

# Dissecting a Secret:

An Investigation by Lauren Nowierski

Sp.747 Final Project  
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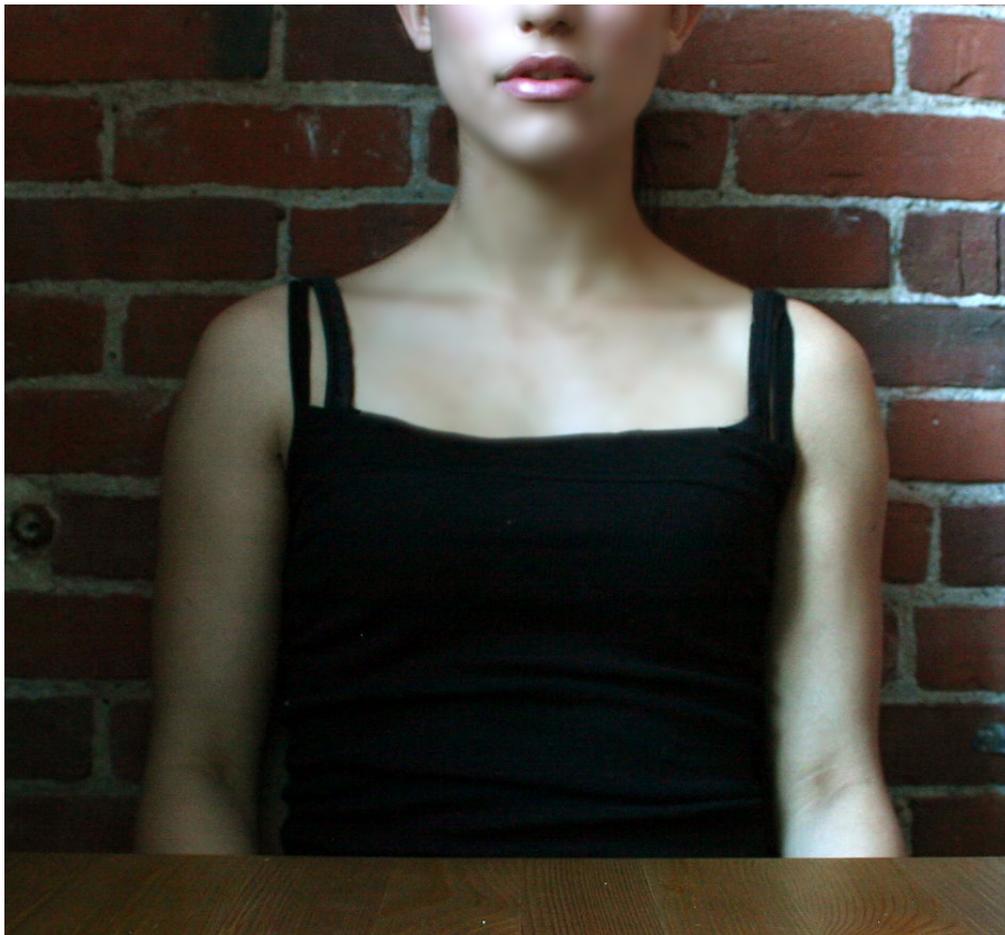
Human nature inherently grants us the capacity to withhold information from others. The great Frank Warren of Postsecret <sup>1</sup> once said "There are two types of secrets: ones we keep from others and ones we keep from ourselves." Keeping that in mind, what exactly is a secret? Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a secret as "something kept hidden or unexplained." <sup>2</sup> But, what exactly does that mean? What exactly is a secret? With the recent success of such internet phenomena such as PostSecret and Group Hug (<http://www.grouphug.us>), people are demonstrating the intense emotional power of secrets. On such websites, people are encouraged to share their secrets with others in hopes that despite their anonymity, the sharing of a personal feeling can be a freeing experience.

For my final project, I wanted to do a photo investigation of secrets to make an attempt to define the almost undefinable. I chose to represent my findings in the form of a photo mosaic for a variety of reasons, but mainly because of the statement a photo mosaic makes. I hope that this mosaic will hold different meanings for different people. Each photo within the photo mosaic is representative of my view of what a secret is. Some of these photos were shot digitally with my Canon Digital Rebel, and others were shot in Medium Format with a Seagull camera. I would like others to note that the secrets depicted within this photo are not my own, but rather, the secrets of many.

To begin, I wanted to select a photo that would best encompass all others that I shot. I chose a self portrait; however, through cropping I attempted to make the photo anonymous. As aforementioned, I am not the important element of this photo; its anonymity is. Before cropping and photoshop, this is the photo I selected:



Because it is a common belief that eyes are the window to one's soul and identity, I chose to crop out the top portion of my face including my eyes in an attempt to make the photo more anonymous. In photoshop, I adjusted the levels, color balance, and contrast first. Then I used the diffuse glow tool in conjunction with the magic wand and the clone stamp tool in an attempt to even out my skin tone. My final product appeared as such:



I chose to keep the color in this photo because I liked the effect of the shadows. This photo is lit completely with natural light (no flash, internal or external) from a picture window by my dining room table.

The next step was shooting a bunch of photos that I felt represented my idea of what a secret was. I traveled on foot all over Boston, Cape Cod, Chicago, New York, and Washington DC. I had the opportunity to travel just prior to the semester to South Carolina, and I felt a few of these photos would compliment the montage as well. I sat on park benches just observing people and snapping photos of those I felt best demonstrated the ideas I hoped to portray in my final project. Not all photos were of people; many were of objects, places, or feelings. In a city, I feel as if the vast number of people force everyone to be anonymous to an extent. In the rural areas I was able to visit, I was most moved by the ocean, the dunes, and the simplicity and quietness of the combination of the two. My object was to observe people in their own elements, and trying to determine if I could figure out something about a complete stranger by simply observing them. I saw many things that made me smile, many that made me laugh, and some that made me cry. Every photo I chose to include in the mosaic was one that spoke to me individually.

