

Touching and tender photographs of a woman's first same-sex love

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY - FEATURE

Photographer Jeanette Spicer shares an intimate period of her life spent with a lover named Steff

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There are moments in life when we are cut free and begin to fall away from the structures and beliefs that have informed our identity until we finally let go. In that moment of total release, possibility opens across the vast expanse and the great unknown, a place where anything could happen – and very often does.

For American photographer [Jeanette Spicer](#), that moment came in 2013 after graduating from the MFA program at Parsons The New School for Design in New York. After an intense course of study laden with deep critiques from the group, the artist was now on her own in the world. Exhausted from the pressures of school, Spicer needed to reconnect with her true self. She picked up the camera and some colour film and set out to work.

As a photographer, Spicer collaborates with those closest to her, exploring the innate connections that intimacy affords. At the time of graduation, she had entered into a relationship with a woman, her first. Her girlfriend, who had never modelled before, entered into a silent dialogue that continued for over a year, forging a new space for self-exploration and mutual discovery in a series of photographs that will be published this June in [Sea\(see\)](#) (Kris Graves Projects).

For Spicer, the body is a space of intimacy, connection, and understanding, one that is deepened here by a profoundly emotional and physical bond. Through the camera, she looked at her lover as we often do: as both the magical summation of the whole and the individual parts that entrance, beguile, and undo. Here, Spicer speaks with us about how photography became a means to navigate this pivotal period of her life.

“(The photos) allowed us to be together in a different light” – Jeanette Spicer

What was the inspiration for this body of work?

Jeanette Spicer: My work in grad school was highly conceptual. It was a lot mentally to go through. After graduating, I thought about why I fell in love with photography to begin with, and started going back to using film. It was important to get back to looking at light and colour. For me, that was enough.

The project started with Steff because I was around her all the time. I am interested objectively in the body and the way that it can hold intimacy and reclaim itself, especially the female body because it is so objectified. It's not super conceptual; it's very intuitive.

Since it is the first body of work I made after grad school, it felt as though I had been shoved off a cliff and I was just free falling because that sense of stability and group was gone. The work was initially a by-product of reconnecting to the camera but as the project progressed it started to become more intimate and more about me, her, and us. This was the first woman I dated so it represents a unique time in my life where everything was new and I was young. It gave me a lot of stability as well.

How did the camera create a means to connecting with your girlfriend?

Jeanette Spicer: I was grappling with my own struggles of sexuality. A lot of the photographs came from a place where I felt very contradictory, where I felt like myself but uncomfortable at the same time. In the relationship, I wasn't the most vulnerable one and that was part of the problem: I was not really sure and she was. As the work became more about the two of us, it gave me a way to look at everything from a different standpoint so that I could observe her and us.

The work I make is collaborative. I work with friends and family members, specifically my mum. It's helpful already being close to someone and having this alternate intimacy. That's why I love making the work that I do: you become vulnerable with them in a way that you normally would not and it's really surprising. The work with Steff was allowed me to see her in a different light and vice versa. There is a whole power dynamic and vulnerability that goes into that.



winter morning, 2014 © Jeanette Spicer

Could you speak further about that power dynamic?

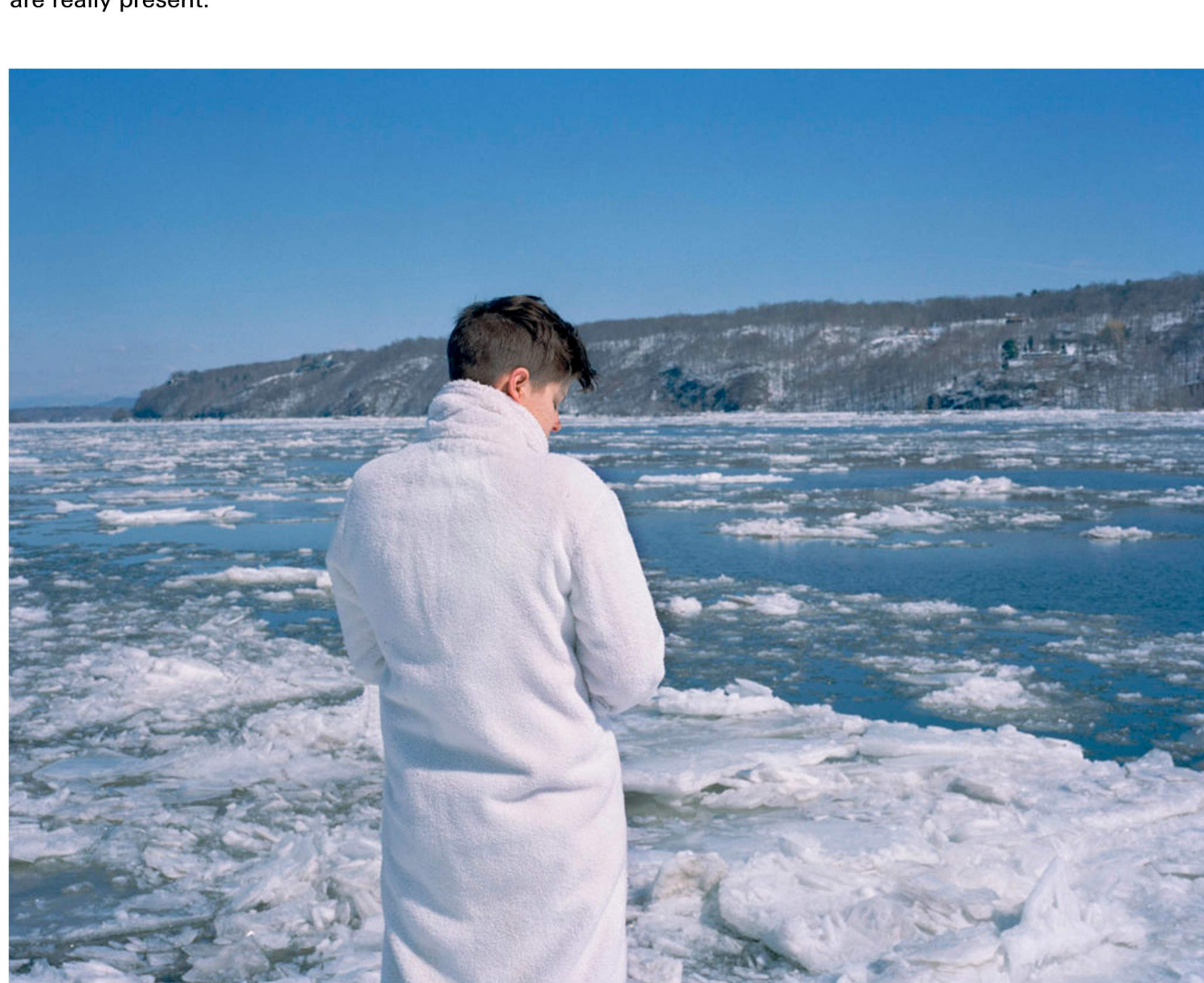
Jeanette Spicer: There were moments where I felt vulnerable when I was shooting her – because I didn't allow that to happen in the relationship. There's a vulnerability for me when I have an idea and I don't know if the person will be comfortable or do it because photography is so important to me. Then it can be awkward: you have this really good idea and you're in the middle of shooting and say, "How about this?"

