

THE BED AS OBJECT AND METAPHOR

by

HEATHER COMPARETTO
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master in Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Art and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2012

Major Professor: Carla Poindexter

©2012 Heather Comparetto

ABSTRACT

This series of work explores the nature of the bed as object and metaphor. The bed is an object where an action, such as thinking and laying awake takes place. In a metaphorical sense, the bed in my work represents moods and emotions that are psychologically tied to the bed.

In this body of work I explore the relationship between the person and the bed. The bed represents not only an intimate space, but also a hiding place of retreat and self-imposed alienation. This series pulls from personal experience, influences such as Alison Brady and Sophie Callie, and select films that focus on the problems, issues, and decisions of the human condition.

In my work I bring together formal qualities and conceptual content to create juxtaposition between beauty and mood. I am interested in visual poetry and formalism in photographs. Throughout all the photographic work I have created, I focus on using existing light and composing an image intuitively.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	v
INTRODUCTION	1
INDIVIDUAL CREATIVE PROCESS.....	6
The Why.....	7
The Technical.....	7
When It Comes Together	7
THE BED AS OBJECT AND METEPHOR SERIES	9
Process	10
Concept	13
Formalism and Aesthetics.....	17
INFLUENCES	20
Alison Brady.....	20
Sophie Calle.....	23
Doug Aitken.....	25
FILM AS INFLUENCE.....	27
Kate Winslet in Revolutionary Road	27
Natalie Portman in Closer.....	28
Kirstin Dunst in Virgin Suicides.....	29
CONCLUSION.....	31
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	32

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photo by Author, 2011	1
Figure 2: Untitled, Underwater Series, Photograph by Author, 2009	2
Figure 3: Untitled, Underwater Series, Photograph by Author, 2009	3
Figure 4: Untitled, Windows and Reflections Series, Photograph by Author, 2011	4
Figure 5: Untitled, Windows and Reflections Series, Photograph by Author, 2011	5
Figure 6: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011	10
Figure 7: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011	11
Figure 8: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor, Photograph by Author, 2011	12
Figure 9: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012	13
Figure 10: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012	14
Figure 11: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011	15
Figure 12: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012	15
Figure 13: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012	16
Figure 14: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011	17
Figure 15: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor, Photograph by Author, 2011	18
Figure 16: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012	19
Figure 17: Photograph by Alison Brady	20
Figure 18: Photograph by Alison Brady	22
Figure 19: The Sleepers, Photograph by Sophie Calle, 1979	23
Figure 20: Gloria K - 1st Sleeper, Photograph by Sophie Calle, 1979	24
Figure 21: Installation view of Sleepwalkers by Doug Aitken, 2007	25

Figure 22: Still Image from Revolutionary Road	28
Figure 23: Still Image from Closer	29
Figure 24: Still Image from The Virgin Suicides	30

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photo by Author, 2011

My photographic research has shifted focus to an intimate and personal series focusing on the bed; an example is seen in figure 1. Until recently, for the most part, I left my personal life out of my artistic practice, making images I felt were separate from it. My first series involved creating and distorting underwater figures, which represented my interest in a surreal world that questioned ideas of our perception. Figures 2 and 3 show an example of this underwater series.



Figure 2: Untitled, Underwater Series, Photograph by Author, 2009



Figure 3: Untitled, Underwater Series, Photograph by Author, 2009

From that large body of underwater images, I moved on to a street style of photography, capturing melancholy and illusive moments in the world around me from the point of view of a voyeur, who was impeded by barriers which created a distorted reality of light and form. During this time, I photographed through windows from interior space, as seen in figure 4, and reflective surfaces as seen in figure 5.



Figure 4: Untitled, Windows and Reflections Series, Photograph by Author, 2011



Figure 5: Untitled, Windows and Reflections Series, Photograph by Author, 2011

Now, I have explored and given deep thought to how my creative process works, what led me to create this new series, and how personal experiences inform this new body of work on the nature of the bed as object and metaphor.

