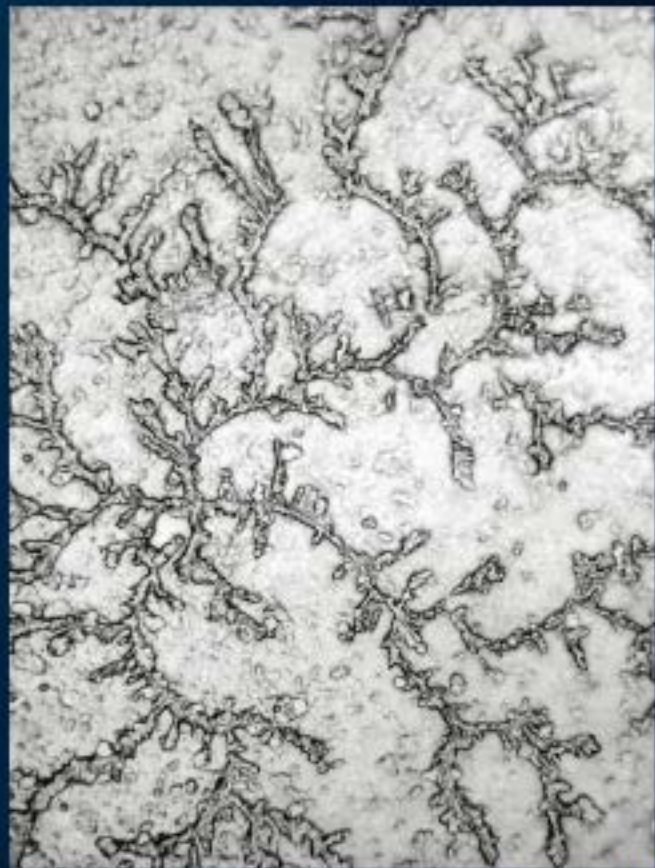


The Tears of Rose-Lynn Fisher

What do
sadness and
joy, laughter
and longing
look like
up close?

by Ryan Bradley



Composition, 2015
Photomicrograph

The artist Rose-Lynn Fisher began photographing her tears under a microscope because she had been crying a lot and wondered what they'd look like up close, those tears.

Also, she had recently received a microscope. It had been her cousin's. He was a cardiologist, and in his retirement, he started photographing heart cells. When he died in 2009, his family gave Rose-Lynn the microscope—a late 1990s Carl Zeiss with a digital camera mounted on top.

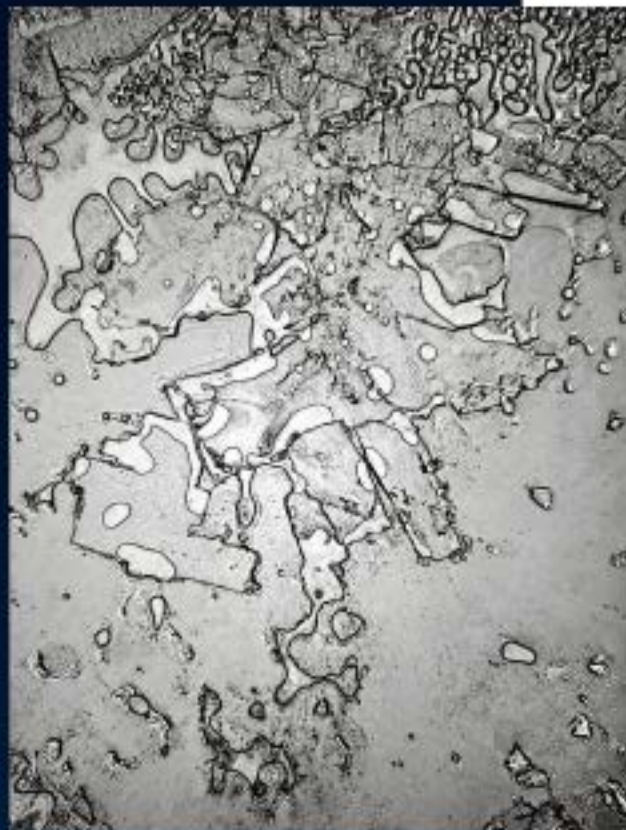
She took it home and, at first, looked at liquids that weren't tears: blood, orange juice, pomegranate juice, seawater. She had worked with a scanning electron microscope in a lab before, photographing bees, but this was quite different, not a three-dimensional object but a fluid, dried upon a thin rectangular glass slide—mounted, with the light from below moving through the liquid, through the camera's lens, and into her eye.

She was looking for something in those dried liquids, not just something visually striking, but something deeper. Maybe that something was funny or strange or—she wasn't quite sure. She'd know it when

she saw it. She'd once, starting about 15 years ago, done a photographic series on abandoned couches in her Hollywood neighborhood. There was something about those couches, the fact of them, the situational comedy and tragedy and personality that made her continue seeking them out and making images from them. She found one behind a gate that looked like it was in jail, and another with a sheet over it that looked maimed or like someone was about to operate on it. And then there was this whole other story, just below the surface of those cast-aside street couches, a story about dashed dreams and abandonment. A very human, very Hollywood story.

She was looking for something similar through the lens of her cousin's microscope. Not the same story, of course, but a project that would ripen and change and carry her through years and years. Then the tears started and did not stop. They came from a complex soup of emotions, mostly prompted by a sudden spate of deaths, the loss of many loved ones. There was sadness, but there was also a good bit of joy. The joy of knowing these people—wise elders, she called them. Joy for their overlapping spans together on this earth. Nothing was driving the urge to see what her tears looked like under the microscope so much as sheer curiosity. *Mia*, they were liquid. The light could move through them. So.

