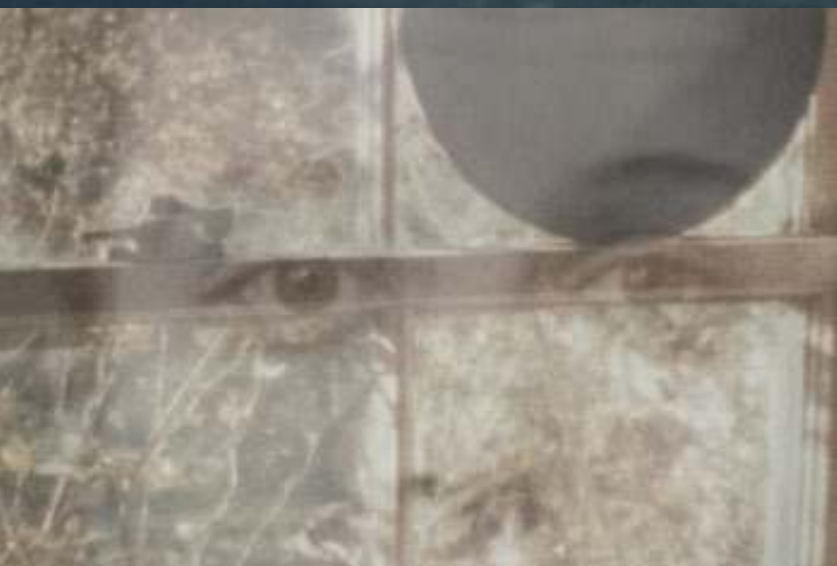




Melissa Shook

The Making of a Documentary

All photographs and Super 8 stills by Melissa Shook.
Kristina Shook & The Estate of M. Melissa Shook.
Courtesy MIYAKO YOSHINAGA, New York.

In early 2025, a huge box was delivered to the home of Los Angeles-based filmmaker Sarah Feinbloom. Inside were some 150 photographs, taken in the 60s and 70s by New York-born photographer Melissa Shook (1939-2020). The photographs had been sent by Kristina “Krissy” Shook, the photographer’s daughter, to start the process of making a documentary, Feinbloom tells me.

– I have known Krissy since we were in our early teens. We became friends after she and Melissa moved from the Lower East Side in New York to Boston. She stood out immediately. Krissy had a New York toughness but also a disarming vulnerability. We stayed close friends over the years and then she asked for my help, as she wanted to make a documentary about her mother. I went on to study

political theory at my university because I was trying to be practical, but my passion was art history. Later on, during my own explorations, I was drawn back to the art world, and especially feminist artists, photographers and performance artists. As a teenager, I had been aware that Krissy’s mother was a photographer but it was much later as an adult that I really took note of Melissa’s work, including her incredible self-portraits from the 60s and 70s. These predated the work of so many of the artists I was studying. While many male photographers of the 60s and 70s focused on more public, political themes and subjects they often didn’t know personally, Melissa Shook’s lens was up close and relational, feminist and domestic. Her portraits were incredible. Sure, I knew that Melissa had a lot to deal with in her life, sexism, self-doubt, the struggles of being a single mother and other things but I remember thinking, “Why isn’t she better known?”

What was your reaction when you opened the box and went through the photographs?

– I had seen only a little of Melissa’s work by then, perhaps 10 photographs that she had taken of Krissy. And here were 150! Knowing Krissy and having known Melissa, going through the photographs of their lives together was such an emotional experience. And then I found out that these were just a fraction of all the photographs Melissa had taken of Krissy, from when she was a baby

Left page: Montage of cropped stills from the documentary *Your Eyes and Love in Grain and Shadow*.



and into her late teens. Wow! Krissy and I had discussed a documentary about Melissa while she was still alive but then she died in 2020. It was during COVID, a crazy time. I had my own documentary film company; GOOD DOCS, and I had to make a living. We discussed the idea of a documentary again. Initially, it was going to be a simple film, put together by a friend of mine, almost like a portfolio, with a spoken, formal biographical narration and some music, and I asked Krissy to send me photographs to use. When my friend got sick, I stepped in as director. After looking at this huge trove of photographs again and again, a very different kind of film started to form in my mind, something much more personal. I was astonished by the depth and breadth of the photographs and the creativity. The give and take between this mother and daughter is so unique and special and it's also complex, emotional, and at times painful. I started imagining the narration, Krissy's voiceover, and it was almost as if I was channelling Krissy, and I heard it as if she were speaking directly to her mother.



