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INTERVIEWS

ANDREW MASULLO ON APRIL DAWN ALISON

November 15, 2019 • The artist explains how he recovered a photographer's lifework



April Dawn Allison, *Untitled*, n.d. Photo: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Andrew Masullo.

For many years, a commercial photographer named Alan Schaefer (1941–2008) privately created an extraordinary body of work: a series of over 9,000 Polaroid self-portraits of an exuberant woman known as April Dawn Alison.

While little is known of Alan—neighbors recalled he loved jazz and baseball—April Dawn is well documented in many and various domestic performances: as a French maid, bikini model, bondage partner, and more. Several hundred of these Polaroids are being presented publicly for the first time in an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, organized by curator Erin O’Toole, who also edited a related monograph with contributions by Hilton Als and Zackary Drucker (MACK, 2019). “This was a lifelong artistic endeavor,” notes O’Toole, explaining both the stakes of the practice and the museum’s decision to display the images posthumously. “The act of photography is part of the pictures, too,” she observes, “a working photographer thinking about photography.” But April Dawn would very likely have been lost to history were it not for Andrew Masullo, a San Francisco–based artist and collector with a keen

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eye and sensitive instincts. Here, he shares a personal reflection of finding, holding, and ultimately letting go of the complete known works of April Dawn Alison. —Jordan Stein

APRIL, DAWN, ALISON. Separately, these three names are quite meaningless to me. But when placed in the order you see here and removed of their commas, they explode in my brain, a full-force volcano, blasting not lava, but Polaroids, thousands and thousands of Polaroids—9,245, to be exact.

I once lived with April Dawn Alison's Polaroids. Her photographic triumph was my secret obsession. In one of the few selfless acts of my life, I gave them to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a museum perfect for her needs. SFMoMA loves her photos almost as much as I do, and will care for them and share them with the world. The museum is right across the bay from Oakland, the city April Dawn Alison called home for decades—where, over time, she walled herself off in her two-bedroom apartment and explored her secret inner-self with her best friend, her Polaroid camera.

My history with April Dawn Alison began in 2015. Through an acquaintance, I learned that a late commercial photographer's pictures had been languishing in a warehouse for years and were available for purchase. Thousands of self-portraits shot over a thirty-five-year period had been stuffed into a dozen boxes, each portraying the photographer—who I later learned was Alan Schaefer—as a woman. With my history of collecting practically everything under the sun—especially unique, vernacular photos—these pictures were right up my alley.



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I was shocked the first time I saw the Polaroids in person. I had never seen 9,245 Polaroids all at once. It was a mountain of photos, like the Rock of Gibraltar in my living room. After picking through just a few pictures, I knew I needed to see every single photo in every single box and would never forgive myself if I didn't.

During the next two years, I carefully unearthed April Dawn Alison's visual life. I savored my labor of love and dreaded that future day when I'd reach my final photo. The extravaganza that was April Dawn's wardrobe—outfits, wigs, handbags, high heels, jewelry—made me merrily delirious. While it's clear that April Dawn was committed to being a woman, she loved being many different kinds of women: a vibrant teenager, an elegant matron, a severe librarian, an oppressed worker, a pinup model, a seasoned actress, a mod go-go girl, an S&M babe, a wizened floozy, a French maid. The number of French maid photos alone in the archive is astounding. April Dawn owned at least a half-dozen frilly, French maid costumes and an endless supply of lace gloves, petticoats, and feather dusters.

At the root of her portrayals and their documentation was April Dawn Alison's need to see herself the way others might have seen her had they only been given the chance: She was her own voyeur. What an incredible need she must have had to repeatedly perform the ritual of watching herself emerge from the birth canal of her Polaroid camera. What excitement she must have felt to welcome herself over and over again into the world! On occasion you see April Dawn studying her pictures or holding the developing photos out to the camera, out to an unknown, future audience as if saying, "See? Look! This is me! I'm April Dawn Alison! I really exist! Here's the proof!"



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Her bedroom was the only place in her apartment that was, photographically speaking, verboten. Why, April Dawn—in 9,245 Polaroids—why do we never once see the bed on which you slept? She endlessly posed in her kitchen, dining area, living room, hallway leading to her bedroom, and small balcony. For me, her balcony is the location for some of most fabulous photos. Knowing her penchant for privacy, I marvel at her bravery in stepping out onto her balcony, out into the world, for scores of photo shoots—even in her bikini! Surely, she risked neighbors watching from across the street.

Many of the boxes housing the Polaroids were specially fashioned by April Dawn. She reused the large white boxes in which her Polaroid film packages were shipped. (She bought in bulk, of course.) She covered over printed areas with anything white to make the boxes pure, wordless, her own. In them she placed hundreds of her self-portraits, neatly stacked, each photo shoot carefully separated from the next. On some of the boxes she affixed little slips of paper on which she wrote in red ink—always red ink—brief descriptions of their contents. On one such slip she wrote “April Dawn Avedon.” While perhaps tongue-in-cheek, I see April Dawn’s declaration a primal belief in herself as a photographer and her Polaroids as worthy of a future.

That future was jeopardized after April Dawn’s death, but the care she took in seeing to their welfare saved them. With the contents of her home a cluttered chaos, estate liquidators were hired to toss nearly everything she owned into the trash. They found the boxes perched on shelves in her bedroom, apart from the general bedlam of the apartment. The photographs were spared.

No one in the world ever knew April Dawn Alison. Her life, in the form of the Polaroids she carefully maintained, is our only proof she ever lived. I see April Dawn’s photos in so many kaleidoscopic ways. One is as her Hail Mary pass, notes in a bottle tossed into the ocean. I believe it was April Dawn’s hope that her Polaroids would one day be seen and, in so doing, her existence acknowledged. For the brief time I had her photographs, it was my privilege to have her wish fulfilled.

“April Dawn Alison,” curated by Erin O’Toole, is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through December 1, 2019.