have my own peace of mind. The Avatar is an imaginary image, and that is the closest I get to reality. During my research I did think a lot about the role photography played in manipulating reality to tell a story...

In terms of the project's title, *The Y*, does it have any further significance for you beyond the reference to the male chromosome of human DNA?

It does have a deep and personal meaning, a question that followed me from the moment I found out that I didn't know who my father was. Why? Why I don't have his address, his number, why is every piece of vital information missing?

What's more important to you at this point - process or resolution?

At the end of the project I started to come to terms with my past and the reasons why I did not know the identity of my father. I found myself accepting the mystery of my family history after doing everything possible to find him. The journey was the most important thing to me.

Did you feel that any new readings of your work were introduced as result of *The Y* being shown in the context of the *Who's looking at the family, now?* exhibition as part of Photo50 at London Art Fair 2019?

It was really very important to see *The Y* in a bigger context, especially when looking at the differences and similarities of how other artists used the medium of photography to reflect on family memories. It was a very heterogeneous exhibition that included classic documentary modes of representing the family with more conceptual approaches. It was important to see the reactions of the

viewers when considering the private lives of the artists and how everyone can relate to the topic of family.

What does the future hold for the project? For example, we've spoken before about exploring the creative possibilities of the photobook. Can you share some insight into what we might expect from the forthcoming publication; the design, structure and shape, etc? How might it rearticulate the investigative experience in this form?

I have always thought of this project as a photobook. I have collected every little trace and piece of evidence in a folder that holds the chronological journey of the research. The photobook gives a sense of completeness of the project even though I believe that a part of me will always think of *The Y* as an ongoing project, however it is incredibly important for me to have the ability to close the chapter at a certain point even if I didn't achieve what I set out to.

I don't want to give away too much about the book, other than the fact that the editor is Witty Kiwi and the design will be of Studio Iknoki. There will be an element that has not been covered much during the exhibitions of *The Y* though. They are the negative images printed on acetate, for example. These pictures are left undeveloped on purpose and they represent the personal and sentimental part of the research, giving an insight into the feelings I had when I visited the places that I thought may bring me closer to finding my biological father. The pictures are evocative and they balance the analytical process of the project. The project's curator, Francesca Seravalle, who I met during a research residency at Fabrica, will also write the accompanying essay.