

# Remembrance: A Journal of Queer Culture, Information, and Preservation

---

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 2

---

2024

## "I Have a Right to Exist Here": An Interview with Photographer Justin Murphy

Nicole Lawrence

Marshall University, lawrence14@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mds.marshall.edu/remembrance>



Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lawrence, Nicole (2024) "I Have a Right to Exist Here": An Interview with Photographer Justin Murphy," *Remembrance: A Journal of Queer Culture, Information, and Preservation*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2. Available at: <https://mds.marshall.edu/remembrance/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Remembrance: A Journal of Queer Culture, Information, and Preservation* by an authorized editor of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact [beachgr@marshall.edu](mailto:beachgr@marshall.edu).

## “I Have a Right to Exist Here”: An Interview with Photographer Justin Murphy



Figure 1: Self-portrait of Murphy, courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography

**Justin Murphy** (he/they) is the founder of Out of the Attic Photography. Born, raised, and still residing in Huntington, WV, Murphy volunteers and freelances for the ACLU of WV, serving as photographer for the Appalachian Queer Youth Summit (AQYS). Murphy’s photography and counselor work with AQYS was featured by Nico Lang in *Xtra Magazine*.

Murphy’s photography is playful and at times registers like an L.L. Bean catalog shoot of Joseph Jacobs folktales—think Jack and the Beanstalk, but Jack is gay (and so is the giant) and the eco-sexual potency of the beanstalk (the charged and romantic natural world) is liberated from the traditional male gaze. Like Terri Loewenthal’s technicolor *Psychscape* series, Murphy’s work reaches for transcendence. Murphy creates a landscape that knows no one gender, and thus, as Loewenthal about her own psychedelic landscapes, “step[s] inside and move[s] beyond the confines of our everyday perceptions.”<sup>1</sup> Even when Murphy photographs stock imagery (mountain, river, bridge, duck) it is in this deceptively simplistic form that we are asked to re-see/re-define our archetypes. We are seeing this mountain, bridge, duck, through Murphy’s gaze as an identified Queer and Appalachian artist. The abused and exploited mountains and streams

of West Virginia are transformed into dreamy and nostalgically charged Polaroids. Murphy's work extends into portraiture, which varies in form from black and white to a Vaseline sheen with rose glow soft focus. There's also landscape and architectural photography. In each of the previous examples, Murphy gives space to places that are often overlooked. However, it is Murphy's candid, journalistic work that is the most emotionally charged. The sense of community, togetherness, the inner-goodness and passion within people, indeed the hope, shines through Murphy's oeuvre.

Down a little ways from the winding park path by Fourpole Creek sits Murphy and their partner's charming four square home. Rose bushes climb the sides of the front and dark green awnings scallop along the brick and tile porch. Murphy greeted me wearing a soft green tee that said West Virginia in thick pink font, beaded bracelets jangled along the wrists, and because it was spring, open-toed Birks slapped along the stairs. A former barista, Murphy brewed me the most perfect pour over before offering me a tour of the house and studio. Canoes, ducks and cattails, lanterns, and owls adorned wood paneling walls. Arched built-in bookshelves loaded with books, antique brass, linocut prints, and monograms for Murphy and their partner centered the room. In the studio, a color block desk hugged a window, felt pennants were pinned to the work corkboard. Photography equipment flanked the A-frame attic and large light rings emerged from the old hardwood like alien flowers. We talked as we walked, but the bulk of our conversation took place in the living room, surrounded by yellow floral patterns and embroidered waterfowl.



*Figure 2: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy*

**Nicole Lawrence, Interviewer:** *Tell us about Out of the Attic Photography. How did you make your way to photography?*

**Justin Murphy:** Out of the Attic Photography was an idea I had several years ago. I had been wanting to start my own photography business for quite a while and I found myself out of work again after having been laid off from my job, a result of the impact of the COVID pandemic. It seemed like the perfect time to make the leap. My partner and I had just bought a house and it had this great attic space that I made into a little studio. It got me thinking of being a kid and rummaging through the old photos and clothes in my mammaw's attic and how attics often hold stories about people's lives and that's what I do with my work. So, I just really loved the literal and metaphorical aspect of the name and felt that it would be emblematic of what I'm trying to do.

