

IRA LIPPKE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHS

Interview by Nicole Miller

Ira Lippke spent his childhood on the move with his siblings and counter-cultural parents in the forests of Colorado and Washington. In his series *Autobiographs*, Lippke restages and reimagines formative events from his childhood. Over six years, the project has taken him from the Cascade Mountains to the wilderness outside of Bozeman, Montana for the 2013 Rainbow Gathering. As he recasts his past in archetypal forms, examining themes of gender, sexuality, and our connection to nature, Lippke moves beyond his personal history to explore collective memory and ancestral lore.



MILLER: Tell me about your picture “Firewater.” It feels like a scene from a dream.

LIPPKE: When I was five years old, we moved to a one-room cabin in the Rocky Mountains with no electricity and no running water. Then, for three years, we lived in a yellow step van named Blossom. “Firewater” depicts my memory of how we used to bathe while we were living in the woods. My dad created a water heater to heat water over a campfire, and the setup looked almost exactly like this. In the photograph, two actors portray my dad and my mom. You can see the smoke going up and the light coming down around my dad. There’s all this dirt, and yet he creates beauty and cleanness. For me, the scene is a study of the discovery of sexuality and gender, pairing the masculine archetype with the feminine.

MILLER: Why did you want to revisit this scene?

LIPPKE: When you look at a photo, you connect to your past and your story. A memory is created or maintained as the image hits your neural pathways. I don’t have many pictures of my childhood, and so, with this series, I’m starting with the memories and moving the other direction to the photographs.

MILLER: You started this project six years ago. How has your process changed over time?

LIPPKE: With the early pictures, like “Firewater,” I wanted to approach the scene like a painter approaches the canvas and control everything happening in my frame, but when I looked at the images, they looked a little too clean and constructed. Somehow, the feeling wasn’t quite right. In the next round of shooting, I was less concerned with “What did the tent look like?” and more concerned with “What did it feel like?” I also wanted to go to a place where I didn’t have to create all these props—where the staging was just naturally there. So I said, “Let’s go back to Rainbow Gathering.”



MILLER: Tell me about the Rainbow Gathering.

LIPPKE: Rainbow Gatherings started in the early 1970s. My dad was involved in it from the very early days, and it still happens every July. Anyone’s invited. If you have a bellybutton, you’re part of the tribe. When we were at the Montana gathering, there were 23,000 people there. When you get there, everyone’s saying, “Welcome home!” and calling out “We love you!” On the Fourth of July, everyone comes together at noon and forms a big circle. The children put on costumes and paint their faces, and an Indian elder leads them inside the circle with a peace pole, and everyone prays for peace. It’s an amazing, beautiful expression. Then people bring out their drums and guitars, and it turns into a big party. For this series, I wanted to photograph at the Rainbow Gathering because it was the setting that would most naturally resurrect what my childhood was like.

MILLER: How did your time at Rainbow compare to the earlier shoots, when you were trying to re-create a specific scene or event?



LIPPKE: It was much freer. In the image, “Mom and Dad,” Jason and Rebecca Walker are in character as my parents, and their kiss is totally unscripted. I didn’t direct that scene at all. We were just experiencing the event and being part of it. There are other scenes that I did direct. In “Sweat Lodge” you see Jason and Rebecca and their daughter Logan, as my sister, and Isai, the son of another friend, as me, grouped together in a way that I sculpted. I placed their feet and hands exactly where I wanted them to make this kind of family knot. So there are scenes that I directed and scenes that happen because we’re fully in the moment. They both feel real to me. They’re both memories, in that they connect me to these family bonds and bonds with the earth.



MILLER: It seems to me that although the images are about the past, they also have a life of their own. In a way, you’re creating entirely new stories.

LIPPKE: Anytime we tell stories, there’s a degree of separation from the event. As much as we want to be accurate, we’re looking at the experience through a certain lens, and there is without question a subjective quality to memory. In this series, I’m embracing the subjective aspect of my experience, trying to get at what it felt like and how it formed me and who I am now reflecting on it.



For instance, the image “Blossom.” When I was a kid, we lived in a yellow van, and there are pictures of me as a dirty baby with my mom who looks kind of like the woman in the photo. We had a dog that looked just like that dog. But in this scene, those aren’t my actors. It’s someone I saw at the Rainbow gathering. I was walking by, and it was like looking back in time. I asked the woman if I could take her picture, and this image is in line with the practice of reportage or documentary photography.



MILLER: What story are you telling in “How to Start a Fire”?