When she saw the magnified tears for the first time, there was a strange, almost overwhelming sense of awe. There were patterns, and these were shapes, and there were strange striations. Geometry, broken and unbroken, walls and fortresses. Bubbles, bursting apart, forming coastlines. She shifted the slide beneath the lens and gasped as the patterns ended and began



Laughing till I'm crying, 2010
Photomicrograph



Tears and Loss, 2009
Photomicrograph



awed. There was a feeling of being inside something large, almost unknowably large. She felt humbled and small. The view, she realized, was a lot like looking out a window in an airplane, down at the earth far below. All in a dried-up teardrop.

WHEN IS A PHOTOGRAPH FINISHED? We think of photographs as fixed moments:

If there was one thing she'd learned through this whole, tearful period, it was to abide in the unknowable.

a shutter clicked, light captured, time scooped. But what if a photograph's finished state comes much later? What if the moment is not fixed at all, but stretched out across time, its ideal reached not upon its capture or when it is developed, but long after, when it is eventually looked at? Finally seen.

Rose-Lynn, now 64, studied at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, where she's lived since she was young. She was born in Minneapolis and remembers her earliest years there in the suburbs, on a cul-de-sac, close to nature, as being full of circles: smoothed-out pebbles, rolling hills, winding paths, round ponds. In L.A.,

everything was sharply angled, the grid of streets and slant of light and out of the shadows. Her life defined by geometries.

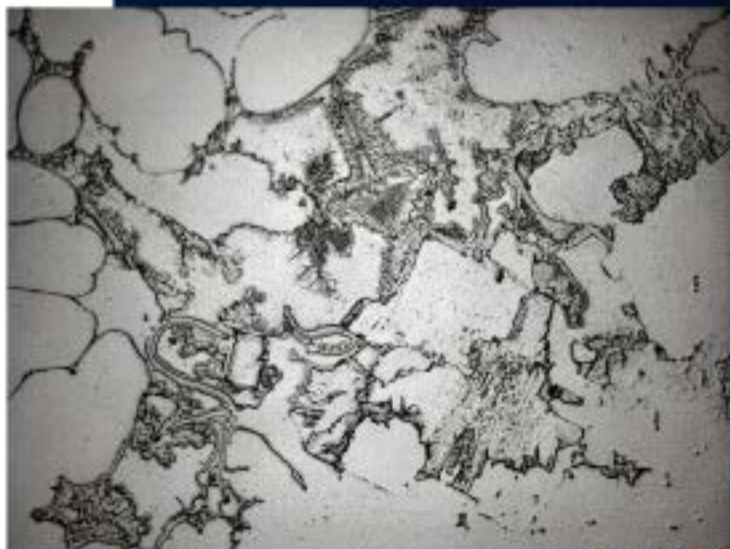
At Otis, she studied under the artist Betsy Saar, who worked in many mediums but is perhaps most famous for her mixed-media collages. Rose-Lynn started as a painter but has done plenty of collage, too. What she remembers best, though, the lesson most important from her time with Saar, is identifying the element in her art that is the way in for her, the artist, the way forward through the work; for us, the viewer, the way inside it. "Where is that? Where's the fullness of energy? And if you can identify that point, stay with it. Don't complicate it." That's what Saar taught her.

Now, with the tears, she leached onto this point of entry—the worlds within the teardrops—and it propelled her forward, through more tears. Most came through loss and breakups and fights and general emotional hardship. Her mother got very sick, and stayed sick, for a very long time. Other tears came from thick bouts of laughter. And some were prompted by chopping onions.

The slides piled up, close to a hundred, then more. When she looked at them on her computer screen, wired to the camera mounted on the microscope, she flew over the landscapes, going very quiet, into a meditative state, waiting for the topography

to speak back to her. This was the part she didn't want to talk about; too much, or even know about: the mystery in selecting exactly the aspect of the world within a tear to photograph, and what it might mean. "You just wanna be with it," she said, meaning the topography of her tears.

This process of selection was, in a way, much like painting or collage. A process spread out over time. She was seeking the sliver of landscape that captured the mix of emotions that had led to the release of the tear, a liquid then mounted onto a glass slide. The eventual image she would



Grief and gratitude, 2008
Photomicrograph

land on, she said, was the part within the landscape "that takes me somewhere, that makes me know something I can't know with my mind." It was an aspect of the landscape beyond words or thought, much like the inexplicable nature of a very specific feeling. Then, often, the image would inspire a phrase. Something like a title.

Some of these titles were concrete, tied to a specific emotion—"Bliss" or "Resolution"—or an incident like "Mom happy tears" or "Laughing till I'm crying." More often they were oblique references, small parts in a larger story that could arrive mid-sentence, or at the story's beginning or, more commonly, the end. One, titled "As she crossed over the bridge disappeared," was about Rose-Lynn's dog, Ginger. The title was meant to be said in one breath, "like leaving and taking every thing with you as you go." Rose-Lynn had been with Ginger—"a little dog, and all kins"—when she died. Rose-Lynn watched her go, and cried. Then she took that moment, the all-at-once-ness of passing over,

Ginger's being there and then not—and collected it on a slide. She found in her tear a landscape that reminded her of nothing but sweetness. Ginger's sweetness coming through in that image. The phrase about the bridge came to mind. It was a story she could gesture at, Rose-Lynn said, but not a story she could or would want to write. She didn't want to detract from the real essential thing, which was a mysterious microscopic landscape inside the residue of a complex emotion. "As I went along, I realized my story is just my story: one moment of crying," she said. "Everyone has their moments ..."

She stopped. The room was very quiet. We were in her mother's home, which was now her own, because her mother had died not long ago. This was tricky, opening up, telling her story, because it could interfere with the art. "I don't want to restrict it," she said. "I don't want to say, 'This is how you should look at it.'" In her paintings and collages, the ones she'd made early in her

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