



Writer'sBlock
WORKSHOP



Susan Mah



Who's in the Spotlight?



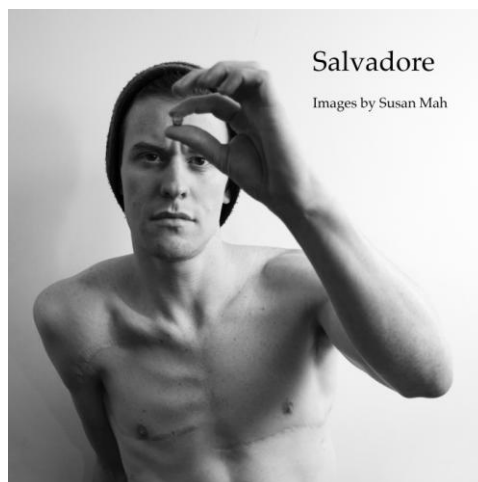
Writer's Block Workshop welcomes Susan Mah and her latest work, **Salvadore**, in which she tells a photographic story of a man suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after violence changes his life.

Susan has a background in clinical social work and psychotherapy with a Master of Social Work degree. She studied photography in Paris and San Francisco, and holds a Master of Fine Arts degree as well.

Here is the official BOOK DESCRIPTION:

This series of images combines both psychological and artistic elements to document the aftermath of a near-death experience. It seeks to explore the ramifications of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is manifested in a variety of trauma victims, not just soldiers. This body of work aims to serve as a resource for trauma survivors and their family members who may be able to identify with Salvadore's struggles.

"The transition from victim to survivor is a long, difficult journey that should be honored and celebrated. I hope this book is a way of doing that."~ Susan Mah



The Interview

Q. Tell us about the book and why you decided to create this project?

A. I decided to create this project because I used to work as a psychotherapist in the mental health field. I noticed that whenever we had a patient who was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), we had no literature to offer him/her. Oftentimes in mental health settings, generic brochures are given to clients regarding depression, anxiety, etc. that feature models posing as people suffering from various disorders. There is no literature available that shows a REAL person talking about his/her REAL-LIFE experience. I thought “Salvadore” could be just that—a real person who survived a near-death experience sharing his story in his own words. I thought that if another person who suffered from PTSD could see the book, he/she might feel less alone, more understood, and more connected to something outside of him/herself.

Q. Why did you choose to work on this with Salvadore?

A. I chose Salvadore because I knew him from work and we were friends on Facebook. As a matter of fact, it was because of a photo of him on Facebook—wherein he lay on a hospital bed with a big, Frankenstein-like scar on his chest—that I learned he had been shot and almost died.

After seeing that image, I reached out to Sal. The therapist inside me wondered if he had developed PTSD as a result of the shooting. I wanted to explore possibly documenting his experience, in the hopes that it would be therapeutic – for him, for me, and for those who would read the book.

Q. How did you get started in photography and what influences your work?

A. The first time I ever really used a camera was during the sixth grade when I took a trip to Washington, DC with my elementary school. To document my vacation with my classmates, my dad let me borrow a tiny little camera of his, reminiscent of one used by James Bond when sneaking into top secrets places! I thoroughly enjoyed taking photos during that trip and took at least a dozen rolls of film. But when I got the prints back from the lab, they all had my finger in them! We both had a good laugh about it, but my dad didn't give up on me. Three years later, after enrolling in a photography class in high school, he bought me a “real” camera and taught me how to shoot manually.

My work is mostly influenced by my former occupation as a psychotherapist. In creating projects as a fine art photographer, my goal has been to merge together my interest in psychology with my passion for photography. In my role as a clinical social worker and in my role as a photographer, I want my work to be meaningful and to have an emotional impact.

Q. Were you formally trained in photography or self-taught?

A. For a long time after high school, I simply shot as a hobbyist, mostly when traveling with my family. However, after working as a therapist for several years, I decided to change career directions and pursue my hobby more seriously. I earned a scholarship to study abroad at Parsons in Paris, then completed my photography studies at the Academy of Art in San Francisco where I earned a Master of Fine Art (MFA).

