

Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families in the Deep South, photographs by Carolyn Sherer is a contemporary exhibition honoring the complexities of lesbian family life in the south in 2011. The exhibition provides an intimate view of a population that had been largely invisible or underrepresented in public art. The images challenge viewers to envision a world without prejudice and discrimination – a world that celebrates commitment, family and inclusion for everyone – a world without limbo.

What do committed long-term lesbian relationships look like in Birmingham, Alabama? How are they revealed in public and in private, inwardly and outwardly? The 40 large-scale portrait photographs in this exhibition address these as well as many other pressing issues about lesbian identity in a state lacking a single law to protect LGBTQ families. The women in these images fulfill multiple roles in their lives, as dedicated professionals, partners, mothers and lovers. The photographs tease out these strands through both subtle and obvious variations in gesture, expression and dress. All participants stand against a stark white background, forcing the viewer to encounter, head on, the complex reality of an invisible class of Americans.

We are in the Deep South. Coming-out as lesbian here is a conflicted endeavor fraught with job, family, social and deeply personal issues. This is vividly captured in the photographs with some women turning away from the camera,

“I immediately felt the impact of the exhibit when I saw the first photograph. I saw courage, fear and our common humanity in a single glance. This exhibition changed my view of lesbian family life.”

Exhibition visitor

too concerned about breaking the silence surrounding their sexual identity. Others smile hesitantly, while younger ones kiss or hold newborn children. This is a compelling view of the very real landscape of lesbian life in the Deep South.

It has also been demonstrably effective, not only for the dedicated or sympathetic observer. The

sheer courage of the participants and the upfront, unapologetic presentation of their relationships attracted nearly 17,000 viewers to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, located in Birmingham, Alabama, from March – July 2012. Visitors from across the country saw the exhibition and were deeply moved by the common humanity evident with every photograph. Men, women, young and old – *Living in Limbo* speaks to Americans from all walks of life.

Although created about a specific community at a specific time, the message is universal. Now is the time for other areas of the country to benefit from this transformative exhibition of lesbian families. This is an insider's narrative on the South.



ANONYMOUS: *Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families in the Deep South*

A full-color, 58-page exhibition catalog is available to accompany the exhibition and includes essays by the photographer, participants and curatorial experts.

“We are honored to have been the first institution to host *Living in Limbo* and all that it represents. The community response was overwhelming with nearly 17,000 visitors.”

Dr. Lawrence Pijoux, Executive Director,
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

Title: *Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families in the Deep South*
Photographs by Carolyn Sherer

Organizers: The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) and Living in Limbo, Inc.

Exhibition Contents: 40 framed pigment prints on Hahnemuhle paper:
20 borderless framed images 36"X36"
20 borderless framed images 30"X30"



Photographer's Artist Statement - digital file suitable for 30"X40" exhibition mounting
Essay by Ellen Dossett - digital file suitable for 30"X40" exhibition mounting
Selected participant quotes - digital file suitable for 30"X40" exhibition mounting

Supplemental Material: DVD of three-minute promotion video and selection of exhibition images
Copy of the exhibition catalog

Space Requirements: Minimum of 2,000 square feet for complete exhibition

Participation Fee: \$5,000 for 12 weeks,
plus prorated shipping and insurance while in guest institution

Publication: Full-color, illustrated 58-page catalog, including five essays and a poem

For Availability, Contact: Carolyn Sherer
Photographer 205.907.7162
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OR

Ahmad Ward
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
Project Coordinator
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award@bcri.org

Other Resources: Photographer, participants, and/or sponsor representatives may be available for opening receptions and educational programming upon request

livinginlimbo.org

Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families of the Deep South

My work has always explored issues related to identity, seeking individual stories that resonate with our common humanity. Although I am motivated by a need to document moments before they disappear, the work is informed by things past, prevalent culture, and current artists. For me, the images are a gateway to a story waiting to be told. They are meant to allow us hope and an appreciation for the complex, contradictory elements of our universal identity.

The process of creating photographs of *my* community for *Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families in the Deep South* was an intimate, emotionally challenging process. The boundary between observer and participant blurred, and I vacillated between fear of consequences and defiant pride. Most of my peers refused to take part because they were afraid of what might happen if they were publicly recognized. They worried about losing jobs, child custody, and family acceptance.

The participants decided how to present themselves—what they wore, how they stood, how they physically related. I chose a studio setting to assure privacy and a white background to minimize distractions. Couples elected to either face or turn their backs to the camera, depending on their comfort with public acknowledgment of their sexual identity. Some chose to include their children.

The families represent a diverse cross-section of lesbians with Alabama roots. They were informally selected by contacting friends and friends of friends. This process introduced me to young lesbians whose reality was often very different from that of my contemporaries. Many live without secrets, changing last names to match their partners' and choosing to bear children.



BURDNETTE AND DARLEEN: *Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families in the Deep South*

The older lesbians' stories are generally more difficult. One friend was keeping vigil by her partner's hospital deathbed when the family of her beloved locked her out of their home. Other women tell of excommunication from their churches and family interventions intended to rid them of their "homosexuality."

This project is dedicated to all my friends: those who did not participate for fear of reprisal, and those who did participate, despite feeling anxious about potential consequences. I hope for a world that celebrates commitment, caring, and family for everyone—a world without limbo.

—Carolyn Sherer, 2012