



ART ON DEMAND

# EMERGE

DEVON RILEY  
COBI TIMMERMANS

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# PHOTOGRAPHY BECAME A MEDIUM OF STORYTELLING, RATHER THAN DOCUMENTATION.

In 1900, the Eastman Kodak Company released their first Brownie camera to the public. With its compact design, simple-to-use controls, and a price tag of only \$1, the Brownie effectively revolutionized and popularized the practice of photography<sup>1</sup>. By making the technology more accessible and easier for the general public, the Brownie (and other models that soon followed) also allowed for the exploration of different types of subjects than had been typical up until that date; different kinds of stories and alternate perspectives were introduced to counter traditional narratives. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography further shifted from being a means to record the world to instead acting as an open window into elaborate stories populated with fictional characters. Photography became a medium of storytelling, rather than documentation.

One of the most iconic artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, whose work embodies the narrative capacity of photography, is Cindy Sherman. In her career spanning more than four decades, Sherman has specialized in elaborate photographic self-portraits in which she adopts a myriad of costumes and personas, with each enigmatic image suggesting a much larger story that extends beyond the photographic moment. In her breakthrough, early series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) Sherman uses her own face and body as a model to create imaginary scenes from movies, often referencing the stereotypical ways that women have been portrayed in mass media and pop culture. This series of nearly 70 images remains some of Sherman's best-known work, and it continues to inspire and be referenced by many young photographers today, including Fraser Valley-based artists Cobi Timmermans and Devon Riley.

Timmermans and Riley first began working together in early 2020, when they were both Fine Arts students at the University of the Fraser Valley. Since then, they have collaborated on various projects, often using each other as models within their individual practices. Inspired by vintage aesthetics and imagined narratives, their work often incorporates the use of vintage props such as train cases and rotary phones. The works on display in the current exhibition are taken from two distinct series: *Yearning for Yesterday* (taken by Timmermans, featuring Riley as the subject) and *I Dreamt of Lilacs and Monsters* (taken by Riley, featuring Timmermans). In these series, the artists have once again utilized each other as models in order to create brooding, atmospheric bodies of work that focus on a female perspective and narrative.

Inspired by the work of Sherman, in which a single photographic “film still” can contain enough information to represent an entire story, several images from Timmermans’s *Yearning for Yesterday* series depict a lonely environment of seclusion. Curious about the habits of individuals with little human connection or sense of community, Timmermans imagines a world where the sole character is contained within the bounds of her bedroom. The viewer is presented with an image of a woman within the context of her own private life, a view that is usually hidden from the outside world. The viewer is thus turned into a voyeur, while the images pose questions that are difficult to answer: “What is keeping her here?”, or “Is she ok?”. The dark somber colour tones and languid body postures displayed by the model throughout the series may even suggest that it could be an abusive relationship or a quarrel between lovers that has resulted in this a lack of human affection. Regardless, we see the woman

turning to various vices as a means of emotional support and perhaps self-medication: cigarettes, cheap magazines, alcohol. Other images from the series depict the woman standing outside, carrying packed bags, then later seated in a car. The images imply that the woman wants to escape, but we never see her in the actual process of leaving the confinement of her bedroom. Could it be that she has never left at all, but that these images portray only her hopes and dreams of escape?

Within the darkness of our dreams, individuals are given the power to picture themselves within various roles or alternative story lines, thus allowing them to escape their everyday reality. Yet what does it mean to live within these dreams or to embody something that we are not? Devon Riley’s series *I Dreamt of Lilacs and Monsters* references narratives of horror, like those created within vivid and uncontrollable dreams. Using Timmermans as a model, Riley references the figural poses of traditional portraiture, but with an added twist of manipulated colour and elaborate props. Using medium format film photography, Riley further evokes dreams and nightmares by



playing with methods of double exposure. Like dreams, this unpredictable method results in a mass of overlaid fragmented images and ghostly figures. This can be seen for example in the image *Cloned Phone*, in which the model is depicted in double exposure, suggesting an ongoing and jumbled narrative. This theme continues throughout the remainder of the series, where the model is often portrayed with closed eyes, then contrasted with shocked expressions referencing the restless turmoil of sleepless nights. Riley’s work communicates the unpredictable and abstract fine line between a dream and a nightmare, which can change at any moment.

Together the work of Cobi Timmermans and Devon Riley calls on viewers to examine created narratives within the context of storytelling, dreams, and reality. Through the use of contrasting colours, vintage aesthetics, and female based portraiture, the pair positivity influence and encourage each other’s work through collaboration. In some ways viewers can imagine that the female characters in each series exist within the minds of the other character, or within same distorted reality. The passive faces of the women pictured in many of the photographs contain a touch of sorrow possibly caused by their struggles, however viewers should not mistake these women as weak, but should closely examine the way many of the figures in Timmermans’s and Riley’s images are portrayed staring back at the viewer, with power and control. As a result, it seems as though these female characters have suddenly become aware that you, the viewer, are trespassing by peering through a window into their dreams and realities.

- EMILIE KVIST,  
EMERGE CURATOR

<sup>1</sup>“The Most Important Cardboard Box Ever?” BBC News. BBC, January 5, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30530268>.

# DEVON RILEY

Devon Riley is a multimedia artist based in Chilliwack, British Columbia. She is currently working towards her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of the Fraser Valley. The materials she works with include film photography and cut and paste collage.

# COBI TIMMERMANS

Cobi Timmermans received her Diploma in Visual Arts from the University of the Fraser Valley and is currently completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts there as well. Her artistic practice focuses on digital and film photography, painting, and collage.



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FRONT COVER: COBI TIMMERMANS, *YEARNING FOR YESTERDAY*, 2021, DIGITAL PRINT, 30 X 24 IN.

INSIDE RIGHT PAGE: DEVON RILEY, *CLONED PHONE*, 2021, DIGITAL PRINT, 24 X 24 IN.

GRAPHIC DESIGN BY CAMILLE CANDIA