

# ROBERT ANDY COOMBS

NOTIONS OF CARE

ON VIEW:

SATURDAY, AUGUST 14, 2021 — SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2021

# INTRO TEXT

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In *Notions of Care*, Robert Andy Coombs creates personal narratives that invite the viewer to partake in the intimate details of his life. Through his photographs, he documents his rich experiences at the intersection of sexuality and disability, which are rarely expressed publicly in contemporary visual culture. Coombs describes his approach as unapologetic; he presents his own body boldly and confidently. Challenging preconceptions of disability while revealing an autobiographical narrative filled with both joy and the banal, Coombs brings visitors along to relate and revel in his journey.

Born in Michigan in 1987, the artist received his BFA from Kendall College of Art and Design and his MFA from Yale University. He lives and works in Miami, Florida.

The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum organized this exhibition to complement FIU's Common Reading Program and First Year Experience course. This year, FIU's entering class and other new students read *Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled* by Rebekah Taussig. This book shares the author's coming of age story and relates her experiences with ableism and her relationships with family and friends. Taussig desired to create a text that details a nuanced depiction of her life to augment the dearth of disability representation in popular culture. Copies of the book are located nearby for visitors to peruse.

All photographs are presented courtesy of the artist.

# COMMON READING PROGRAM

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The themes of the exhibition relate to the book that was selected for the Common Reading Program Fall 2021 - *Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* by Rebekah Taussig

- A memoir-in-essays from disability advocate and creator of Instagram account @sitting\_pretty

- Growing up, Rebekah only saw disability depicted as either monstrous or inspirational but never showed the complexities of ordinary life

“Sitting pretty” – means to be in an advantageous position; in a good, safe, or comfortable position

# ARTIST BIO

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## Education:

- Yale School of Art - MFA 2020, Kendall College of Art and Design - BFA 2013
- Born in Michigan. Lives and works in Miami, Florida
- Growing up, RAC spent a lot of time outdoors. He took photographs on his neighborhood walks in middle school and began exploring portraiture in high school.
- In his third year of undergrad, Coombs' sustained a spinal cord injury due to a gymnastics training injury
- He's always been creative – originally wanted to go to college for vocal performance, but decided on visual arts instead.

For more info, read the interview conducted by artist Jess T. Dugan [here](#).

# Notions of Care

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From the series: *Cripfag*, is "an exploration of my body, partners, friendships, fantasies, sex, caregiving, intimacy, fetishes, technology, access, romance, and more. I also had to explore my body, and due to the lack of function, I was in need of sexual partners to help me explore."

For more info, read the interview conducted by artist Jess T. Dugan [here](#).

# MAIN THEMES

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Face and overcome an obstacle

Intersectionality between accessibility and queer identity/relationships

Care/Caregiving

Elements of photography

Portraits

Body as subject

# PHOTOGRAPHY

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Elements of Art

Composition

Lighting

Setting

Relationship between subject and photographer

Relationship between subjects

Storytelling

Portraiture

# LABEL TEXT

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Sunset at Grand Haven Beach I, 2017 40 x 53  
inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

While Coombs engages caregivers and romantic partners in his art, **the relationship of care** is not simply one way but a mutual connection. Coombs also cares for those in his life. Here, Coombs presents a tender moment between himself and another subject as their bodies draw close together.

**Nature is significant to Coombs**; he grew up in Upper Michigan and being outdoors allows him to reconnect with childhood feelings of reveling in nature. The shoreline, an often-cited location in the history of art, disappears in the background, as we are drawn to the eyes of Coombs. As we gaze at Coombs, he gazes back at us with thoughtful intensity. In an interview with Dr. Vaigneur on the web-based talk show, *Disabilities Redefined*, the artist states, **“My work says I’m here, I’m queer, and I’m disabled.”**



# LABEL TEXT (CONT.)

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Sunset at Grand Haven Beach II, 2017 40 x 60", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

