



Melissa Shook: Freedom to Create

September 18–December 19, 2025

Opening Reception:

Thursday, September 25th, 3–5 pm

Stevenson Library, Bard College

Melissa Shook

(b. 1939, New York, NY; d. 2020, Chelsea, MA)

ca. 1960s

Silver Gelatin Print

Photograph by Kemper Peacock.

"I have begun to realize how important freedom is for the person who desires to create in any way."

— Melissa Shook (age 17), Bard College Application, 1956

Melissa Shook: Freedom to Create traces the celebrated photographer's formative relationship with Bard College—where she studied from 1959 to 1961—through a recent, generous gift from her daughter, Krissy Shook. Letters exchanged with family and friends, graded essays, Bard newsletters, professor evaluations, and portraits of alumni collected over the years join a suite of ceramics and handmade artist books that span a life's work devoted to daily observation and personal identity. Shook's cameras are displayed alongside exhibition catalogues and postcards, artist interviews, and selected contact sheets and prints from her seminal *Daily Self-Portraits* (1972–73) and *Wellfleet* (1973) series.

Guided by Shook's Bard application essay insight that freedom is essential "to create in any way," the exhibition illuminates self-discovery, the conditions that nurture creativity, and the liminal space of young adulthood. Bard emerges as both campus and catalyst: a place where lifelong friendships formed, identities took shape, and an English major who once noted she had no plans to teach evolved into a pioneering photographer and beloved UMass Boston educator—proof that creative paths belie prediction.

By pairing personal ephemera, marked-up contact sheets, and completed prints, *Freedom to Create* maps thought, process, and product onto the interconnected roles of student, artist, and teacher, inviting visitors to trace their own through-lines of becoming. This exhibition highlights the unintentionally seeded experimentation that fuels an artist's growth. As you move through, consider not only where you are going, but also: What do I need to create?

Thank you to Tom Wolf, Krissy Shook, Miyako Yoshinaga, Rachel Brown, and the Stevenson Library Exhibition Team for your help in bringing this exhibition to life.

Curated by Fiona Laugharn '12

Bard College

EXHIBITION SPACE 1ST & 2ND FLOORS, STEVENSON LIBRARY, BARD COLLEGE