

FAT CANARY JOURNAL

November 2019

DONNA BASSIN  
[www.DonnaBassin.com](http://www.DonnaBassin.com)



I AM MY OWN WITNESS - anonymous

The Fat Canary Journal celebrates the powerful, contemporary portraits created by photographer Donna Bassin in response to the political and cultural climate in the United States today. Donna, a fine art photographer, psychoanalyst, published author, and award-winning documentary filmmaker uses images coupled with statements from her sitters to create a poignant body of work which captures the spirit of the individual and the world around them.

Donna is a graduate of PRATT Institute and the International Center of Photography. Despite her desire to pursue photojournalism during the war in Vietnam, she put her camera away after Janis Joplin threw a bottle of Southern Comfort at her while on assignment for The Michigan Daily.

Years later, her contemporary photographic work resumed after she served as a consultant with New York City's Department of Mental Health following the tragedy of September 11. Her award-winning photography series, The Afterlife of Dolls, her response to long hours at Ground Zero, was featured as a solo show at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey. It was awarded a Gradiva Award and Golden Bell Leadership Award for contributions to mental health through the arts and, as well, was featured on NJTV's State of the Arts. Subsequently, her work has been juried in many group exhibitions from New York City to Los Angeles. Her photographs have been commissioned for book covers, and her work is in several private collections. Donna was recently invited to represent New Jersey women artists in a public art project titled Her Flag ([www.herflag.com](http://www.herflag.com)), which will exhibit at the state capital in 2020.

Her two documentaries, Leave No Soldier and The Mourning After, tell the stories of U.S. veterans as they explore and share the impact of P.T.S.D. on their lives and the role of community in their "coming home." Leave No Soldier was featured at the Rhode Island International Film Festival and was the winner of a Director's Award in 2008. The Mourning After was published by Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing as a recipient of a video grant and was awarded a Gradiva Award in 2017. As an author, she has published several books and journals in the areas of gender, motherhood, community activism, mourning, and the use of the arts as a witness to trauma.

Donna is an adjunct Clinical Assistant Professor at New York University's Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. She is a co-founder and past president of the board for Frontline Arts, whose mission is connecting and building community through socially-engaging art practices.

Currently, she is working on two new series, As I Am My Witness and Pilgrimage. Donna's work can be seen on her website: <http://www.donnabassin.com>, <https://www.facebook.com/donna.bassin.3>, and <http://www.instagram.com/p1nhole>

#### I AM MY OWN WITNESS



*“When I left my country for the U.S. six years ago for my education, I thought I would be leaving behind the rampant killing of others solely based upon the difference of ethnicity. Unfortunately, the nightmare I experienced back home has become powerfully pervasive here in the U.S. I am looking forward to a future where humans are just seen as human and not diminished or exalted by skin color, religion, gender, or the race they are born into or choose to practice.”*

*Anonymous*

## ARTIST STATEMENT - I AM MY OWN WITNESS

*As a photographer who is also a practicing psychoanalyst, my photographic work has always centered on the ability of art to address trauma and loss. After the 2016 presidential election, I embarked on an ongoing series of photographic portraits entitled I Am My Own Witness to artistically address the profound and destructive personal and societal pain I encountered all around me.*

*Each week I invite people to come to my studio to explore their experience of this postelection world. These sitters reflect every demographic: young, old, gay, straight, trans, black, white, immigrant, citizen, rich and poor. Their stories and the ways that they express them visually are individual but the desire to be seen and heard is universal.*

*What results is an intimate photographic collaboration in which I function as both photographer and analyst. Through varying poses, gestures, and use of props and costumes, I challenge the sitters to bear witness as I use my camera lens to give voice to their expressions. While the black background that all these portraits utilize creates a shared frame aesthetic, what appears in that frame is always powerfully unique. Some sitters explore feelings of profound vulnerability or helplessness. Some use this experience to assert and express identities increasingly being suppressed by the outside world. Others uncover ferocious strength they did not know they had as they look anger and hatred in the eye.*

*This series is an expression of both my artistic and analytic work and is informed by my personal history including the tragic death of my younger sister in childhood, my work at Ground Zero following 9/11 and my interest in social issues.*

*Inspired by French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas' observation that the portrait invites a face-to-face relationship between portrait sitter and viewer, my hope is that these images and the stories they express will move viewers from bystander to active witness in what I believe must be our collective and ongoing fight for social justice.*



*“I am holding in my skirt a bounty of dolls representing children deprived of childhood and adults deprived of hope. All gathered in my skirt seeking safety. I want to protect them from a world that preys on their vulnerability. But they are content to be the cushion between me and the threat to humanity I feel from this precarious time in which we now live.”*

**Philemona Williamson**

## I AM MY OWN WITNESS



*"Knowing that I'm not one of those lucky humans whom the camera seems to 'like', I wanted to confront my own self-conscious discomfort, by preparing, if necessary, to disrobe completely -- to remove anything that could serve as a disguise. I also wanted to include pieces my blown glass -- like me, not photogenic, but as priceless as if they were my own children. I was drawn to the black mesh, because, as in a favorite fairy tale, it both covers and reveals -- I could become less a person, and more like a three-dimensional graph of a person. By the way, if there is such a thing as reincarnation, I'd like to come back as a geometric theorem."*