Robert Andy Coombs is **both the creator and the subject** of most of his photographic work. The environment described in this image is filled with the romance of early sunrise lighting the ocean shore. Instead of the predictable figure gazing out at the sea, we see an affectionate and supportive twosome in the shallows. **Coombs collaborates with his models and, in this photograph, the assistant that helped take the photograph.** This picture, made by the assistant under the artist's direction, is a carefully crafted image of loving care in an idyllic landscape. As a photographer Coombs relies on natural light, sparingly introducing artificial light into his practice. This scene, with the horizon line in the distance and majestic light from the sky formed around the clouds emphasizes the **artist's interest in natural settings.** The artist commented on the podcast, *Talk Art*, with Russell Tovey and Robert Diamen, **"When I got the idea to do self-portraits, I was almost 30 and it was kind of like a new sexual awakening to me. I stopped caring what people thought of me, I love my body and I want to share it with people."**



Ivy league embrace

Inkjet print on metallic paper, 2018

## LABEL TEXT (CONT.)

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In Coombs's work, **bodies are physically close**, and at times entwined, as seen here. **Mutual respect and comfort** are always at the core of the picture-making. The fireplace and stately wood paneled room provides a startling and perhaps ironic backdrop to these two half-dressed men in an intimate embrace. Photographed in a dorm at Yale University during the time the artist was a graduate student, the space feels both familiar and foreign. Coombs and his collaborator picked ivy from outside and brought it in to accentuate the decorative aspects of the room. **Coombs unabashedly returns the gaze of the viewer**, in contrast to the other subject, whose feet, chest, and back are partially obscured. The image employs complex lighting technology and careful planning so that every inch of the scene is described, from the softly lit sconces to the painting above the hearth.



Ivy league embrace

Inkjet print on metallic paper, 2018

# Close-looking

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Look at this image. What do you see?

How would you describe the subjects?

How would you describe the setting?

- Two subjects, one of which is RAC. RAC is facing the viewer, the other face is hidden from view.
- Two men in a close embrace framed by the mantle and ivy
  - Mantle/ivy adds emphasis to the subjects
  - Chandeliers at both ends further emphasize framing of the subjects
  - Linear image? We see horizontal lines where the carpet meets the wooden wall, in the mantle, in the framing/paneling of the wall, in the framed picture. The design/pattern of the carpet even leads our eye towards the subjects, particularly RAC, as he faces us directly.





Frustration, 2017 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

## LABEL TEXT (CONT.)

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- Through nude photographs of himself and some of his disabled friends, Coombs portrays the **humanity of people with disabilities**. In this self-portrait, the **artist looks directly at us** so that we cannot look away. His chest is clearly described, including a port between his collarbones and the diminished muscles in his wrist and fingers. One of the tattoos on his neck reads: giving up is the ultimate tragedy. Another tattoo, acquired during his college days, is a template for a nametag.
- Intentionally left blank, the tattoo speaks to the fact that we all **adopt and perform different identities and personalities**. From an interview with the artist Jess T. Dugan, Coombs explains, **“Once I send the images out into the world, the feedback I cherish the most is having other disabled people finding my work and re-evaluating how they view themselves.** Most of the conversations with them are that they have never felt sexy in their disabled body and I've given them a **visual representation of someone who owns their disabled body the way it is and is unapologetic.”**



