

Professor has taken a selfie every day for the past 30 years

February 23 2017, by Philip Marcelo



This panel of black and white self-made photographs provided by Karl Baden shows Baden over the last three decades beginning Feb. 23, 1987, top left, through Feb. 21, 2017, lower right. The Boston College professor's "Every Day"

project has chronicled his visage in nearly 11,000 photos in various locations with the same lighting and background each day for thirty years. He intends to do it the rest of his life. (Karl Baden via AP)

Long before they were called selfies, Karl Baden snapped a simple black and white photo of himself. Then he repeated it every day for the next three decades.

Baden's "Every Day" project officially turns 30 on Thursday and he says he has no intention of stopping. The stark contemplation on mortality and aging has prompted some to dub the Boston College professor the unwitting "father of the selfie."

The 64-year-old Cambridge resident grumbles at comparisons to the pouty face, self-congratulatory portraits that now fill Instagram and Facebook. But he recognizes the ubiquity of the selfie has helped raise the profile of the project, which has been exhibited in art galleries in Boston, New York City and elsewhere over the years.

"If it wasn't for the selfie craze, I'd probably be slogging along in anonymity as usual," Baden joked this week. "Which is sort of what I had expected."

What makes the project work is that it reflects a number of universal themes, from death to man's obsession with immortalizing himself in some way, said Howard Yezerski, a Boston gallery owner who has exhibited the project on two occasions.

"It's both personal and universal at the same time," he said. "He's recording a life, or at least one aspect of it that we can all relate to because we're all in same boat. We're all going to die."



In this Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2017 photo, photographer Karl Baden, of Cambridge, Mass., stands for a photo in front of an exhibit of his photographs from 1976 called "Thermographs," at the Miller Yezerki Gallery, in Boston. On Feb. 23, 1987, long before they were called selfies, Karl Baden snapped a simple, black and white photo of himself. Then he repeated it, every day, for the next three decades. Baden's "Every Day" project turns 30 years old Thursday, Feb. 23, 2017. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Robert Mann, a New York City gallery owner that exhibited Baden's work on its 10th anniversary, says he's impressed with how Baden has stuck to his process. "Watching Karl age (gracefully) in front of the camera has been an honor," he said.

Baden quietly launched his project on Feb. 23, 1987, the day after Andy Warhol died and nearly two decades before Facebook emerged. He tries to remain faithful to that first image, posing with the same neutral facial

expression and using the same 35mm camera, tripod, backdrop and lighting.

"The act itself is like brushing your teeth," he said. "I'll just take the picture and get on with the rest of my day. It's not a holy ritual or anything."

Baden has taken other pains to maintain the same aesthetic. He has consciously not grown a beard or mustache, and his hair remains simply styled.

"I have to turn all these variables into constants so that I'm not distracting from the aging process," Baden explained.



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Besides mortality, Baden says the project touches on the notions of obsession, incremental change and perfection.

"As much as I try to make every picture the same, I fail every day," he said. "There's always something that's a little different, aside from the aging process."

Approaching 11,000 photos, the changes in Baden's appearance over time don't appear dramatic. But in 2001, Baden underwent chemotherapy to treat prostate cancer and became noticeably thinner.

The cancer is now in remission and, as later pictures show, Baden quickly bounced back. The only lasting change from that time, he says, has been his eyebrows; they never quite grew back.

And there's been just one day over the past 30 years where Baden admits he neglected to take a photo: Oct. 15, 1991. "It was a dumb moment of forgetfulness," he said.

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