

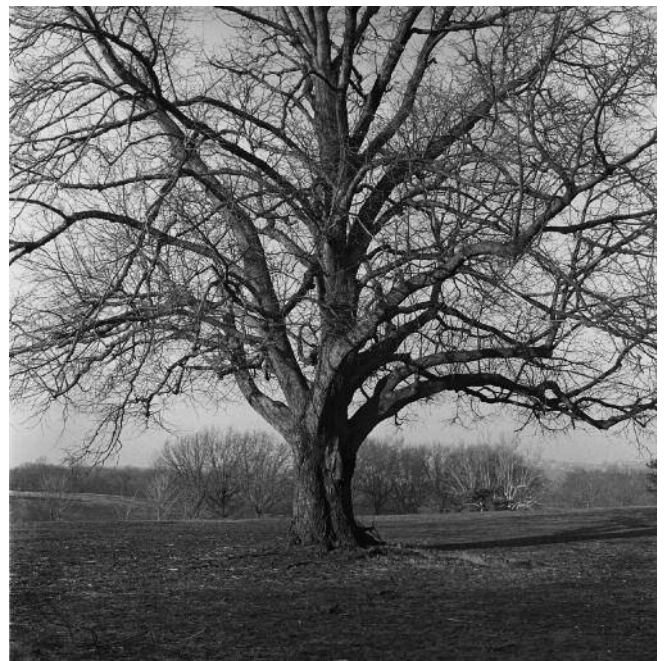
I Thought I Could Fly

I Thought I Could Fly is an exhibition of photographs by Charlee Brodsky, who is guided by an impulse to use her camera to educate and change the world, not to simply record its events. Compelling, persuasive photographs have had the ability to influence public opinion since the invention of photography. It is Brodsky's goal for the photographs in *I Thought I Could Fly* to make a tangible contribution to eliminating stigma surrounding mental illness.

While Brodsky has primarily created a photography exhibition, she does not intend for the photographs to stand alone. The photographs only reach their complete form when paired with first-hand narratives written by individuals who convey their personal experiences with mental illness. The photographs and narratives, which first appeared in Brodsky's book, *I Thought I Could Fly: Portraits of Anger, Compulsion and Despair*, address a wide spectrum of psychiatric disorders and are authored by diverse contributors.

Brodsky veers away from standard documentary photography, which is characterized by candid shots of people in unguarded moments. In *I Thought I Could Fly*, she has carefully composed the photographic images as metaphors that distill and symbolize the essence of the writers' narratives. For example, a photo of a barren tree represents the narrative of a woman who writes that she gained a sense of much-needed consistency by frequently photographing a tree in a park she walked through on her way to therapy appointments; a young woman's pierced belly-button interprets the experience of a mother frustrated by the stormy relationship with her rebellious daughter who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The potency behind these works stems from the synergetic interplay between the narrators' candid voices telling their own stories and the symbolic interpretation of those stories via photographs.

Questioning the often anonymous nature between the photographer and the photographic object, documentary photographer and photojournalist Susan Meiselas comments, "Every picture tells a story and has another story behind it: Who's photographed? Who made it? ... I wonder what we can know of any particular encounter by looking at such a picture today. We have the object, but it exists separated from the narrative of its making."¹ Brodsky cleverly avoids the consequence of the image becoming detached from its origins by adopting creative strategies that illustrate the real stories behind the photograph. Moreover, Brodsky's approach to elucidate the story behind the photo enables contributors to share their experiences with candor, clarity and anonymity.