**Walter Zimmerman**





*“When we look at these old wedding portraits, happiness comes to mind. In both of our cases, we used to think we could never attain that same “happiness.” Now, we share the lingering fear of “who can we really trust?” The thought of having to temporarily remain in the closet as a married couple despite the changed laws, just to avoid inciting hatred in the wrong person, is enough to bring us back to thinking that the “happiness” we thought we finally had is still beyond our reach.”*

**Chad Mooney & James Chwalyk, Jr.**



*“The resulting images remind me of how a lot of young girls and boys go through the same identity crisis growing up. I’m not seen as an American because of my skin tone and I’m not a Mexican in my family’s homeland because I was not born there. I’m proud to be Mexican American, I however long for the day everyone realizes there’s only one race with many beliefs.”*

**Dulce Avila Romero**





*"I am 93 years old. My body is falling apart but my mind is strong. I am the last of my personal generation to be alive. My husband and brother both served in WW2. My husband helped to liberate a concentration camp. We believed war would be over at the time and the sacrifices we made would allow for a future better world."*

**Estelle Bassin**



*“For me the project spoke to what it meant to be of mixed ethnicity in America. From the moment I arrived in this country at 5 years old I was teased relentlessly for not knowing English and for having a foreign name. Growing up I was always connected to being Nicaraguan, being Japanese, being Black, connected to these cultures equally but often I was put in a box. I couldn’t be all of these I had to choose or the choice would be made for me. Most of the time I was just a “Spanish” kid or a “Black” kid, I suppose because my physical traits weren’t overwhelmingly Asian. I’ve grown up dealing with racial stereotyping and racial slurs, I’ve grown up living the Black experience while simultaneously living the Brown experience all while feeling equally Asian. I feel that society has tried to make me choose a side, a culture and even if I were to do so I would never be accepted because I wasn’t Hispanic enough or black enough or Asian enough. What I have learned though is I am enough, I am enough of everything I am to be accepted, my people love me and as much as society wants me to choose I will never. I will continue to represent every part of me and I will continue to break out of every box I am put in until they see me for who I am!”*

**Jorge Torres**

## I AM MY OWN WITNESS



*“My name is Ron EA Powell; my Jamaican parents gave me those initials as a symbol of you reap what you sow. I feel that I express myself and my emotions through my art. Reflecting on the current events and ongoing tensions in our world today, I believe we need to put aside our ego and admit that something is wrong. It may be an issue so simplistic to the core, yet we need to address it together. My self-portrait oil painting entitled, ‘torn’ reflects the theme and emotions I feel...resistance.”*

**Ron Powell**



*“Living in America has been a bittersweet experience for me. I hate the lack of opportunities and the lack of freedom here in the U.S. Being a black American Muslim I have experienced many unfair and unjust things- being denied jobs because of my race and religion and being profiled by the police. Every day I fight that struggle, constantly trying to prove to the world and society that I am not the “stereotype”. Although it is a tiring battle I refuse to give up the fight. My ancestors before me didn’t and neither will I.”*

**Sufiyyah Abdul-Baasit**

I AM MY OWN WITNESS



*"No comment."*

**Messiah Webb**

# Donna Bassin

## Photography and Film

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### Education

PRATT Institute  
International Center of Photography

### Professional Affiliations

New Jersey Combat Paper Project and Frontline Arts  
Assistant Professor of Art Therapy, PRATT Institute

### Solo Exhibitions

2004 *Playing Around*, Pierro Gallery, South Orange, NJ  
*Memories: Ascending/Descending*, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ

2003 *The Afterlife of Dolls*, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ

### Group Exhibitions

2019 *Little by Little*, Art Intersection, Gilbert, AZ  
*State of the Art 2019*, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ  
*Contemporary Portraiture: To See Each Other*, Passaic County Arts Center, Hawthorne, NJ  
*ViewPoints 2019*, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ

2018 *Armistice Day 2018*, Puffin Cultural Forum - Frontline Arts, Teaneck, NJ  
*Call & Response: The Art of Listening*, 1978 Maplewood Arts Center, Maplewood, NJ  
*Natural Encounters*, N.Y. Photo Curator - Global Photography Awards  
*Viewpoints 2018*, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ

2017 *Art Connections 13*, George Segal Gallery, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ  
*Street Photography*, Blank Wall Gallery, Athens, Greece

2016 *Trois Poissons in a Big See*, Sterling Sound, New York, NY  
*Viewpoints 2016*, Aljira: a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ  
*Art Connections 12*, George Segal Gallery, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

2015 *Mirrors of the Mind 4: The Psychotherapist as Artist*, Art Share LA, Los Angeles, CA

2008 *The Spontaneous Gesture Realized*, The Rubelle and Norman Shafler Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