Frustration, 2017 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

# Close-looking

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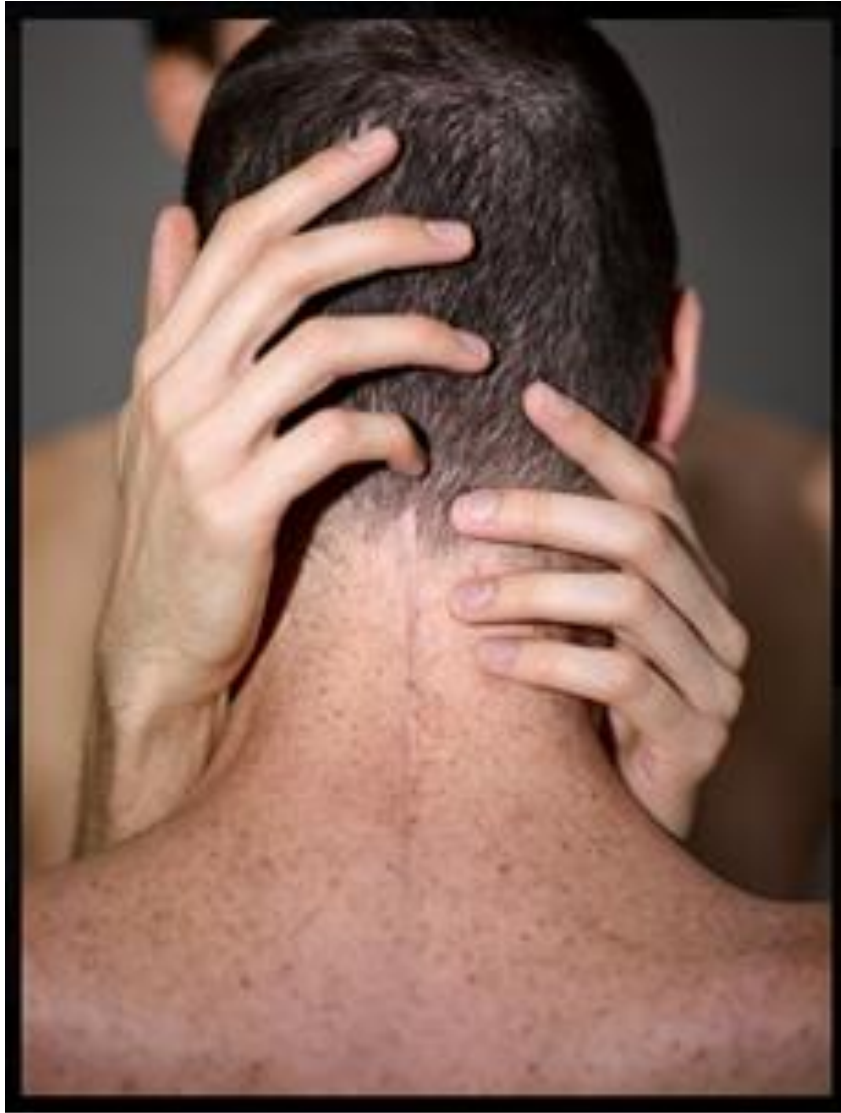
RAC is confronting the viewer

How would you describe his facial expression?

What does his body tell us?

Port-a-cath (seen in chest) is a device that is usually placed under the skin to assist with the intake of medication or IV fluids

Significance of tattoos



## LABEL TEXT (CONT.)

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Here, Coombs gently holds another person in an intimate embrace. The image is minimal, the figure is unidentified except for a **detailed expression of skin and bone**, in a moment, perhaps, before a kiss. The photographic frame allows only the slightest content and yet **holds the viewer complicit in the romantic moment**. Since childhood, Coombs knew he did not desire a monogamous long-term relationship. Many of his intimate scenes involve a fleeting relationship or model. Regardless of relationship status—short or long term—**acts of care are present**.

Hands on neck I, 2018 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.



## LABEL TEXT (CONT.)

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🔗 This witty self-portrait of Coombs recalls **European mythological paintings**. The artist and two friends, tattooed and bearded, pose in an idyllic scene that reads like a contemporary fairytale. The trio take on the identity of **woodland sprites, legendary guardians of the forest**. Webster's Dictionary refers to them poetically: *by light of moon the woodland sprites do dance and play*.

🔗 The artist, who is the central figure, is seated in a wheelchair, yet **he controls the frame with majesty**. Coombs' photographs imagine a world where **disability does not overwhelm natural life**, and is filled with physical affection, humor, and love.