I have had a fascination with photography since I was young. I spent hours of my time growing up poring over images in magazines of pop stars and rock bands. I would carry them around until the pages were tattered and falling out. I also loved using disposable cameras and things like that to take photos of my friends and school trips. It wasn't until about 7 years ago that I considered doing it as a career. I went back to school at Marshall University for journalism and I took digital imaging and filmmaking classes taught by Tjah Bumgarner and it really clicked with me that this is something I could do. She really opened up my eyes to the power of images and visual storytelling. She is a big reason why I'm doing any of this and she continues to inspire me now.

A lot of my work focuses on the intersection of Appalachian and Queer identities. I've gotten some really cool opportunities: I have documented two years of the Appalachian Queer Youth Summit, several protests, a feature story for Huntington News Network on two incredible drag artists (Nyshyne and Indigo Richwood), PAed for the Elaine McMillion-Sheldon documentary King Coal, photographed a local wrestling event called Slam Plaza, and a lot of other really exciting stuff. I also do a lot of general portraiture for families and that kind of thing. I definitely hope to see my work be primarily focused on the documentary side of photography as I progress.



Figure 3: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy



Figure 4: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

**NL:** *During the pandemic you produced self-portraits. Speak a little about your relationship with the form. Was it difficult to photograph the self? How does it differ from photographing your other works?*

**JM:** I was out of work for a pretty big chunk of time during lockdown and had a lot of time on my hands. I feel like a lot of folks took that time of isolation to create things, which I think says a lot about what actually gives people fulfillment if they are simply given the time to do it. While many took to making bread I chose to focus my efforts on growing my skills as a photographer. I'm a menace in the kitchen anyway. The self-portraits started with a challenge from a photographer, Sam Waxman, that I follow on Instagram. He posted a call for self-portrait submissions, not selfies but actual self-portraits, and he would post them on his stories. That inspired me to do more. The whole world was on lockdown so working with models was pretty much out of the question and I was definitely available so that's just how it all started. Doing them gave me a stronger sense of confidence. I have always had a difficult relationship with my body but through this process I was able to reconcile that a bit and to see more value in my body.



Figure 5: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

I would experiment with different poses and contort my body in different ways just to see what worked and I think because it was just me I felt a sense of freedom to be as weird or silly as I wanted. It can be intimidating to do that as a model working with a photographer. I mean, no one wants to look stupid or embarrass themselves. Self-portraits allowed me to eliminate that fear. I kind of feel like in hindsight that it made me better at directing people when photographing them. A compliment that I seem to get a lot is that I have a unique ability to make my subjects feel comfortable and at ease in front of the camera. Hearing that always means a lot to me because I feel like everyone deserves to feel beautiful and it feels good to help them get to that place.

**NL:** *How does your work tell stories?*

**JM:** Photos can be a really powerful medium for storytelling. When you snap a photo you're freezing a very specific moment of time. It's the closest thing we have to time travel. You can look at old photos and see how people dressed, what their homes looked like, their emotions being written all over their faces, and so much more. That is what I keep in mind every time I lift my camera to my eye. I remember Tjah always saying when I had her in class that everything about what we capture as photographers and videographers should be purposeful—from what we choose to include in the frame down to the angle in which we shoot. You have to be really mindful about what you wish to accomplish by what you're shooting. I try to tap into the feeling of what is happening around me. I think when you can really immerse yourself into your environment that is when you capture real authentic emotion. I think about photographing a protest at the state's capitol over a transphobic healthcare bill. The anger and sadness hung thick in the air but what I felt the most was strength. Seeing all these people united by this cause was truly remarkable. Some folks were fighting for themselves and others were fighting for people that they loved. That takes a lot of guts. Capturing these emotionally raw moments of screaming and tear stricken faces was such a privilege and one that I don't take lightly. I think it allows you to see that these are real people just like yourself, and hopefully, makes you feel more connected to them. Connection is what it's all about in the end.



Figure 6: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

**NL:** *When we last spoke, you mentioned that tension between being queer and being Appalachian, can you speak to your identity as both?*

**JM:** I haven't always felt like I could own both my identities as an Appalachian and queer at the same time. The two always felt at odds with each other. I think the biggest cause of that is the prevalence and influence of evangelical Christianity in the region. At least, that's largely been my experience. I grew up in the Southern Baptist church where I was routinely told that being gay is sick, wrong, that people like that will rot in hell. That takes a major toll on a person's self-worth. At school I was relentlessly bullied and even teachers spoke about their opposition to queerness. That queerness goes against God. That doesn't exactly give queer folks a lot of room to feel like they can safely be themselves. We are still seeing it with our state legislators. The amount of anti-queer legislation and overall fixation on our community is staggering. It definitely sends a message to queer people. It says we are not welcome and are seen as subhuman. I couldn't disagree more with those bigots under that gold dome.