Melissa Shook.

Top. March 17 (?), 1973, from *Daily Self-Portraits* 1972-1973 series, gelatin silver print.

Bottom. March 19, 1973, from *Daily Self-Portraits* 1972-1973 series, gelatin silver print.

Right page. Untitled, *Krissy by the window*, circa 1969, from *Krissy* series, gelatin silver print.



Were you planning to use photographs only initially?

– Initially the concept was basically to show a selection of photographs, add some music and a voice-over but that's not a film, more like a souped-up slideshow. I was sitting there looking at the photographs, thinking, "Damn! it would be really nice if there was some film!" At first, I thought of acquiring some stock footage of the skyline of New York and the Lower East Side, just to set the stage but that didn't feel right, since the photographs were so personal. I asked Krissy if she had any film but she said, "No, there's nothing. You have the photographs, and that's enough." But I pressed her, "Are you sure?" And she said, "Well, there is one roll of Super 8 but I've never watched it and I don't know where it is." Anyway, she found one roll and sent it to me and I was spellbound because it was really atmospheric. I suspected there must be more Super 8 footage somewhere, and kept prodding Krissy. She was overwhelmed at that time, because she was working on a photo book as well. Slowly, more film rolls arrived. They had never been processed or seen, so we had to send them to a specialist to be developed. The 17 rolls of footage that Krissy found

turned out to be very poetic, beautiful, eerie and powerful, Krissy as a baby, Melissa, young and beautiful, beach scenes with Darryl Clegg, Krissy's father, cats in their apartment and Melissa's friends. There was also footage of hippies on the streets of the Lower East Side, which really captured the zeitgeist. Melissa clearly had talent, and you can see the makings of a young cinematographer. It is too bad she didn't get to really pursue it further. Krissy and I watched all this newly discovered footage together on Zoom and I knew that we had the material for a great film, not just a slideshow.

How did you structure the film at that stage?

– My idea, along with my editor Alex Regalado, was to move in and out between the Super 8 footage and the photographs and weave them to connect everything. We felt an immense responsibility to Melissa, a woman who was not only a great photographer but who had the essence of a cinematographer and it was all there and it was beautiful. There's poetry to her filming, a stillness, you can sense Melissa observing, but there is also playfulness. Krissy runs towards the camera; it's really lovely and innocent. Alex enhanced the footage here and there

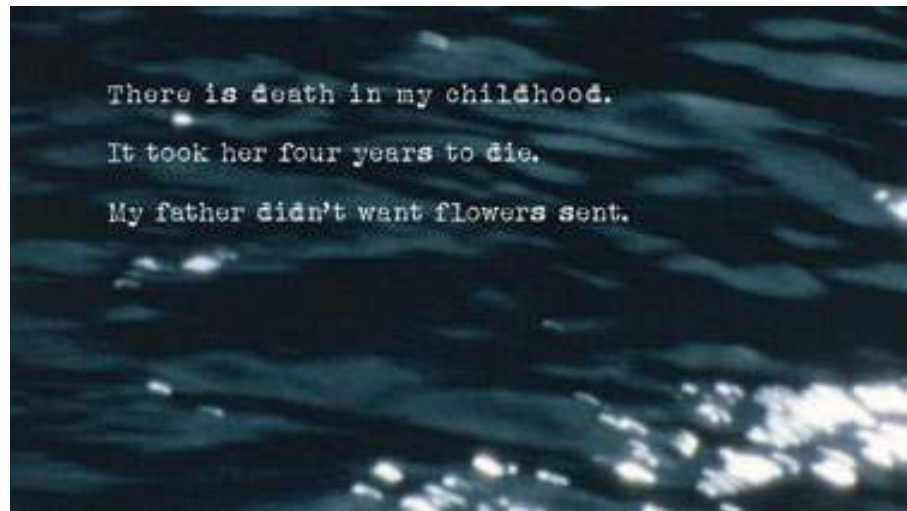


Stills, one cropped, from the documentary
Your Eyes and Love in Grain and Shadow.

by slowing it down to make it more lyrical. Super 8 is such a rich medium. It has lovely colours and a grainy feeling that feels very poetic. Getting the 17 rolls of Super 8 was as if somebody had handed me a box of gold, and said, “Here you are, just polish it.” And then a final roll of Super 8 film emerged. Krissy found it in a purse of Melissa’s. It felt as if she had left it there for us. “Here are all these bread crumbs, and now you can put them all together and make something.” Maybe I’m fabricating this, but I have a feeling that Melissa saved this footage, hoping that someday it would end up being used. The last roll was just incredible. It shows Krissy dancing in high school, and Krissy shimmying in a sequin dress.

