

## SHEILAH WILSON'S BRAVE IDEAS “Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” — the White Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*

Where do brave ideas—truly brave ideas, the seemingly impossible ideas that house the potential to inform and enlighten—come from? Although they might seem to be the result of scientific exploration, they are in fact its inspiration. And brave ideas are the locus of creative endeavor. Like art, they come from inside, where personal memory and innate understanding are brought to bear on bodily perception, cognition and emotion. But having brave ideas and expressing them are two entirely different things. And this is where art comes in.

Conceptual photographer, installation and performance artist Sheilah Wilson uses ritual and collaboration to uncover the roots of brave ideas. Beyond its intriguing range and superficial beauty, Wilson's work fascinates in that it gives lasting physical form to things that are by their very nature both ephemeral and intangible. Two bodies of work accomplish this goal in particularly poetic fashion: *you are my favorite photograph* and *A line drawn continuously and without looking while you tell your out-of-body experience*. Both series' incorporate collaboration and performance, and both take their final expression in the form of photographs.

In *you are my favorite photograph*, the artist collects from people written memories of their favorite images, and ritualistically sleeps with them pressed against photographic paper and her own body. Overnight the paper is transformed—affected by light, time, and the artist's physical connection to the words describing the image. Upon waking, Wilson-the-Medium becomes Wilson-the-Artist. She processes the latent images bearing abstract forms of the collaborator's channeled memory. Whether or not we interpret the image as an actual document of transmission, it is afforded veracity because we acknowledge it as a photograph. But with no camera or subject before it, its seductive tones are magically created by nothing more than time and light. The photographic objects also hold wrinkles and creases resulting from physical contact, which urge us toward further conjecture. The artist herself states, “It is difficult not to search for forms and reasons in this random imprint of body/intermediary and light on paper.”

In her series *A line drawn continuously and without looking while you tell your out-of-body experience*, Wilson solicited participants who have reported such sensations. The artist asks them to draw a continuous line while they verbally relate their story to her. She then traces the line onto

transparency material, using it as a negative to create an exposure directly onto photographic paper. Like the abstract images in *you are my favorite photograph*, these white lines become the literal manifestation of the teller's intangible experience. The stark lines cut wholly unpredictable trajectories through dense black space, and simultaneously document the teller's discrete parcel of time out-of-body. While full-on accepting this work requires our suspension of disbelief about such spiritual accounts, appreciating its connotations does not. We all experience our physical bodies as vehicles manifesting our ideas; these images remind us that we do not fully understand how, but that the connection between body and mind is significant and inextricable.

In nearly all her work where the artist's objective is to translate what is impalpable into a kind of evidentiary construct, the outcome remains visually abstract. To approach it otherwise would locate us too much in this world, in a position fixed on identifiable image content. But Wilson's use of the photographic image to give form to the unseen is canny due to the tacit implication that something must have been there to be recorded. When we view a photograph we recognize that what's there really isn't there, that what exists is merely an image of what once was. Still, we've all experienced intense mental and emotional connections to something (or someone) we see in a photograph, something removed from us by time and space but that nonetheless feels present. When we view Wilson's work we experience the same feeling, and it begins to blur our definitions of what we can and cannot experience as physically present.

Sheilah Wilson's website is titled, “Brave Ideas,” which likely indicates her feeling about her collaborators' thoughts and experiences, as well as the nature of their transmission. But beyond that the artist's work is itself brave. In an age of trust in technology over our own human physical perception and intuition, Wilson places her trust in the ability of serendipitous exchange to reveal invisible—yet equally real and significant—aspects of our human nature. In doing so she asks us to reject contemporary cynicism, be open to the outcomes of art, and learn to trust in, and even act on, our own brave ideas.

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