Woodland nymphs, 2019 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

# Close-looking

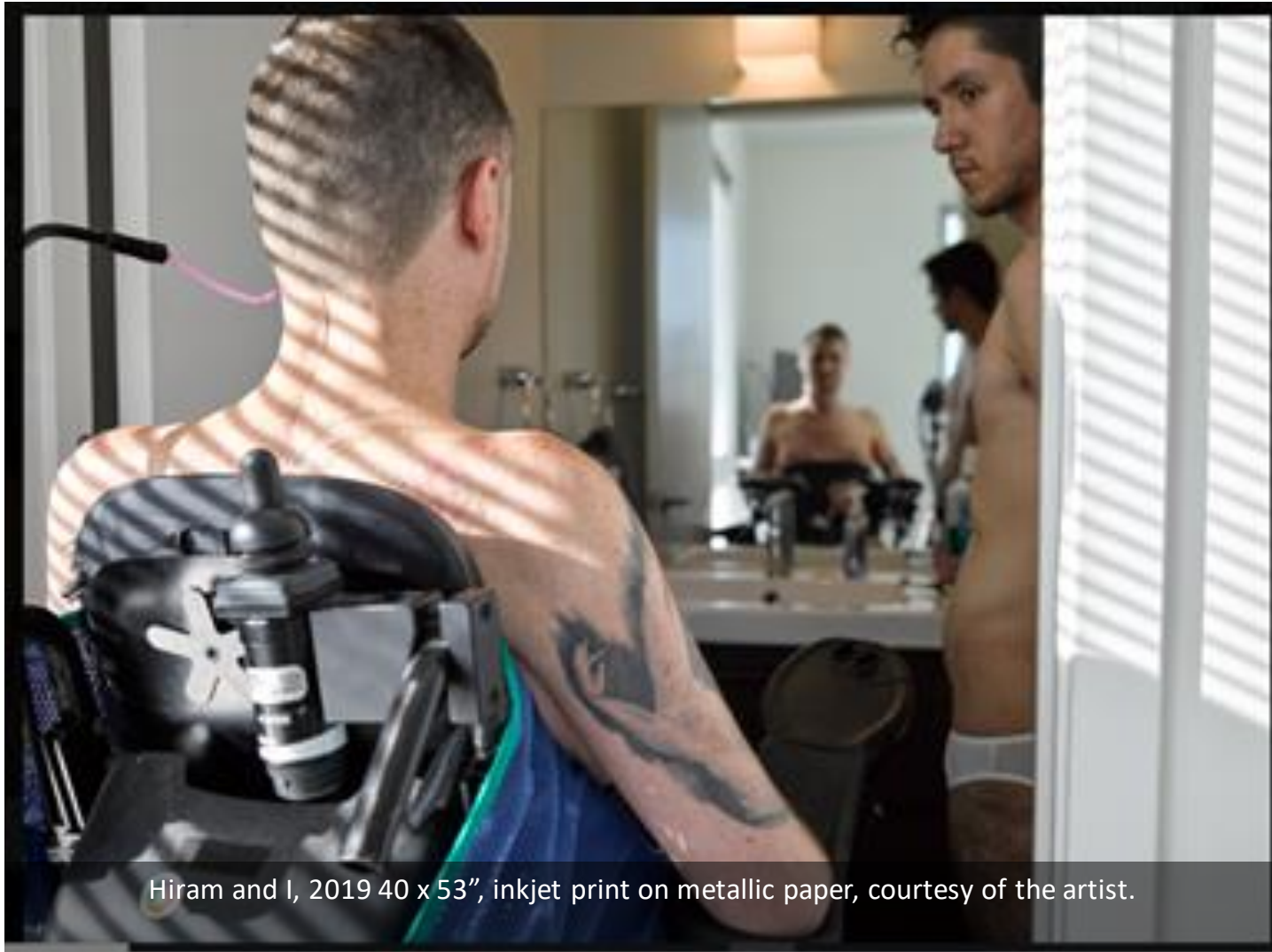
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- Look at this image. What do you see?
- Describe setting and subjects.
- Is this photograph reminiscent of a particular style of art?
- What are the prominent themes?
- How does this affect the context of this photograph?



Woodland nymphs, 2019 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.



