



Mareea Vegas is an Auckland-based photographer and musician. Each issue, she talks to a new photographer bringing interesting artistic ideas to the field of contemporary photography. Through these discussions, she hopes to inspire *D-Photo* readers to branch out in their photographic practice. Mareea's own work spans a variety of styles and formats, with her singular approach earning accolades and commissions from the likes of the Auckland Art Fair, the Auckland Festival of Photography, and Nikon New Zealand.

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## BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Mareea Vegas asks photographer Céline Sayé how she has brought her life experiences and photography together to create a series of stunning projects

There is a felt intimacy in the photographic works of Céline Sayé, with the recent loss of her father triggering an emotional transformation for the 2016 Unitec graduate that propelled her through complex emotions to land in a place that she says allowed an uncomplicated reconnection with life's simpler moments.

A French native, Sayé returned to her roots on the Brittany coastline in 2015 to care for her ailing father — a journey that sparked an important conversation between father and daughter on the notion of life and death, and led to a photographic exploration of the landmark history of World War II's iconic Atlantic Wall. Returning to New Zealand for the final year of her degree, Sayé explains that the unexpected trip back to France was ultimately a journey of discovery — enabling a spiritual metamorphosis during the final year of her degree — and a personal revelation about what photography really means to her.

***D-Photo*: How have the issues examined in your work changed during the three years of your bachelor's degree?**

Céline Sayé: To me, studying is about discovery and a lot of experimenting to develop your own style and find out what really interests you. Before studying, I was mainly doing street photography and staying very distant from the subjects I was

shooting — just observing with the camera what was happening around me. The three years of study [have] taught me how to go beyond my comfort zone and to get closer to the subjects. I've discovered that I like to share 'people stories', stories which are close to my heart as opposed to looking at strangers from a distance. This discovery especially came through in my second year after doing a series of street portraiture. I felt that there was something missing when working with complete strangers, people that I would just spend a few minutes with and never see again. I needed to feel the personality involved with the subjects, spend more time with them, and create a relationship of trust.

**Through creating this trust with your subject, what concepts did you explore?**

I was first inspired by a French movie called *Amour* (Love) [directed] by Michael Haneke, starring Emma Riva and one of my favourite actors, Jean-Louis Trintignant. It's a heart-rending, poignant movie about what someone will do for love during one of the most challenging situations in life, and it really resonated with me. It made me think about the duration of love, how you can still be important for each other after so many years. Maybe I wanted to be reassured that love still exists in old age, that it is not only something for young people. I wanted to work with a couple who had been together for a long time to

try to find the answers to these questions. I didn't know them before starting the project, but the more time I spent with them, the more I entered into their world and established this relationship of trust. The photographs were made into a photo book, with text alongside telling the story of the beginning of their relationship.

My other ongoing project, Femmes, relates to the subject of breast cancer. It's very personal to me, as, before Unitec, I trained and worked as a radiographer, specializing in breast screening, so I was able to join my two skill sets together. The work has several messages, and this new desire to connect and express these has helped me to convey information. I really wanted to respect the dignity of each woman, to show more than the physical scars that are left. I wanted the viewer to engage with the work and be touched by each woman's story, and to show that breast cancer does not look any one way from the outside — and it can affect anyone, whether you have a family history of it or not.

Women affected by the disease are our mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, and friends. They're everyday women and they have to live the everyday life. It's been important to me to give a message of hope by sharing the story of four women — there is life after breast cancer; [there] ... is not only a fatal outcome — as well as encouraging women to go for screenings!

**How has your knowledge as a medical professional influenced your approach to personalizing this photographic work?**

I felt compassion, but I think my background training helped me take a position where I wasn't so emotionally attached or affected. My experience definitely helped me to understand what they'd been through with regards to their treatment, so I could ask appropriate



questions. However, as I was creating this photographic work, I was more interested in how their breast-cancer journey may have changed their private lives. They definitely felt more confident when I told them that I didn't want to associate their face and their chest in the same frame, and that I would keep their anonymity. I really wanted to concentrate on the woman herself. Therefore, when I exhibited, I combined a taped interview with their portrait image, and placed their breast images separately.

**Why did you choose to process the breast images in black and white but leave the portraits in colour?**

I felt that I was removing the medical aspect of those images by processing them in black and white. I've aimed to give a more artistic rendering to the body, reclaiming the beauty. Also, by framing the images this way, we concentrate just on the chest, keeping the body and face

anonymous. This was also a way for me to respect the privacy of the women. I felt really empowered by this project, and the reaction of the viewers was so positive that I plan to extend the work. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to yet, as my own family was hit by cancer, and a lot of things have changed for me.

