

*My Polaroid Selfies 1981 Book 1* by Melinda Camber Porter  
(Blake Press 2017)

**Book Review** by Jeff Edwards:

The desire to divine the soul's subtlest complexities from a person's face is probably as old as human eyesight itself. Examples are legion, from the perennial tradition of psychological portraiture and self-portraiture in the visual arts, to the once widespread but now thoroughly debunked pseudoscience of physiognomy, to the current pursuit of facial recognition technology that can accurately perceive and describe a subject's personality in detail.

Over a three-year span during the early 1980s, artist, writer, and filmmaker Melinda Camber Porter set off on a mechanically assisted version of this same quest, making use of a Polaroid SX-70 camera to try to capture reflections of her shifting thoughts and moods in her transient facial expressions. The eventual result was a three-ring binder filled with 150 extreme close-up selfies, generally presented one per page and annotated with comments on her state of mind at the time ("I am depressed," "I am thinking of love," "I am trying to be happy," etc.). *My Polaroid Selfies Book I 1981* reproduces approximately a third of these photos, offering viewers a glimpse into this secret project of self-interrogation. The book documents these images almost to the point of overkill, with each depicted twice on facing pages, first as a captioned thumbnail that shows its page in the binder, and again as a full-size reproduction of the print alone. Every few pages, the preceding images are reproduced yet again, arranged side-by-side in pairs or groups of eight, a clear invitation to compare and contrast Porter's varied expressions. The only thing that's left out of the presentation is her handwritten notes. It's a strange omission, given the original intent of these photos. The result is a kind of ambiguous tension: the exclusion of her commentary places the burden of interpretation squarely on the viewer, thus encouraging a closer look at each image, but it also reveals some of them to be oddly elusive and emotionally opaque, especially in Porter's more deadpan moments.

Along with the images, the book contains a well-curated set of supporting texts that situate Porter's photos within the much larger—and equally fascinating—contexts of Polaroid and selfie photography. A foreword by photographer and historian Michael Edelson presents a sensitive and enlightening portrait of inventor and Polaroid Corporation founder Edwin H. Land. Edelson also explores the instant camera's impact on the modern world via a series of historical and personal anecdotes, and delves into some of the deeper currents in Porter's life and work, including the importance of William Blake (who also believed that the face is a mirror of the soul) to her own practice across multiple media. An essay by millennial artist and photographer Storm Ascher notes just how vastly Porter's calm and intimately self-reflective images differ from the aggressively outward-looking results of so much contemporary selfie-taking; having discerned a profound practice of gentle but persistent self-questioning at the heart of Porter's three-year snapshot project, Ascher hints that we might have something equally profound to learn about both art and everyday life from Porter's binder of snapshots. A Polaroid Corporation timeline and additional biographical and historical material dramatically expand the book's range, making it into both a primer on Polaroid's history and an appreciation of Porter's life as an artist and writer.

A reader with any amount of firm cynicism about today's selfie culture is likely to approach this book with a subjective catalog of prejudices and preconceptions that will need to be worked through before Porter's images can be viewed fairly and sensitively. At first, it's easy to dismiss some of her expressions as mugging for the camera, and the old question of whether posing for a snapshot inevitably changes one's behavior also comes into play—a factor which, if true, would arguably invalidate Porter's entire project, killing it at the root. The only fair answer to these concerns is to approach this collection of images the way all sincerely made art should be approached: with a generous spirit and a willingness to put in the time needed to reveal its subtleties. This body of work is a “see it for yourself” proposition, and any evidence as to whether there's true substance in her attempt to make selfies of the soul ultimately lies with each viewer's unique experience with it. The things that may happen when one spends enough time with these images probably can't be conveyed either adequately or accurately in words. Yet they're both the key to understanding Porter's project, and its very essence.

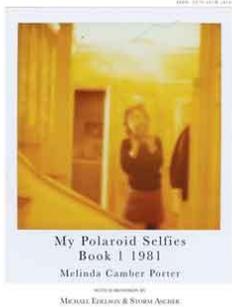
**Jeff Edwards**

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### **MY POLAROID SELFIES: 1981 Book 1** by Melinda Camber Porter



*My Polaroid Selfies: 1981 Book 1* by Melinda Camber Porter

ISSN: Volume 2, Number 8: Includes 48 Polaroid Selfies

Forwards by: Michael Edelson, Professor Emeritus Stony Brook University of film and photography and Storm Ascher, Artist  
Volume 2, Number 8 (Blake Press)

Hardcover: (ISBN: 978-1-942231-58-5), 8½x11, \$49.99 (2017).  
(192 pages, 210 photo illustrations, index, and bibliography)

Ebook: (ISBN: 978-1-942231-59-2), \$3.99 (2017).

See Melinda Camber Porter on YouTube...

Melinda Camber Porter was fascinated by the Polaroid Camera. The fact one was able to get instant feedback and not wait days or weeks to get one's traditional photography developed. She could now take pictures of herself and see if it showed what she was thinking, instantly. Today, of course, we call this a 'Selfie'. These 48 Polaroid photos were taken by her with her Polaroid camera purchased in 1981.

It took Edwin Land over 50 years to develop and commercialize the Polaroid Camera, we are informed in the Foreword by Michael Edelson, Professor Emeritus of film and photography at Stony Brook University. Edelson states, “Melinda Camber Porter, as usual, was inspired by William Blake who spoke so often about the face and its binding to the soul. In fact, the only way to achieve a personal wholeness, he felt, was through unifying the body and spirit. Gazing at these images requires the viewer to undertake a languid journey of intimate exploration. These Polaroid photographs function just as diary entries for her. One writes the most inner secrets onto the pages.

Some, beside hiding the book, also maintain a closed lock with a key that only one person possesses. Here the pages are open and free; no lock nor hiding place. Only patience and an open eye is needed to reach the true faculty of knowing, the faculty of many experiences as William Blake pointed out.”

The Polaroid Corporation once a billion dollars company, died a slow death with the digital age, but has again returned 40 years later to fascinate all: “Melinda Camber Porter had an ability to transcend the element of time in all of her creative works; representing imagery and writing about personal experiences that could ultimately be an overall expression of the human experience. She understood this Polaroid phenomenon of documenting the self before it was coined the “selfie” by the Millennial generation,” states, Storm Asher in her 2017 Foreword, as an Artist and a Millennial Polaroid Photographer.

Melinda Camber Porter passed away of ovarian cancer in 2008 and left a significant body of work in art, journalism, and literature. The Melinda Camber Porter Archive wishes to share these conversations with the public to ensure the continuation and expansion of the ideas expressed in her creative works.

**Melinda Camber Porter Archive of Creative Works**

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Melinda Camber Porter's YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIfCaF2qpHh8uQgffSXLQ>