

Who is



April Dawn Alison?

April Dawn Alison, *Untitled*, n.d.;
San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art. Gift of Andrew Masul-
lo. Courtesy of SFMOMA and MACK

Her Polaroid self-portraits were at once funny, sexual and sad, but who was the 'real' April Dawn Alison? Ahead of the publication of a book dedicated to this San Franciscan original, the title's editor Erin O'Toole pieces together the artist's work spanning four decades, and explains how this posthumous publication is helping promote LGBTQ visibility

Text by Huw Nesbitt

When April Dawn Alison died aged 67 in San Francisco in 2008, no one knew who she was. Since the Seventies, she'd been a recluse, appearing only after work and on weekends to take Polaroid self-portraits in her apartment, dressed up like movie stars, housewives and porn actors. Sometimes she looked goofy, sometimes sad, serious, or sexy, other times hauled-up in bondage gear, but she never strayed from where she lived. For years, April Dawn had harboured a secret: she'd been living a double life. During the day, she was called 'Alan', an ex-military commercial photographer. But at night she was someone else.

This June, a book named after April Dawn will, for the first time, collect some of the 9200 self-portraits she took over four decades, shedding light on her art and her life. Following her death, these images were sold by the manager of her estate (April Dawn was, allegedly, estranged from her family), and were eventually acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)

in 2017, which this July will exhibit them. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Polaroid selfies, in which the artist experimented with cross-dressing, the photos not only function as aesthetic and personal documents but bring to the fore the struggle of LGBTQ people to live openly in society, both then and now.

Whatsmore, had it not been for a chance encounter, these images may still be languishing in obscurity. Having been contacted by a mutual acquaintance of the person who took possession of April Dawn's archive two years ago, the book's editor and SFMOMA curator, Erin O'Toole, immediately realised their value. She subsequently sought to contextualise these shots by publishing them alongside texts by *The New Yorker's* Hilton Als, and LGBTQ activist and producer of the trans comedy *Transparent*, Zackary Drucker. Tackling the ethics of posthumous publication as well as the artistic relevance of these images, O'Toole tells SLEEK why April Dawn's story is worth telling.

This is a very special collection. Have you worked on anything like this before?

No, it's really unique. I've been at SFMOMA for 11 years, and I have never seen anything quite like it. I was blown away by a couple of things. One is that there are over 9000 pictures in the archive, and the other is that this was a project that April Dawn Alison was dedicated to for over 30 years.

How were you able to tell when April took them?

The pictures are undated, so I tried to determine how old they were through the style of the clothing. My best estimate is that she began circa 1970. We know that she passed away in 2008, so she stopped sometime before that.

How would you categorise these photos?

I think the best way to think about them is as a conceptual project. I'm not sure how she would have categorised it, but that's how I see it. She's created this fully realised self that she's documented over the long term. One of the incredible things about it is that we witness her becoming more and more confident and assured as April Dawn over time. At the beginning, there are these very tentative attempts, but then she becomes more comfortable, more fluid. Then in the middle period it becomes this incredibly joyous and energetic embrace of April Dawn.

Were you able to piece together an idea of who April was?

I know quite a bit about her public life as a man, but next to nothing about April Dawn. As far as I can tell, this was a private persona. I've spoken to relatives and friends, and none of them knew about her existence or these pictures. April Dawn was known to them as a man named 'Alan "Al" Schaefer', who was born in the Bronx, worked as a commercial photographer, and learned photography in the military.

How have you reconciled that, ethically, with publishing her photos in a book and an exhibition?

I'm very sensitive to the fact that this work was made for a private

purpose and we don't know if the artist would have wanted them shown. I think that showing the work is the right thing to do, however, because there's currently a lot of tumult surrounding gender, identity and rights for LGBTQ people, and my hope is that this work will contribute positively to the conversation by providing visibility. I knew as soon as I began considering showing the pictures that I needed to engage the community about what it would mean to do so and to get advice about how I should talk about her given I know so little. I've had to consider the consequences of possibly posthumously outing someone as well as what it would mean to not show them. Ultimately, though, when I've shown this work to trans women, in particular, they've been very excited at the prospect of it being shown because visibility for people of non-normative gender identities is so critical to acceptance, and I've taken that seriously.