**Your next two series, Blockhaus and Visages Multiples are very personal in meaning to you. What can you tell us about them?**

I had to go back to France unexpectedly last year, as my dad was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. I wasn't sure that I could complete my third year of study, so I started thinking about what I could do in France if I couldn't get back to New Zealand. I grew up on the coastline of Brittany, which was part of the Atlantic Wall during the Second World War. The coast is full of bunkers built by the Germans. They're everywhere. They are part of the landscape.





Some bunkers are in original condition, and some have been recycled into houses or clubs, and, more recently, local artists have painted some. I thought it would be a nice series of work to document all those bunkers, as they belong to our history and are integrated into my everyday landscape. I would photograph them on cloudy days and show the pictures to my dad. It became an ongoing conversation between us, and, when he was able to go for a walk, he wanted to take me to places where I could discover new bunkers. To me, those images in Blockhaus are illustrating so much more than just World War II bunkers. They will always remind me of my father, even though the series relates to a very difficult time.

My father passed away in June last year, only four months after his diagnosis, so, after several months in France, I came back to Auckland to face the challenge of completing the degree while in a state of grief. It was then important for me to make work that continued to somehow connect me to my father. *Visages Multiples* is the title of my latest body of work, and it expresses my mixed feelings about life and death — but it also refers to a book of poems that my father wrote when he was a young man. His poems were deep and complex, also mentioning the notion of life and death. Therefore, his book of poems became the centrepiece of my project, a metaphorical and psychological work that explores my internal dialogue between my father’s poetry; my emotional experience of grief; and my reconnection to small, beautiful moments in life. The work was presented as an installation including photographic prints, the recording of my voice reading the poems of my father, and the original book as an artwork. The aim was to create an intimate atmosphere in which I could share my personal journey with the viewer.

**The images in the *Visages* series are striking, presenting a mixture of space, stillness, sadness, and energy. Did the moments find you or vice versa? And, on a technical level, how important were your camera settings to the creation of the images?**

It is a mixture of both. At the beginning of this project, I was overwhelmed by feelings relating to the complexity of life and the question of the afterlife, so I was looking for dark and mysterious moments. Gradually, I started to reconnect with beauty and life’s simpler moments, which evolved into simpler imagery. However, I found myself wanting to be more experimental the whole time. So yes, the moment would find me, too, as I was playing more with the camera. The result for me was one of shooting more instinctively and intuitively. The camera settings would depend on the effect that I would want to have or try. It was changing all the time. The work of Rinko Kawauchi has influenced and inspired me for this project. She said, “For a photographer, it’s a necessity that you can shoot stuff magically, accidents are necessary.” So, I let the unexpected happen, but, afterwards, I used careful selection and looked for a relationship between the images to illustrate the story I wanted to tell.

**How do you remain close to France through your work? Has living in New Zealand changed the kind of work you are producing?**

The question of displacement has never been a concern for me. I have never felt the need to express a kind of connection to my homeland until last year. It was the first time after many years of living in New Zealand that it felt very difficult to be separated from my family. The ocean is a place for me to connect to my origin. I produced a series of atmospheric images by the ocean: this is where the photograph

Illusion from *Visages Multiples* emerged. I don’t think this is going to be an ongoing theme in my work, as my surroundings have never been my main source of inspiration. The theme that I worked on over the past few years could have been produced anywhere; it wasn’t specifically connected to New Zealand.

**With photography as a way for you to process emotions and issues in life, what will your next project as a new graduate look like?**

There are a few works that I’d like to expand on, such as the breast-cancer project, finding more bunkers on my next trip back home, and my exploration of metaphorical imagery. I’d like to keep producing work around issues that intrigue me — specifically on a psychological level. As for now, I’m working on the last pictures I took of my father to create a body of work for the [Auckland] Festival of Photography in June.

**Because all our readers would love to know what you shoot with, what’s currently in your camera bag?**

You’ll find my Canon 5D Mark III, a few different lenses, my Speedlite flash, a light meter, some filters, and a zoom microphone, as I have been working with sound a lot.

**Finally, where would we find Céline Sayé at 10am on a Sunday morning?**

On a Sunday morning, you are more than likely to see me running along the waterfront, as I am often training for running events!

You can see more of Sayé’s work at [celinesayephotography.com](http://celinesayephotography.com) or at the Auckland Festival of Photography exhibition, *New Perspectives*, at Circle Gallery in Newmarket, June 14–18.