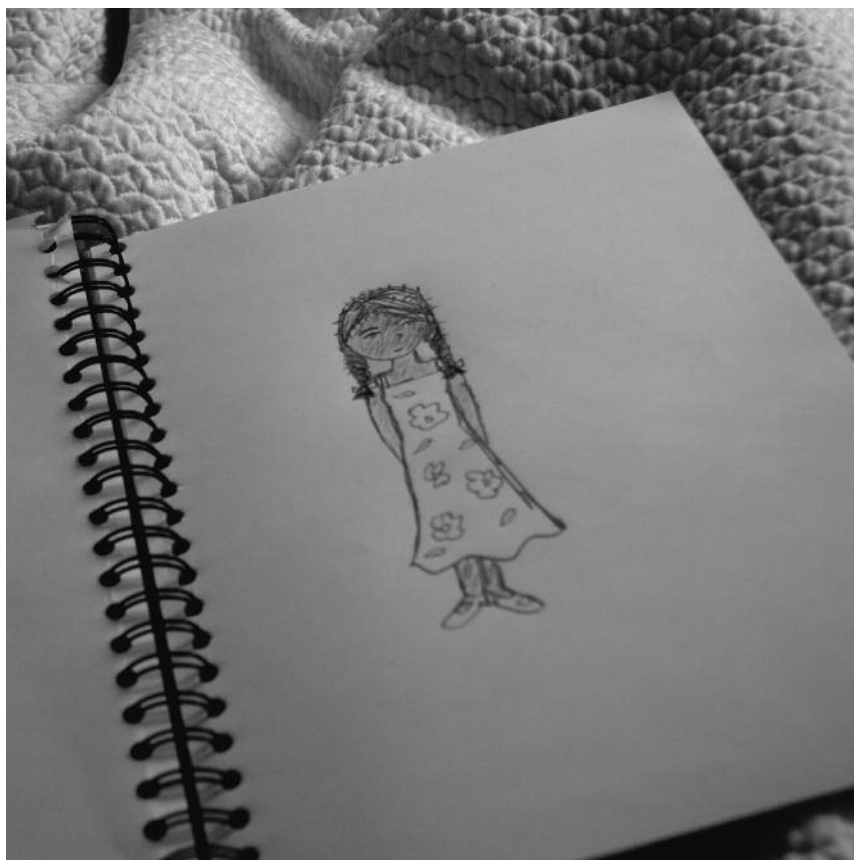
All photos: Charlee Brodsky, Untitled, 2007, courtesy of Bellevue Literary Press.

While all of the conveyed experiences are real, the contributors' identities generally remain anonymous. The unfortunate reality is that stigma surrounding mental illness remains toxic, and the desire to be forthcoming and candid is too often tempered by fear of being unfairly labeled or alienated.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 57.7 million Americans suffer from diagnosable, treatable mental disorders. The United States Department of Health and Human Services claims, however, that fewer than half of those individuals seek treatment. The factors contributing to the jarring disparity between those needing treatment and those who seek it are complex and multifarious. Experts and researchers concur that fear, stigma and lack of awareness rank high among the reasons that deter people from seeking treatment.

Perhaps, as the State of New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma asserts, if the public and experts alike address mental illness as a community, society can embark on an age of enlightenment in mental health. With the right treatment, many people with mental illness can be full participants in society. Hoping to shape ways of seeing and altering public perceptions that might facilitate enlightened attitudes and spur communities to combat stigma, Brodsky impartially reveals that mental health disorders cross all social, racial, cultural, socio-economic and age boundaries and effectively conveys that friends, family members, colleagues and neighbors have no immunity. The narratives affirm that people want to share their experiences with others, be understood, and be part of a dialogue that helps assuage stigmas and fears.

Photography freezes its subjects in place and time. The world evolves and people mature, but the subject in the photograph remains static. A 13-minute documentary film accompanying the exhibition contextualizes and brings to life the stories of five contributors to *I Thought I Could Fly*. They discuss with candor topics surrounding their relationships, treatment, setbacks and achievements. Juxtaposing the narratives from 2007 with the 2009 interviews illustrates where they have been and how they have progressed. No longer anonymous as in the photographs, the



interviewees illuminate their presentness, expose their vulnerability in this complex world, and shed light on what they have learned so far about mental illness.

While Brodsky is impartial about revealing how pervasive mental illness is, she is not neutral about her feelings regarding the prevalence of stigma, originating *I Thought I Could Fly* in 2004 because of her concern that mental illness remains misunderstood and misconstrued. Woven together are two artistic genres of narrative writing and photography to generate a socially responsive body of work. Brodsky sublimates her photographs to the narratives, however, because she is driven by the reciprocity of the experience, the idea that experiences of individuals can be effectively communicated to others via an intermediary and that such communication can lead to greater understanding.

—Melissa Hiller, Director AJM
January 2010

Inspired by her daughter's diagnosis of bipolar disorder and her desire to connect with people and their everyday experiences, Charlee Brodsky uses photographic imagery to bring audiences into the routines of people affected by mental illness. Brodsky's work is exhibited regionally and nationally. She is an author and professor of photography at Carnegie Mellon University.

¹Meiselas, Susan. *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (New York: Random House, 1997), xvi.

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