What was life like for the LGBTQ community in California during April's lifetime?

Everyone knows that there's long been a large and active LGBTQ community in the Bay Area. What I don't know is whether or not April Dawn participated in it. My sense is that she didn't. I've shown the pictures to a great many people who have tried to help me find others who might have known her and found no one, and after conversations with friends and family my feeling is that April Dawn was a private persona. Even today, it's very difficult for trans people to be out in the world. It still isn't safe, despite some improvements, and back in the Seventies it certainly wasn't, so maybe she never felt safe to be April Dawn outside her apartment. I don't know for sure.

Themes of gender and performance recur throughout the history of photography. Do you see April's work responding to that?

I don't know if she was responding to anything in particular, but I see parallels with the work of artists like Claude Cahun, Gillian Waring, Yasumasa Morimura and of course, Cindy Sherman.

Why, as a professional photographer, do you think she chose Polaroids?

There's a long history of people taking private, often sexual, pictures with Polaroids because you don't have to send them to a lab to be developed. It's instant, and there's something special about the quality of them. They're these jewel-like objects and the colours are so beautiful and intense.

What connects these images? Obviously they all feature April, but there are so many different themes and poses.

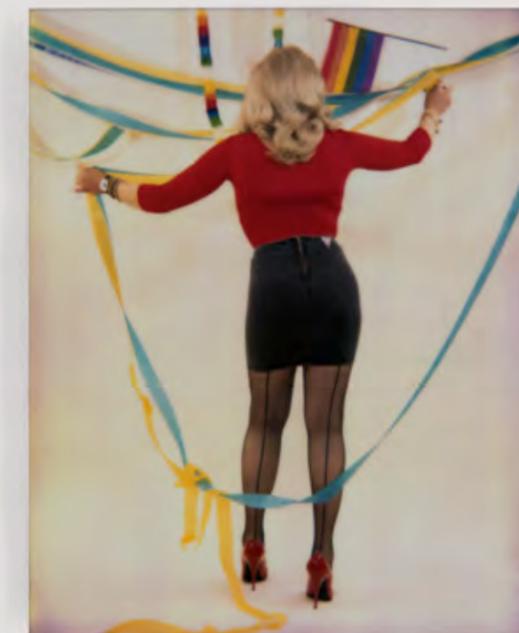
I'd say there are two things. One is the sense of colour. When you see them together, the pictures are just this riot of colour. And then there's the emotional quality. She's bearing her soul to the camera. She's not holding anything back. She's putting herself out there. There's no restraint. There's just pure joy. Sadness. Humour.

Which are your favourite photos?

One of my favourites is one where she looks like Joan Crawford. It has a blue background and she's leaning on the back of this white upholstered chair wearing a bright red sweater. There's something very sweet about the way she lays her head on the edge of the chair. There's also a series where you see her only from the waist down wearing a pencil skirt and red pumps. She's wearing handcuffs and ankle cuffs, and she's striking these bold poses. They look like a Seventies shoe ad by Guy Bourdin. I love those.

There are a few recurring poses, but the one that's most striking is when she turns her back to the camera. What do you think the significance of these images is?

My first read on it was that she wanted to make sure her hair was right. But when I showed them to several trans women, they felt that they showed her how other people might see her in the world. Whether or not that's what she was actually doing, I thought that was a very beautiful way of thinking about them. They are about seeing yourself from another person's perspective.



April Dawn Alison, *Untitled*, n.d.; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Andrew Masullo. Courtesy of SFMOMA and MACK



April Dawn Alison, *Untitled*, n.d.;
San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art. Gift of Andrew Masul-
lo. Courtesy of SFMOMA and MACK

There's a long history of people taking private, often sexual, pictures with Polaroids because you don't have to send them to a lab to be developed. It's private, it's instant, and there's something special about the quality





April Dawn Alison, *Untitled*, n.d.;
San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art, Gift of Andrew Masul-
lo. Courtesy of SFMOMA and MACK

April Dawn Alison, 2019, by Erin
O'Toole (ed.) published by MACK