2007 *Shame*, Redsaw Gallery, Newark, NJ

2006 *Oh You Beautiful Doll*, Andrea Meislin Gallery, New York, NY

2005 *Exposed*, Pierro Gallery, South Orange, NJ  
*Truth*, Gallery 214, Montclair, New Jersey  
*Almost Human: Dolls and Robots in Contemporary Art*, Hunterdon Art Museum, Clinton, NJ

2003 *Three Twins*, The Arts Guild of Rahway, Rahway, NJ  
*Time, Light, Space*, New Century Artist, New York, NY  
*ArtSpace*, Montclair, NJ



*Stebbins Gallery, Cambridge, MA*

**2002**      *Into the Light*, Photo District Gallery, New York, NY

## Film and Video

**2016 - 2015**    *The Mourning After*, Documentary, PEP Video

**2014**            *Leave No Soldier (edited)*, Documentary. Director and Producer. (R.T 53 minutes)

**2008**            *Leave No Soldier*, Documentary. Director and Producer. ShrinkWrap Productions. (R.T 83 minutes)  
Screenings include: Film Festivals (See awards), The International Federation For Psychoanalytic Education, The Stephen Mitchell Center for Relational Psychoanalysis in conjunction with the Creative Arts Therapy Graduate Program at Pratt Institute, The American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work National Conference, The Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis, The American Psychological Association Division 39 Spring Conference, IARPP International Conference in Tel Aviv and The Chicago Association for Psychoanalytic Psychology

**2004**            *Dollhouse*, Recipient of Experimental Television Center Finishing Fund Grant

**2003**            *Dollumentary: The Origins of Dolls*, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ

**1978**            *Buddy and the Monster: A Children's Orientation to Psychiatric Hospitalization*

## Awards and Grants

**2018**            Honorable Mention for Segregation and Human Rights in the *12<sup>th</sup> Julia Margaret Cameron Award*, Photography Gala Awards

**2017**            NAAP Gradiva Award for "The Mourning After"

**2014**            Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing, Video Grant for "The Mourning After"

**2008**            *Leave No Soldier*, Director/Producer. Documentary. Official Selection of the Rhode Island International Film Festival, The Big Muddy, New Filmmakers Festival, Best Director at the First Glance Film Festival and Merit award at the Accolade Film Festival

**2007**            The American Psychological Association, Division 39 Section IX Achievement Award

**2005**            The National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis, Gradiva Award for Artwork Contributions to Psychoanalysis

**2004**            New Jersey Council of the Arts Featured Artist of the Month: January  
Pratt Institute, Development Grant  
Roy W. Dean Film & Video Grant: Finalist, "The Mourning After"  
Experimental Television Center Ltd., Finishing Funds for "Dollhouse"

**2003**            Mental Health Association in New Jersey, Gold Bell Leadership Award for Contributions to Mental Health Through the Arts Catalogues and Publications

## Selected Lectures

- 2015 The Emerging Veterans Art Movement, NYU, New York, NY
- 2007 Soho Photo Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 Images of Memorial Activity, Memory, Memorials and Collective Working Through Conference New York Freudian Society, New York, NY
- 2003 The Art of Traumatic Mourning. Third Annual Conference Five New York Societies of the International Psychoanalytic Association
- 2000 Pratt Institute, Development Grant

## Book and Magazine Reproductions

- 2018 “We the People: Portraits of Resistance and America Reconstructed.” Featured photographs by Donna Bassin from series *Here I Am: Portraits of Resistance*, Psychoanalytic Review, 105(6), December 2018. Ed. Douglas F. Maxwell.  
“Gorillas.8” Featured photograph for ‘So Zoo Me, a photo narrative’ by Mark Blickley in *Event Horizon*, Issue 5, 2018  
“Reflection.5” Cover photograph for *Decentering Relational Theory: A Comparative Critique (Relational Perspectives Book Series)*, eds. L. Aron, S. Grand and J. Slochower, Routledge Press  
“Reflection.4” Cover photograph for *De-Idealizing Relational Theory: A Critique from Within (Relational Perspectives Book Series)*, eds. L. Aron, S. Grand and J. Slochower, Routledge Press
- 2014 “Hand” Cover photograph for *Holding and Psychoanalysis second edition*, J. Slochower, Routledge Press
- 2013 “Waves” Cover photograph for *Psychoanalytic Collisions, second edition*, J. Slochower, Routledge Press
- 2005 “Inside Dolly: A Still Live Revisited.” *Almost Human: Dolls and Robots in Contemporary Art*. Hunterdon Art Museum, Clinton, NJ
- 2004 “The Afterlife of Dolls.” Catalogue by Mary Birmingham. The Montclair Museum of Art, Montclair, NJ
- 2002 “Listening to Laurie”, Cover photograph for *Being and Doing: Essays on Gender*, ed. D. Franco, Ph.D., Mental Health Resources

## Selected Interviews

- 2015 Fog of War, State of the Arts, NJN TV
- 2005 “Childhood”, State of the Arts. NJN Public Television. Featured Artist
- 2003 “Therapist’s Imagery: Psychoanalyst Uses Dolls to Explore Relationships.” The Star Ledger, December 5, 2003
- 2002 “Review of Donna Bassin’s Work.” The Montclair Times. Montclair, NJ