

Brenda Francis Pelkey

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STRUCTURES OF ANTICIPATION

Guest Editors: Yoke-Sum Wong, Karen Engle, Craig Campbell

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BRENDA FRANCIS PELKEY



The anxiety of anticipation: producing new work with text within a two-day symposium.

When I was asked to participate in the symposium, I immediately agreed. I thought, why not? I have a good anticipatory experience coming up as I was happily looking forward to my retirement from teaching. As the date approached and I received more and more information, I began to have serious doubts about what I could produce and what would be good enough. My biggest worry was if it could stand up to previous work. The structure was so unlike my usual approach to projects that on average take at least two years and more to complete. My usual working method is one of long, slow thought, grazing through texts that may have some peripheral connection to the subject, thinking and thinking about the subject

matter, searching out the sites to photograph, questioning, doubting, worrying about how competent I will be with all the technical demands of photography, and then finally finding my ground and producing the work. It is exhausting and I am not sure why I feel I have to make it quite so agonizing, but if I don't then I feel I haven't put everything into it and how could it be any good if I haven't come close to sweating blood?

As the date approached, I began to think about how I had to empty my office of all the paper and books and that I could photograph that process. I bought boxes and I practiced photographing my office. I tried adjusting lighting, close-ups, open drawers anything I could think of. The results were very disappointing. I couldn't possibly show anyone. It was completely visually boring and conceptually nowhere. Still, I didn't want to let go of the idea. I sat in my office for hours. I thought about my teaching career and all the students that had passed through my classes over the past thirty-plus years. The idea of motion, of moving through, struck me as a place to start.

I began again to pack the boxes, paying attention to the movement of taking books from shelves, sorting them and packing them. I put the camera on a low shutter speed and mimicked that movement with the camera. After three hours of packing and photographing, I reviewed the results and was more satisfied with the images. I felt they worked both visually and conceptually. But I was still uncertain and feeling anxious about producing work so quickly. I consulted with others (something I had never done before) to choose the final five images. This sense of vulnerability was not pleasant. I also had to find some words to accompany the images. In two previous bodies of work, I had used image and text—terse narratives to amplify and direct the image interpretation. Of the work produced for the symposium, the one that stands out for me is the story of “Hockey Marjorie.” Of all the students of all the years of teaching, her story stands out—maybe because the words that accompany this image are such a small part of the experience of teaching her.

They called her hockey Marjorie

*Hockey was her only subject until the team banned her from
the rink*

*She dressed as her Mother for a week, with make-up made
bruises*

The portraits were raw—the story more so

She was never referred to as Hockey Marjorie again

I can recall still her face.