In order to create the mosaic, I first started by selecting the 150 photos I felt would best demonstrate the feeling I hoped to attain: the things one cannot observe without proper thought. After selecting the photos, I cropped each to a size that I could manage easily: 600 pixels in length or 600 pixels in height, depending on the vertical or horizontal orientation of each photo. I then went through each photo, adjusting the levels, color balance, and contrast with Photoshop.

After adjusting each photo in Photoshop to the proper dimensions and quality, I used a program for Macintosh called MacOSaiX. This program is one that uses the base photo of your choosing, in this case the self portrait, and uses sources that a user inputs to help create the mosaic. The program uses an algorithm which matches both the colors and the shapes in each photo and inserts the photos in the manner which best fits the base photo. I decided to split the base photo into 14x15 pixel squares. Because I did not possess enough photos of my liking to fill the entire mosaic with unique photos, I allowed the algorithm to use each photo up to four times. I discovered that four times was the best use of the photos without seeming like overkill through a process of trial and error. I chose 14 x 15 pixel squares because that was the closest ratio to the resizing of the photos I determined earlier in Photoshop.

When I viewed my first result, as pictured below, I was not satisfied with the particular choices the algorithm made.



This was the first effort that I made using MacOSaiX. I added a layer in Photoshop and used the base photo as an overlay to help make the mosaic more obvious. What I did not like about this result was the frequent repeating of the photos; At this point I had allowed each photo to repeat up to 10 times. I also felt that without the overlay, the mosaic was extremely hard to view given the wide spectrum of colors of all of the original photos.

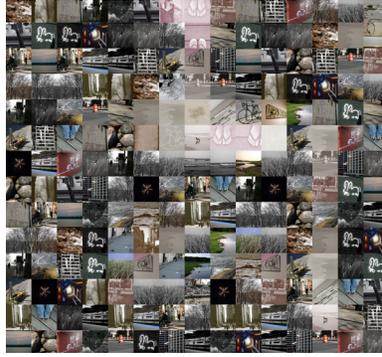
In order to remedy these issues, I decided to photoshop the original photos once again. This time, I went square by square attempting to determine which photo was the best fit based on their shape. Once I determined that, I placed a grid on the base photo and used the eyedropper tool to extract the color of that square. Then, with the best-fit photo, I used the gradient map tool in Photoshop to change the color of the best-fit photo. For instance, I took this original image, and using the eyedropper tool, changed the gradient of the photo from zero to the color of the skin located on my chest in the self portrait.



Before

After

After doing this to nearly every photo except for the ones that the colors were acceptable to create the photo, I made another attempt at running the mosaic algorithm. The following was my second result:



I was slightly happier with this result, due to the gradient changes, but by this point, I had yet to convert every photo's gradient. I also used the base photo as an overlay with less opacity. I then decided that in order to achieve the best mosaic result, I would need to input the photos I wanted square by square without using the algorithm. To do this, I first ran the algorithm, and then went square by square changing the photos as I pleased. While vastly time consuming, I was much happier with my result.

By this point, I found that some photos did not fit as perfectly as I hoped by simply using the gradient tool. Then, I chose a few photos, in which I used the invert tool. The following is a demonstration of one photo where I first adjusted the gradient, and then inverted the gradient map.



I liked the shape of the water and the grass for use in the mosaic; however, I felt that the colors would be best if used with gradient and invert functions of Photoshop. I proceeded to do such things with a various number of photos, and finally, I came to a mosaic layout that I really liked. I saved the file as a .jpg and added text. At this point, I added no overlay to the photo, this is how the mosaic appeared:



Without an overlay, I could already see the mosaic as well as one could expect using such large photo sizes. I was going to leave the photo as is, but then I had another idea. I opened the photo in photoshop and decided that despite the fact that no overlay was necessary to see the mosaic, I was going to create multiple layers, add text, and invert the background to make the mosaic slightly more interesting to the eye. After adding text, and a very, very opaque (roughly 10-15%) overlay of the original image, this is how the mosaic appeared:



Then, in various layers, I separated the squares in the person from the squares in the background using the extract tool and magic wand. I then inverted the entire image, and used the overlay of the person to achieve my final result. To achieve the final result, I reduced the fill and opacity of the inverted background layer. I also increased the opacity greatly of the overlay of the person.

Overall, I am very satisfied with my final product. I feel that although complex, the image can also be read as very simple. I feel fortunate that I had the opportunity during the semester to travel to Washington, Chicago, New York, and Cape Cod, as well as the opportunity during IAP to travel to South Carolina. Every single image was chosen for its adherence to the theme, and I feel that while the theme may seem a bit vague, I feel as if each individual photo could be titled with the text of the final product.

My conclusion to my initial intent: the discovery of secrets: I found that secrets can be big or small and come in all shapes and sizes. They can be hidden in the anonymity of the city in the throngs of people, or it can be found in the calming waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Everyone has secrets because it is virtually impossible for any other person to know every thing about another. It is easy to get caught up in your own thoughts, but sometimes taking a moment to observe the world around you just might be worth the while. I certainly found it to be the case. While at times I felt intimidated by observing a particular stranger or scene, I felt oddly at ease by the end of the project. Some of my photos, such as the one of the man in the wheelchair, were my own personal attempts at photographing with concern without saying a single word. I felt the project extended to more than just the final project, because I found out more about myself through simply taking pictures.