INDIVIDUAL CREATIVE PROCESS

My process in making art has always been: do first, think later. I rarely have a specific end result in mind. The work comes first, and the development of concept progresses as the work progresses. Henri Cartier-Bresson invented the term “the decisive moment” in photography. The decisive moment, defined by Bresson is outlined in the book *Photography, A Cultural History* as “the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms which gives that event proper expression”. I believe that the decisive moment in essence, is about capturing the precise moment when form, light, composition, and color come together to make an image.

Throughout my work I have utilized the idea of this decisive moment to create photographs intuitively, using the surrounding environment and what light is available. In the underwater series the models were given very little instruction; they were told to jump, move, or swim. While I was underwater with my camera, I would continually photograph until there would be that “ah ha” moment when light, form, and color came together to create the right juxtaposition – this is the decisive moment.

In the body of work that focused on windows and reflective surfaces, the decisive moment was used more intensely. I inserted myself into an environment that would lend itself for opportunity to capture moments that seemed to happen on their own. By allowing myself to be present and aware, I used snapshot aesthetic and the decisive moment approach to photograph melancholy and illusive moments that were around me in the outside world.

In this new body of work on the bed as object and metaphor, the decisive moment is used in the way that it was in the underwater series. When models are used, they are given little

instruction. Based on the quality of light and composed forms, there is a moment that comes together when light, form, and color create the image.

The Why

Photography is the one thing that has always come naturally to me; when I became interested in photography it just worked for me. I found that I had a strong eye for composition and could design a well-arranged image. I was very interested in the immediacy of photography, and the idea of being able to capture something before it was gone.

I was never sure of one specific intrinsic reason why I would make the photographs I made, only that I felt a need to do it. Creating art comes from a subconscious place and is a means of exploring. This is the compulsion that has driven me to make photographs.

The Technical

From a technical standpoint, the camera in my work is used as just a tool. I am most interested in composition and concept. I'm a believer in making a good image without the latest technology in photography. The best technology can certainly help, but I place more emphasis on the actual moment happening within a frame. My images are shot full frame, and importance is placed on composing the photograph within the camera using the nuances of light, color, texture, and form.

When It Comes Together

There is a certain moment when my artwork starts to make sense to me; it takes place in the editing process. The editing process is when photographs are transferred from the camera to

the computer, this is when images are carefully looked at and selected. I can start to imagine what size they should be and what kind of impact they should have.

The correct size is important in my work; typically the work is printed very large at 30 by 40 inches. I prefer the viewer feel somewhat encompassed by the photograph, but not be completely overwhelmed by it.

THE BED AS OBJECT AND METEPHOR SERIES

The idea of photographing beds began as a natural progression from my work that focuses on interior views from a window. One body of work grows from another. In the series with emphasis on the windows, the photographs are taken from the point of view of a person on the inside of a space looking outward. In this series that focuses on the bed as object and metaphor, the point of view shifts from looking to the outside world, to looking inside one's self.

In *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since the 1960's*, John Szarkowski discusses the premise that photography can fall into two different metaphors. These are the two metaphors that Szarkowski defines: "In metaphorical terms, the photograph is seen either as a *mirror* – a romantic expression of the photographer's sensibility as it projects itself on the things and sights of this world: or a *window* – through which the exterior world is explored in all its presence and reality".

Considering these concepts in my work, I see the former series with windows and reflective surfaces as the window metaphor described by Szarkowski. I sought to photograph melancholy and illusive moments in the exterior world around me, and explored what was present. In this series on the bed, the work has shifted to the metaphor of the mirror, focusing on looking inside one's self to uncover feelings of depression and alienation.

Process

In the very beginning of this work, I was first interested in formal qualities of the photographs. I was attracted to the way the light coming in from windows lit the bed, and the way the sheets and blankets took form, this is shown in figure 6. This became the essential starting point from which I began to explore the relationship between the person and the bed.