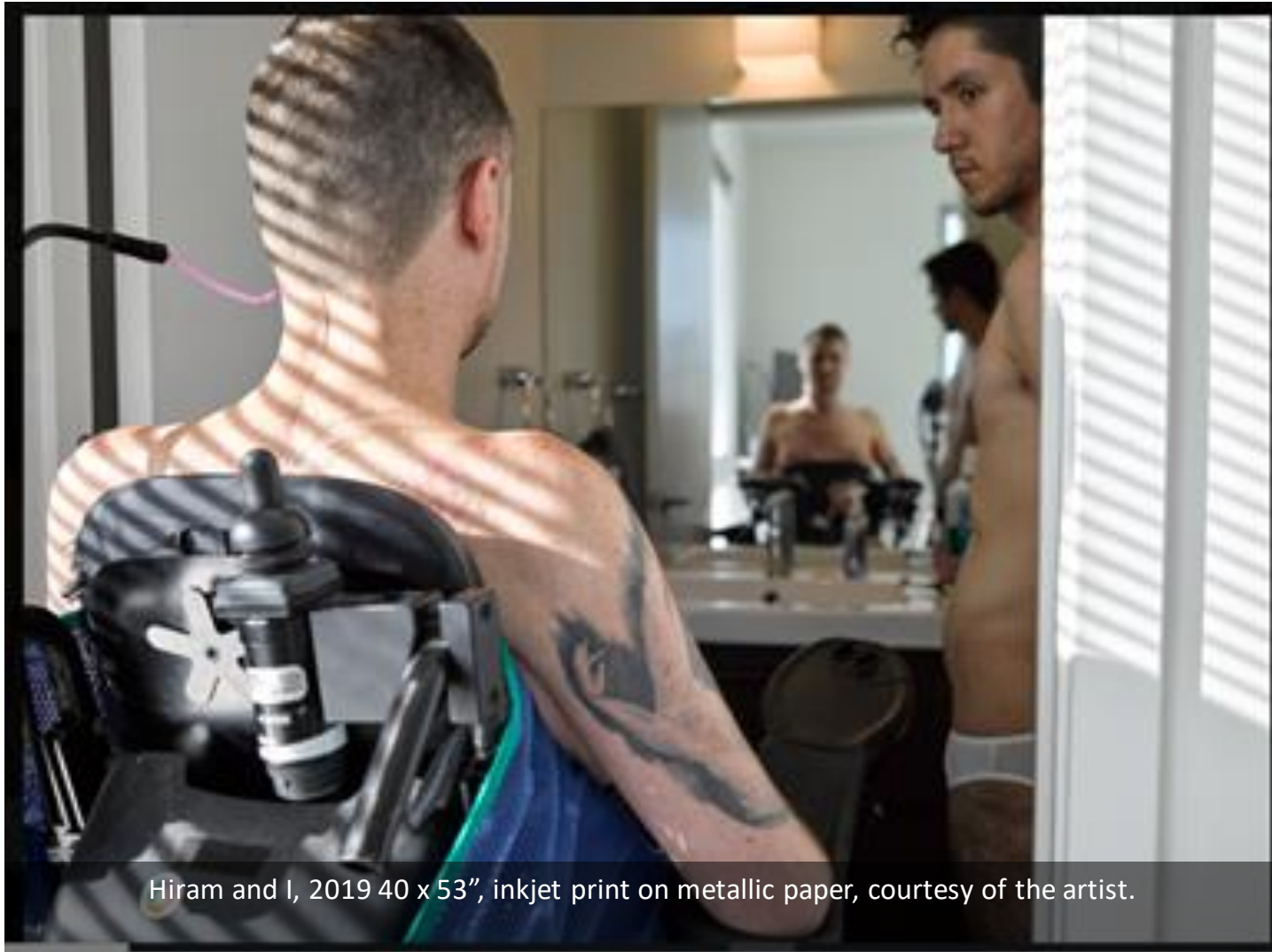


Hiram and I, 2019 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

## LABEL TEXT (CONT.)

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- Narratives of caregiving to those with disabilities is typically told from the point-of view of the caregiver. Coombs' work challenges that dynamic in this photograph, in which natural light majestically infiltrates the scene through blinds
- Coombs enters the bathroom to brush his teeth and engage in other mundane tasks. The presence of another man, wearing only underwear, imbues the scene with tenderness. The use of the **mirror enhances the complexity of the composition**, in which Coombs' face is blurred but his wheelchair is prominently featured.



Hiram and I, 2019 40 x 53", inkjet print on metallic paper, courtesy of the artist.

# Close-looking

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- Look at this image. What do you see?
- What elements can we identify?
- Who are the subjects?
- What can we learn from their relationship?
- What is the focus of this image?
- What is blurred?

# Questions to Ask

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- What can we learn from these photographs?
- What do these photographs mean to you?
- What are some adjectives that encompass this exhibition as a whole?
- What role does nature play in the artist's work?
- Through his work, do you think Coombs was able to convey his message?
- Do you think this kind of photography is effective? Why?
- Which image do you find to be the most powerful? Why?