

# ELLIE BROWN

Native of Boston. Lives and works in Ulsan, South Korea

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## LAMENTATIONS IN LIMINAL STATES

The liminal state (in ritual) is characterized by ambiguity, and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation. Ellie Brown photographs these states, as they exist in the mindset of her sisters in transition between childhood and young adulthood. These in-between states can feel excruciatingly painful. It is difficult to be in-between jobs, in-between relationships, and it is especially hard to be in-between childhood and adulthood, a time when the self is trying to find solid ground.

Ellie Brown, camera in hand, stands witness to these dark corridors as she photographs the emotional, intellectual, and physical states her sisters are going through; the hallways girls trespass in search of the authentic self. Ellie Brown, intimates, "when my sisters entered my life, I was going through some very rough pre-adolescent years. I had lost all sense of self-confidence due to mean female friends and male teasing... I strongly believe that the timing of their coming into my life during those years has everything to do with when I started photographing them and why I've continued for ten years." Perhaps Ellie Brown trains her lens on her sisters in order to discover the trajectory of her own path, the path many girls walk in a culture like ours that teaches young girls to disappear; to starve themselves of their own identity, in order to fit in. Perhaps this is where the sadness begins and where Brown points her camera lens, refusing to submit to the disappearing act played by many of us on the road towards womanhood.

- **EMILY'S MESSY FLOOR**, 2006 C-PRINT 16X20 IN. / 40X50 CM. →
- **CORSAGE CRISIS**, 2006 C-PRINT 16X20 IN. / 40X50 CM. →
- ← **ELLIE**, 2006 C-PRINT 16X20 IN. / 40X50 CM.
- ← **EMILY LOUNGING**, 2006 C-PRINT 16X20 IN. / 40X50 CM.
- ← **EMILY SPREADING GOWN**, 2006 C-PRINT 16X20 IN. / 40X50 CM.

Early on, in 1996, Brown's younger sister Emily is pictured with her body pressed tightly between two clothes drawers, hiding, yet her eyes stare back at the camera, refusing to relinquish power. Emily, also pictured in 1996, wears a sweatshirt with the logo, "King and I", she is pictured as the princess of strength, hips thrusting forward, eyes and mouth in states of confidence. Abby, during that same year is also pictured with eyes that stare back to the viewer, meeting our own gaze, quietly refusing objectification. In another image, Abby is pictured with her toys, a plastic oven and iron set. Her portrait, in this environment, feels meditative. Her eyes portray a vacancy. Abby is lost in her own world, she is not entranced by the toys that mentor domesticity.

Two years pass and something happens, pre-adolescence takes hold. The two sisters are pictured in sullen states of contemplation, in the backyard, although still on the swing set. In another image, Emily sits on the steps of the front porch while water passes threw her hands, staining the steps just below her reach. Still pictured as young girls, Emily and Abby are photographed in states of strength and meditation. These are the black and white years.

In 2001, color sets in, and the two sisters are pictured differently. We still see them intimately, but this time not in states of contemplation but rather other transitional states like shaving legs in the shower or caked facials before the girls' Bat Mitzvah party.

Ellie photographs Abby, in 2002 through 2004, as a girl pre occupied with her appearance and the material world. She is photographed while shopping, manicuring her nails, and brushing her hair. She is no longer pictured as a girl who refuses to be objectified, who reveals in her internal world. Rather we see a young adult becoming a good consumer, buying into a culture that insists she keeps up her appearance, a culture that demands that she lose her sense of self, in order to fit the mold. Abby looks beautiful, scared and angry.

In 2002 we view Emily as a healthy teenager, the usual angst written all over her face. But something startling happens in a few short years. In 2005 Emily is pictured sorting food coupons and cleaning the fridge with a friend. Emily is photographed from an ariel point of view; her collar bone jutting out from her chest, skeletal arms reaching for food that will never be eaten. Food related activities that will never nourish the body or the soul. Emily has developed an eating disorder.

Ellie Brown, sister and photographer, begins to feel like a failure as a sibling and artist. All the years of photographing her sisters to "open dialogue about their issues," seem to collapse in Brown's arms. Do the images she creates have the power to transform? Will they help other young girls to understand themselves and the place they hold in the world? Or, do the photographs occupy a liminal space, a place where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior relax, opening the way to something new?

This photographer thinks they do.

Written by Robin Lasser

Robin Lasser is a Professor of Photography at San Jose State University. She co-creates, along with Professor Kathi Sylva, a public art project titled: Eating Disorders in a Disordered Culture. [www.eating.ucdavis.edu](http://www.eating.ucdavis.edu)