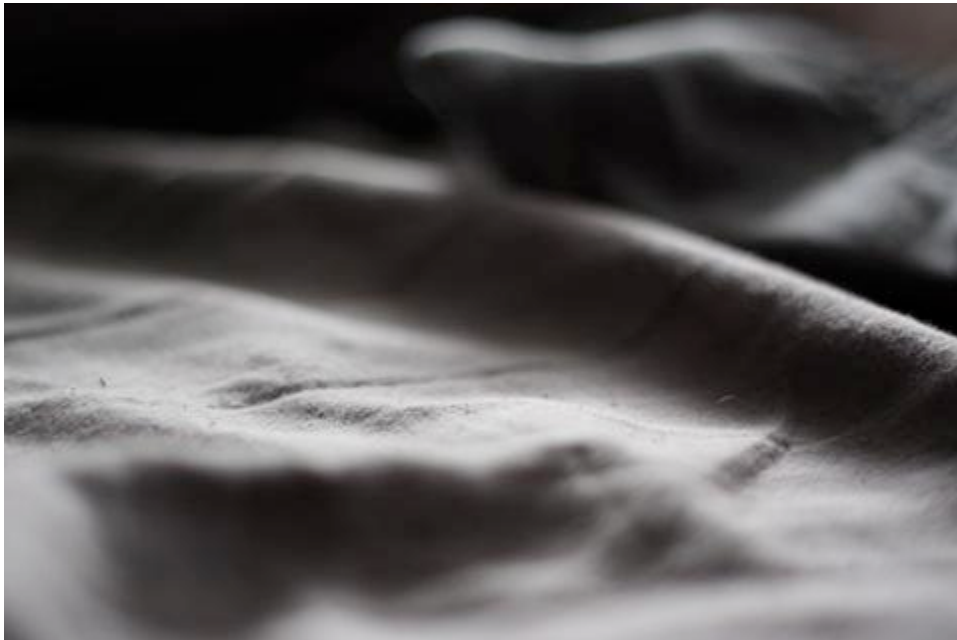


Figure 6: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011

The process in this series is the same as in all of the other series I have created, which has been to start working from the stand point of an educated anchor of intuition allowing the concept to fully unfold as I continued. I started photographing in my own room; I photographed my bed from different angles and perspectives. I would lie on my bed and photograph what I often stared at or through, the window and the walls. After photographing my own space, I went

on to photograph other people's personal spaces. In these images I focused on the bed, and the view from the bed. When I looked through these images there was something that struck me, a certain loneliness or emptiness, which can be perceived in figure 7.



Figure 7: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011

After photographing the empty bed, this series contained numerous images that started to appear repetitive, as indicated in figures 7 and 8. While I felt these photographs were visually beautiful, I wanted to add more visual interest and psychological weight to the series.



Figure 8: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor, Photograph by Author, 2011

The figure, specifically the female figure, was introduced into some of the photographs to push the concept further. When I proceeded to a shoot, I first photographed the bed from many angles throughout the room. Then, I photographed a female figure in the bed. It's important that the figure doesn't look contrived. The model is asked to find a position that is comfortable and she is asked to keep her eyes open. The model is then photographed with an emphasis on natural light flowing into the room from the exterior windows; as indicated in figure 9.



Figure 9: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012

Concept

As the bed series evolved, consideration was given to what it meant to me personally, and what it was intended to reveal and portray. At first, I was simply interested in the bed conceptually as a highly intimate and personal space. Things happen in beds – sex, restless nights, dreaming, conversations, the hazy start of a day, and long afternoons. I thought about the bed and how normally it represents a place of comfort, retreat, intimacy, and rest. However, I realized I was photographing beds for a different reason. I see the bed as a place to be alone, to focus on inward thought, to hide, and a secure place of self-imposed alienation and depression. This body of work is meant to portray a sensation of loneliness, emptiness, and mood. In this series, the bed represents and acts as a metaphor for each of these feelings.

All the images in this body of work are taken in the afternoon. This is the time of day that I find to be most depressing to be alone in bed. This concept is suggested in figure 10.



Figure 10: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012

In the images that are devoid of a figure, I feel that the absence shown combined with the formal qualities of light, form, and shadow contribute to the portrayal of mood, emptiness, and loneliness. In these images the absence is deliberate, these photographs are taken from the viewpoint of either lying on the bed or standing very close to the bed, this is represented in figures 11 and 12 below.



