

Books, Boxes and Photographs  
John Pickel, 2015

Photography is a provocative medium. We are sophisticated viewers seeing innumerable images on a daily basis and understand the photograph has no greater claim to truth than any other media. But a photograph of a loved one or deceased parent grips us, challenging this assumption. There's an essence, a quality generated by the mechanics of photography, which creates a tension between what we know and what we feel.

Using a smartphone and a photography app, I shot the *Berliner Bahn* series with this tension in mind. The app blanks the phone screen and then vibrates when each shot is taken. The wide angle and extreme depth of field of the camera allowed me to capture candid images that a conventional camera could not. Wearing headphones and listening to music, while pointing the phone toward a subject that caught my eye, was my daily practice. Although the process might read as spontaneous and random, I consciously chose the subject matter by pointing the phone at passengers who attracted me on some level or at that which suggested motion. After shooting more than one thousand images, I culled them down to twenty-five by choosing dynamic compositions that would resonate with each other. This series is my subjective representation of a few months on the Berlin mass transit system.

My interest in handmade books grew from storyboarding video projects. Many times I would shoot still photographs, placing the prints in the sequence of the storyboard. As time passed, I found my attention to detail and the simple rewards of making a beautiful object became more important than producing a video. Now, I direct the audience through the tactile and intimate experience of viewing the handmade book.

For example, the box of books entitled "Family" was inspired after I inherited a large cardboard box of family photographs. After scanning the images, I printed them back to back on 17 x 22 inch inkjet paper, and then tore them down to signatures for the three books. Many spreads are quite abstract, depicting little recognizable information. Others may show the chin of one relative, juxtaposed to an eye or part in someone's hair. The box was made to suggest a cigar box, but using materials with the color and feel of something of much more precious.

With the "Berliner Bahn" I photographed the unknown to make it more familiar. With "Family" I abstracted the familiar to create distance. This is not a simple dichotomy. I am more interested in the tension between knowing and feeling.