LIPPKE: When I was six, a woman at the Rainbow Gathering taught me how to build a fire. She was naked and beautiful. I was just a boy, so I was learning how to build a fire, but I was also aware of this beautiful, naked woman. She taught me that to get the fire hotter, you blow on it, which didn’t make much sense to me—if you blow on a candle, you blow it out. I thought, What? It was a very loaded context. Rather than re-enact the scene with an actor, I wanted to bring in an allegorical figure to be that woman. It made sense to have my wife in the picture, looking back through history, part of the same conversation.



MILLER: There's an emotional continuity from that original moment to the relationship you have now with your wife.

LIPPKE: So many of these images are about my early awareness of sexuality and gender. "The Beginning" is based on a memory I have of the first time I tried being naked at the Gathering. Often, these hippie-gatherings are clothing-optional, and I remember saying, "Ok, I'm going to try this." I went back to my tent—I had an orange tent exactly like the one in the photo—and took off my clothes and started walking around. I thought, This feels free. But after while, there was some self-awareness and shame, and I decided I was just more comfortable wearing clothes. Rather than having little Ira re-enact the scene, I thought it would be better for me to re-experience it myself for the photograph.

MILLER: What did it feel like?

LIPPKE: I had many of those same feelings of self-consciousness from when I was a kid, especially with the camera there. For me, this whole series is about an awareness of physicality, sexuality, our connection to nature, our connection to each other, our sense of freedom verses shame, which all reminds me of Eden. In Eden, there are ideas of nakedness and nature, and this balance of freedom and shame.



MILLER: I think your image, "Sylvania," has some of that ambivalence you're talking about. On the one hand, it's very playful—these two figures frolicking in the woods. On the other hand, there's the suggestion of a chase, of a predator and its prey.

LIPPKE: I guess that's a part of my view of sexuality. What's interesting is that some people read these images as dark and sad and heavy, and others read them as totally free and wonderful.

MILLER: What do you think they're responding to that signals the heaviness or the sadness?

LIPPKE: I think that's the subjective element. To me, the images are intentionally a mix. For example, in "Dark Rainbow," the bright colors of the rainbow are so joyful, but they're embedded in the darkness of the storm. To me, the Rainbow Gathering has a dark side. There's drug addiction, a lot of abuse, and reacting to abuse. There are also a lot of people coming together to celebrate and pray for peace and be in harmony with nature. It's a very mixed thing, and I'm trying to hold onto both those things.



MILLER: What's the bridge between the world of your childhood and where you are now? When did you first pick up a camera?

LIPPKE: One summer, when I was fourteen, I was depressed. I remember being in the parking lot of the library in Stanwood. We had just gone to the store to pick up our photos that were being processed. I remember looking at these pictures, and they enabled me to see my life in the third-person, objectively. I realized how many things I had to be thankful for. The pictures gave me a perspective on life that brought me out of this depression. They also showed me the power of a photograph to speak and serve as a means of contemplation. I decided that I wanted to learn how to take a good photo, so I went into the library and got out a book about photography. One of the perks of being home-schooled is that you get to teach yourself things, so I taught myself photography using books from the library and my dad's SLR 35-mm camera. When that camera broke, I bought a Yashika at a thrift store for fourteen bucks, which I still have.

Later, at Biola University, I studied history, literature, philosophy, theology. I paid my way through school as the university photographer and by photographing weddings and bands and album covers. I tried to do every kind of photography I could—architecture, fashion. I did a bunch of product photography, which I hated, but I'm glad I did, because it taught me how to use different approaches.

Now, I can do landscape work, like this image, “The Gloaming.” I can shoot details of still life, like this image called “Sky” or do documentary work or direct a scene. It’s not just one method applied repeatedly. There’s a time to use a hammer and a time to use a drill, and all of these different modes of photography give me access to my memories and feelings in a different way.



MILLER: Your team at Ira Lippke Studios also shoots a lot of weddings and events. How does that kind of photography connect to your fine art photography?

LIPPKE: It’s interesting. People come here to talk with us about shooting their black-tie event at The Plaza, and they see all these dirty naked hippies on the wall. On one level, it feels like a totally different world, but on another level, it’s the same exact subject matter. It’s humans. It’s family. It’s love and gender and sexuality and the spiritual world. What I’m doing as a photographer is documenting and exploring formative events in people’s lives and telling stories.

My original working title for the project was Lore. These scenes felt like stories told around a fire. Before people had photographs, there was oral tradition, and people would tell their family stories regularly to keep that history alive. I think my photography serves that ancient role of ancestral lore, helping people connect with their history.