Figure 11: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011

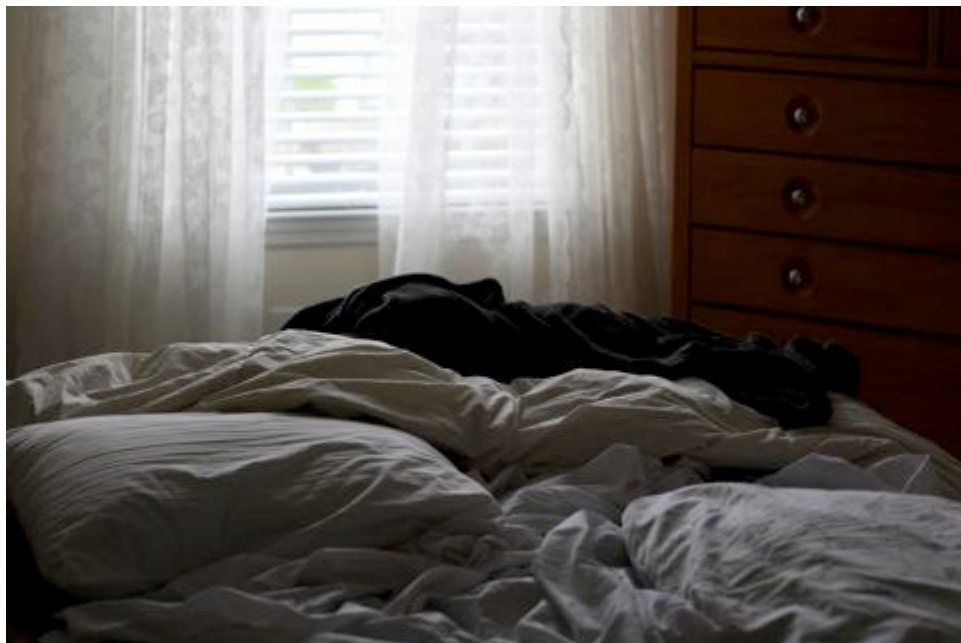


Figure 12: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012

Many of the images from this series are of women alone in their beds. I use women because I can relate to them, so the work is slightly representational. The work is not about the actual person I am photographing, but the portrayal of the bed as a place to experience inward thought, depression, and self-imposed alienation. These images that I am presenting of women alone in bed during the afternoon are essential to my concept. Certain images that show the female figure gazing outwards, represent and portray disengagement from the outside world. This concept is portrayed in figure 13. In this image the woman is looking outward, but confined to the bed.



Figure 13: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012

In the images that show the figure completely turned away, as seen in figure 14, the same concept of disengagement and self-imposed alienation is present. The figure in the bed could be asleep or awake, but the act of being in the bed in the afternoon is still prominent.



Figure 14: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2011

Formalism and Aesthetics

Formalism has been the most obvious common thread throughout my work. As a photographer, I have a compulsion to create something visually beautiful. In *Art in Theory: 1815-1900 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, there is a section where Maurice Denis describes the importance of formalism with this simple statement: “We should remember that a picture - before being a war horse, a nude woman, or telling some other some story - is essentially a flat surface covered in colours arranged in a particular pattern”. Denis is referring to the fact that

formal matter in art it is what makes the piece, art. Formal qualities in artwork are essential, it is what makes the work physically attractive. Content although important is quite simply, the information presented.

Emphasis in my work has been placed on using natural light, texture, and color to create an image that brings together aesthetics and content, this is shown in figure 15.



Figure 15: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor, Photograph by Author, 2011

Formalism and concept in this series on the bed as object and metaphor are used together to create juxtaposition between beauty and mood. In this series, afternoon light is used in every image. The quality of afternoon light is soft and optimal to achieve the subtle color as shown in these photographs. A lens with soft focus is used to create the hazy blur that gives an image an ethereal feel, as shown in figure 16.