Q. Do you follow a specific process when you take photos?

A. My process is to first come up with a strong concept that does more than merely entertain. My goal is to create work that can serve a purpose and can help others by providing education, support, understanding, comfort, or insight.

Q. What are the main photography themes in this book?

A. The themes in this story highlight the areas of Salvadore's life, which were negatively impacted by his near-death experience: his vision, motor skills, physical health, musical abilities, social skills, relationships, sense of safety, and mental health.

Q. What makes it different than other photography-based books?

A. What makes this book different than other photography-based books is its focus on mental health. When people think of a typical photography book, what often comes to mind is a beautiful tome that you'd put on your coffee table, like a piece of art. But for me, a good story is more than just beauty. It's something that engages the mind and the spirit, something that demands more from the reader, challenging their preconceived ideas.

Q. What is your favorite photo and what's the story behind it?

A. Difficult question! Oftentimes as a photographer, you will take a photo and feel very strongly about it right afterward. Then as time goes on, you lose those intense feelings about the image and even think: I loved this?!

However, one image of mine that I continue to love is the first image shown on my website in the "Memphis Faces" series: <http://susan-mah.squarespace.com/memphis-faces-project/>

I was born and raised in Memphis, TN, which is a city that was, and continues to be, fraught with racism. I just love the image of this couple—the pale white wife and the dark black husband, sitting side by side in their arm chairs, like royalty. After having taken the image, what I didn't realize until much later is that they each, unconsciously, put their arms in exactly the same position—a sign of positive body language. I also love how incredibly messy their house is, and how they have absolutely no shame about it. It's like they have this attitude—we are here, as is, and we're not apologizing for it. There is no attempt to keep up appearances. To me, it feels like a validation of self. They are what Memphis should be.

Q. What advice would you give to someone wanting to create their own photographic story?

A. I would advise him or her to think of a concept—something you want to communicate, something you feel passionate about—and share that message through your work. Working in this way is much more challenging, but can be much more rewarding for you and for others.

Q. What projects are you currently working on or planning for the future?

A. The fine art project I'm currently working on is my Loss Project. Started in 2014, the Loss Project is a merging of psychology and photography, an artistic exploration of the human condition, presented in a series of environmental portraits with the theme of loss.

This ongoing project is meant to serve as a form of art therapy on a number of levels. For me, it is a manifestation of my own grief experiences that will, hopefully, over time be a catharsis. For subjects in the portraits, it offers a safe place to process thoughts and emotions about loss in the act of modeling and in receiving their images. For viewers, it is an opportunity to connect with their own sense of loss and grief in a way that is meaningful.

In 2016, the Loss Project found its proper home at HealGrief, a nonprofit based in LA. There, my Loss Project images related to death, along with subjects' stories of their grief, are exhibited in an online gallery. Moreover, there is a call for entries to the public to share imagery about their own losses. In so doing, the Loss Project becomes a therapeutic intervention, so to speak, wherein anyone in the world can share their story, whether or not he or she identifies as an artist.

To learn more about the Loss Project or to share your work in the online gallery, please visit:
<https://healgrief.org/loss-project/>

Susan's photography is amazing... Please check out her work! You can find her at these links:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/susanmahphotography/>

Also on FB: <https://www.facebook.com/thelossproject/>

Website: <http://susan-mah.squarespace.com/>

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/susan-mah-bbb871bb/>

Link to book: <http://amzn.to/2z798vT>

I would like to thank Susan Mah for giving her time, sharing her creations and being a part of the Writer's Block Workshop Indie Author Spotlight. Please check into her work and support your fellow indie author by purchasing her book and sharing this Spotlight with your followers! ~Lynn



Want to be in the Spotlight?

To qualify, you must have a self-published book / e-book for sale with decent reviews and of an appropriate nature. The book can be fiction or non-fiction. Your book will appear on the site with links to your book or sales page for a period of four weeks.

This Spotlight for your book is FREE. I only ask that you share your Spotlight with a link to this blog page with your social communities, as I will do the same. In this way, we support each other as a writing family.

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~Lynn