Figure 7: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

I grew up here. My blood, sweat, and tears are in the soil of this region. I have a right to exist here. That's become a big theme in my work. I want to show that queer folks do exist in these mountains. We always have and we always will. On the other side of that coin, I would say that a lot of queer media that I've consumed has told me that in order to live freely as a queer person I need to escape to metropolitan meccas like New York, San Francisco, or Chicago. We are beginning to see more narratives from Appalachian or rural queers but I want more. Those perspectives are so valuable.

**NL:** *Your work pulls in nature, blue collar, analog, magical realist, 70s aesthetics—talk about the significance of those aesthetics with the philosophy behind your photography?*

**JM:** These aesthetics are so significant to me because I have such a strong connection to all of them. They've all influenced me to be the person I am. I don't come from a wealthy family. My family has always had to work hard for what they have. So much of what occupied my mammaw's and aunt's house growing up had been around since the 70s. Definitely an "if it ain't broke don't fix it" mentality. I always loved that. It felt different from the rest of the world, warmer. We spent summers running through the woods at family members' houses and making up scenarios for various adventures. I still feel that magic in West Virginia summers. I like to incorporate these aesthetics in my work because they made me who I am. It's something I want to celebrate.



Figure 8: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

**NL:** *How do you see photographing as a political act?*

**JM:** I think everything we do is inherently political from the brands that we buy to the music we listen to. Every decision we make speaks to what we feel is important and morally right. I think photography is no different. It all goes back to intention. What are you intending to say with your work? Years ago during a panel discussion I attended Elaine McMillion- Sheldon said, “We don’t give people a voice. Everyone already has a voice. We just put the megaphone in front of them.” That has stuck with me ever since. I think photographers and all media makers should always be mindful that there is a lot of responsibility in who you put that megaphone in front of. Whose voice are you amplifying? What messages are you amplifying?

**NL:** *Who are/were the important people in your life and who inspires you?*

**JM:** I am fortunate to have a lot of wonderful people in my life that inspire me endlessly. I have a wonderful and loving partner, Nathan. My best friends Billy and Travis are two of the most loyal and generous people I have ever met. My mom is one of the strongest people I’ve ever known. My Uncle Jay has played a pivotal role in how I see the world. When I was kid I didn’t have too many friends and he would spend a lot of time with me. He got me into punk music and *Star Wars* movies. We spent a lot of time at record stores and going on hiking trips. He’s the one that taught me that being different is good. He DJed a show on WMUL, Marshall University’s radio station, and he would bring me along sometimes. I just always thought he was so cool and he made me feel cool. I still do. He lives in Oklahoma now and still does all kinds of cool stuff like make zines and hosts a music podcast. Anytime I get to see him we just snap back into

speaking almost our own language and it's just a matter of time until we are pilfering through records somewhere. I am really grateful for his influence.



Figure 9: Portrait of Nyshyne and Indigo Richwood, courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

**NL:** *Elaborate more on what you regard as queer joy.*

**JM:** Queer joy is such an important thing to be spreading right now. Anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation keeps getting introduced and passed all over the country. That is why it is so important to make sure we are celebrating queerness. Historically many queer stories and films end in tragedy, which gives the impression that there can be no joy or happiness living a queer life. With everything I do I hope to thwart that message. Being queer is the greatest gift I've ever been given. It is freedom. It is beautiful. It is joyful and joy is an act of resistance.



Figure 10: Courtesy of Out of the Attic Photography, Justin Murphy

---

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Robertson, "Oakland artist transforms Calif. Landscapes into psychedelic photographs." *SFgate*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.sfgate.com/art/article/terri-loewenthal-ansel-adams-landscape-photo-13823608.php>.

#### References

Robertson, Michelle. "Oakland artist transforms Calif. landscapes into psychedelic photographs." *SFgate* (San Francisco, CA), May 17, 2019. <https://www.sfgate.com/art/article/terri-loewenthal-ansel-adams-landscape-photo-13823608.php>.