Figure 16: Untitled, The Bed as Object and Metaphor Series, Photograph by Author, 2012

Composition in my work is utilized by implementing very basic knowledge of design theory. Line is used to draw the eye to a specific spot where the subject of the photograph is. Color is used subtly, with warm hues to be inviting. Shape is used to create soft forms.

These photographs are taken with a camera and composed in full frame, there is no cropping in post editing. As a photographer I'm interested in immediacy and fully composing an image with light and form within the camera.

INFLUENCES

While there are many artists who have used the bed as subject matter and metaphor, the influences I have chosen to focus on are artists' careers that I have long followed. The films that I have chosen are ones that I have watched repeatedly.

Alison Brady



Figure 17: Photograph by Alison Brady

Alison Brady is an artist whose work has always resonated with me. When I look at her work I am drawn to the way she focuses on using, distorting, and manipulating the human figure to convey a feeling of anxiety, anguish and displacement; this is shown in figure 17.

Alison Brady states that her work is “a series of color photographs that work to stimulate unconscious emotions, desires, and sexual compulsions, all unified within a dynamic that vacillates between the real and the fantasized. I explore issues related to madness and alienation as they exist in contemporary culture, concentrating on expressions of neurosis, on feelings of anxiety, displacement, and loss of identity”.

Allison Brady and I have similar concepts, and obviously very different ways of portraying them. Brady talks about conveying feelings of alienation, anxiety, and displacement. In Brady’s work this is done quite literally with imagery as you can see in figures 17 and 18. Figures faces are hidden or very blatantly concealed in a violent manner to elicit the emotions that Brady addresses.

In the bed series, I discuss and portray similar feelings such as depression and alienation. In comparison, Alison Brady’s’ images are more involved and direct than mine. The images in my series on the bed embrace a simple beauty, and forms are presented in a softer manner to display similar feelings of alienation, displacement, and anxiety.



Figure 18: Photograph by Alison Brady

Sophie Calle



Figure 19: The Sleepers, Photograph by Sophie Calle, 1979

Sophie Calle’s work has always interested me because of the way she integrates her personal life into her art. I am attracted to how she explores human desire and alienation. Her project that I find most relatable to my series on the bed is called “The Sleepers”, as seen in figure 19. In this series Sophie Calle invited guests to stay in her bed for 8 hours at a time. Here she photographically documented the sleeping people as they laid awake, slept, and woke up. The end installation resulted in 173 photographs.

Calle’s work seems to be detached and voyeuristic, it seems to me that she is more interested in the documentation of the sleepers, in talking to them, in looking at them, and in

photographing them. Her style seems to be more documentary in the sense that she is being the voyeur, and attempting to capture these moods, feelings and vulnerable moments in other individuals, as seen in figure 20.



Figure 20: Gloria K - 1st Sleeper, Photograph by Sophie Calle, 1979

Our work is similar in that it is focused on using the bed as a metaphor in order to explore feelings and emotions. Calle's series as previously stated has a voyeuristic and documentary approach. My work is represented in a less documentary way, and more formally. My work

could be considered voyeuristic when considering its raw point of view. When I am photographing I do not intend to be voyeuristic. However, the end photograph may result in an image that may appear voyeuristic allowing the viewer of the work to feel like a voyeur.

Doug Aitken



Figure 21: Installation view of Sleepwalkers by Doug Aitken, 2007

Doug Aitken made a video installation called “sleepwalkers” as seen in figure 21. This project was projected on the outside walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Aitken used five different people in this project, and made an installation that focused on the people as they sleep, wake up, and go about their day. The installation is interesting because it’s not one continuous video; the narration is broken apart with no real beginning or end, making it appear to be a series of moving images.

I am most attracted to the parts of the video that are focused on the person in the bed, and the blurred moments between sleeping and waking. This project is more about the people in relation to their busy urban environment, but I find it relatable in my bed series because it is dealing with human existence and a relationship with the outside world. These individuals in the video are seen alone in their bed, and alone as they go out and face the world separately.

I'm attracted to the scale in this project; projection lends itself to a larger than life size. In the bed series, the images aren't projected but are printed rather large to offer a similar feeling.