"No."

It's a bit of a rejection. She was fine with most things but it's funny when you're intimate with someone – obviously, you are seeing them naked and then they would say, "No, I can't do this." It showed me this is something she would show me so that enhanced the feeling that this must be very precious because it was only for me to see.

How did the camera become a means to create a new form of communication in the relationship?

Jeanette Spicer: We were working two to three weekends of the month on this. Because she trusted me and supported it, she was open. It allowed us to be together in a different light. There is a silence to it. It was really lovely. There would be anywhere from three to eight hours of shooting where we wouldn't need to have a conversation but we were engaged with one another. I love making work with people I am close to because it opens up another space where we can be together in a meditative, relaxing space where you are really present.



untitled, 2014 © Jeanette Spicer

Could you talk about the relationship between the female gaze and the female body?

Jeanette Spicer: I predominantly work with women but it wasn't until I worked with Steff that I started claiming the phrase "the female gaze." It's a way to reclaim the body and my space, which is so quickly taken away from me mostly by men in a variety of ways – especially in photography.

There are many iterations and nuances within the female gaze. It's important to differentiate between a queer woman looking at another woman's body, a queer woman looking at her partner's body, and a straight woman looking at a woman's body. I don't frequently see a lot of queer women photographing their partners and it needs to have more visibility.

At the same time, there's a subtlety to it. I have said, "I don't think my work is political," and people have said, "Are you kidding me?" But that doesn't feel like the right term for me. I know that I am dealing with issues that can be political but the work is also meant to talk about photography: light and colour, and how we engage with our subjects. I want it to be accessible to other people. I want it to be open. It's about love for another person.

Also the way I approach the work is quiet and intimate. I'm interested in domestic settings, interiors, and the way the body can immerse itself in space, whether that is outside or inside, and how we can claim our space or find any kind of connection. In a lot of ways I wanted her to be really empowered. For example, we were on Fifth Avenue and she flashed me. She can do that. It's legal. It's her body and I was exploring that – and even my own body to a degree.

“I don't frequently see a lot of queer women photographing their partners and it needs to have more visibility” – Jeanette Spicer

Could you talk about how the cropping of body parts became a means of contemplation of your partner?

Jeanette Spicer: The camera that I am using is a medium format 6 x 7 camera. The focus on this camera is very tricky. You don't necessarily see the whole picture so it forces you to be right in the middle, not too close but not too far.

Some of it was thinking about logistics. I wanted a particular shot to be seen by the public and I knew I could not include her face or a way where she would be identified. That informed some of the cropping, shadows, and profile shots. The body can become another part of the space. It can also show the femininity and the masculinity in her braided together. The body is intriguing and I wanted to know more about it and the way to do that is these more severe shots.

There were other things that were more important, like detail shots. I was standing on the bed looking down at her hands against a green curtain and she has blood on her hands; it was my blood. My eye is trained to see light, colour, body language, and detail. I also want people to see the environment and recognise that we are in a bed in an apartment.

What does the title mean?

Jeanette Spicer: The title talks about the conflicts I felt the entire time we were together: being in my natural habitat and being taught that it's wrong – there was a lot of guilt and confusion wrapped up in that. How could I feel so at home and at peace and then so resentful and conflicted? There was a lot of turmoil where two things were happening at once the entire time.

We went to Virginia Beach for eight days, shot almost every day, and broke up very soon after that. I did most of my photographs of her at the ocean and the ocean represented many things I dealt with throughout the relationship: power, intensity, creativity, and peace.

Sea(see) will be available in June from Kris Graves