FILM AS INFLUENCE

Film is closely related to photography. I've been interested in Psychological dramas that focus on the problems, issues, and decisions of the human condition, the madness it causes internally, and the feelings of depression and anxiety it leads to. In each of these films I relate to the push and pull of human existence in women. The stills I have chosen are the ones that immediately stand out in my mind when I think of the given film. In each of these stills, I am attracted to the moment that is happening and the feeling of mood that is portrayed.

Kate Winslet in Revolutionary Road

Kate Winslet's character is a woman who eventually goes insane because she's stifled under the "American Dream". The basic premise of this film is about a couple chasing down happiness and failing to find it in each other, and in the life they have created. In this still, as seen in figure 22, Kate Winslet's character is peering out of the window after giving herself an abortion. What I see in this still is a woman that has gone into deep depression.



Figure 22: Still Image from Revolutionary Road

Natalie Portman in Closer

Natalie Portman's character "Alice" in this film is entangled in a back and forth love affair where she is left repeatedly. In this still Alice is confronting and talking to the other woman that her lover has shown great interest in. The content in this particular part of the film relates back to my series on the bed as object and metaphor, in the way that the image conveys similar emotion and mood that my images do. In figure 23, there is visible sign of emotion and distress. The emotion shown here is very deliberate, but has a similar feel conveyed in my series on the bed.



Figure 23: Still Image from Closer

Kirstin Dunst in Virgin Suicides

Kirstin Dunst's character in this film is a girl named "Lux". Lux is coming out of adolescent innocence and falls subject to depression with the rest of her sisters. In this scene Lux wakes up alone after spending the night in a field with a man she thought was her lover. This still relates back to my series in the respect that it portrays a young woman alone. These stills as seen in figure 24, show a similar reflective mood that my work shows.



Figure 24: Still Image from The Virgin Suicides

CONCLUSION

I am pleased with the results of this thesis body of work. I have produced a body of work that has personal meaning, while staying true to what I am attracted to formally and aesthetically. I feel that I have evolved as an artist and have successfully brought more of myself into my work. I have always preferred to be detached from my artwork keeping it as something that is separate from my personal life, however this entire series is inspired by instances I have experienced in my personal life. This is something that has been uncomfortable but also rewarding. To refer back to the metaphor of windows and mirrors, this new work on the bed as object and metaphor has shifted from the metaphor of the window, and turned inward to the metaphor of the mirror.

I think I have been successful in conveying meaning and emotional relevancy in this body of work. At the heart of it, this body of work is about depression and alienation. All of the images were taken in the afternoon, a moment in the day when a person should probably be anywhere else besides their bed. While the feel of mood may be more blatant in some images and less blatant in others, the body of work as a whole portrays a sense of emptiness, loneliness, and alienation.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- [1] Szarkowski, John. *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978. Print.
- [2] Marien, Mary Warner. "A New Vision." *Photography: A Cultural History*. 2nd ed. London: Laurence King, 2002. 258. Print.
- [3] Harrison, Charles, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger. "Maurice Denis: 'Definition of Neo-Traditionsim.'" *Art in Theory, 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001. 863. Print.
- [4] *Revolutionary Road*. Dir. John Frankenheimer. Perf. Kate Winslet. 2008. Film Still.
- [5] *Closer*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Natalie Portman. 2004. Film Still.
- [6] *The Virgin Suicides*. By Sofia Coppola. Dir. Sofia Coppola. Perf. Kirstin Dunst. 1999. Film Still.
- [7] Calle, Sophie. *Sophie Calle: The Sleepers (Les Dormeurs)*. 1979. Photograph. BAM/PFA. Berkeley Art Museum. Web. 3 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibition/133>>.
- [8] Callie, Sophie. *Gloria K: 1st Sleeper*. Photograph. *Surface to Air*. Web. 3 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.surface-to-air.com/blog/2011/08/the-sleepers/>>.
- [9] *Sleepwalkers*. Photograph. *Coolhunting*. By Doug Aitken. Web. 4 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/sleepwalkers.php>>.
- [10] "Alison Brady." *Alison Brady*. Web. 02 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.alisonbrady.com>>.