It seems to me that the opening footage in the film was chosen with great care.

– Yes, you are right it was a huge decision, and the idea to open the film with footage of Melissa sitting in the park came from our great producer S.C. Smith. He insisted on it, and it was a brilliant idea. She



looks very sad and then she looks directly into the camera and you can’t ask for anything better as a filmmaker. This opening shot lets the viewer know that this is a film where you can connect with this person, that she is very honest and that nobody is hiding anything and I think that’s really true of how Melissa lived her life.

Did Krissy open up more and more in the voice-over as the work on film progressed?

– The first time we recorded the voiceover, essentially a scratch track, Krissy did her best when reading the first draft of the script and adding a little



here and there. We weren't in a professional studio, so it was hard. That was in May 2025, three months before we even knew that there was Super 8 footage at all, we thought we only had the photos. The final voiceover was recorded in a professional recording studio and that was very important for the result. Money was an issue and developing the Super 8 films cost thousands to get processed so we were lucky when our consultant Swiss Nigerian director and actor Jarreth Merz managed to get us a good recording deal. We arrived at the recording studio and it was there that Krissy brought it all home because now she had seen the film and the new footage and she was in a professional setting, in a booth by herself, so she could really get in the zone. It got very emotional. All I had to do was say, "You're talking to Melissa, to your mother," and that's what she did. The film was something that Krissy promised Melissa she would complete when Melissa was dying. And when we finished our film, Krissy said to me, "Sarah, I feel so complete, so relieved, like I have honoured my mother's wishes." For us as friends, to be creative together was very special. I have made a lot of films over the years; about the Lakota on Pine Ridge, about hill tribe people in Thailand, about child trafficking, all very intense topics but this film really stands out to me as one of the great honours of my life. To top it off, we were incredibly lucky to be able to license music from a great American composer, Pulitzer Prize and Grammy winner Caroline Shaw. We are all very proud of the finished film.

Entitled *Your Eyes and Love in Grain and Shadow*, the film premiered at Photo London in May. It's short, roughly 16 minutes, but it's an intense experience. While deeply personal, it's also a love letter to a particular time in New York and the community on the Lower East Side. More footage could have been used, as well as a vast number of black and white photographs. Did the text for the voiceover dictate the length of the film?

– I have an intrinsic belief that there's a blueprint for how long something is supposed to be and that I simply have to discover it. I don't really think about length. I think about how interesting and rhythmic a film should be and what the energy should be like as I'm watching it. I felt that this film had to be structured chronologically, Melissa's early years, Krissy as a baby, Krissy growing up and at the end, Krissy appears as a grown woman and as an artist in her own right. I knew we were going to make a short film, because we didn't have enough footage to stretch it much further. I also don't think that something has to be long to be really good. Rhythmically, I wanted to do certain things differently in each section, like I wanted the baby section to be really slow and lyrical, and then I wanted things to be more staccato, and then a section with a funky feeling, and then something almost frantic. In the end we used all these strategies to convey our core themes. A glimpse of girlhood, a vanished New York City, the early experiments of a remarkable female artist. And an important reminder to cherish those we love.



Since her passing in 2020, Melissa Shook has become much better known, thanks to the efforts of her daughter and New York gallerist Miyako Yoshinaga. *Daily Self-Portrait 1972-1973* was published by TBW Books in 2023, and next year, Bilder Atlas will publish *Krissy*. Initially, Melissa Shook's self-portraits and the photographs of her daughter might seem obsessive but as Krissy Shook explains, there was a reason for that. I started my conversation with her by asking her about her mother's early years.

– She didn't have an easy childhood. Her mother died from stomach cancer when Melissa was 12. She had gone from Long Island to a hospital in Chicago to try to get care. She kept thinking she was going to get better because, at that time, doctors in America did not tell patients if they were dying of cancer. Her father was an alcoholic, and just drank while her mother was sick. When her mother died, a nurse came from Chicago to Long Island and married her father. Her new step-mother treated her like a rag-doll, cut her hair, chose what dresses she should wear and so on. Eventually, my grandfather sobered up and divorced that woman and married for the third time, the love of his life. For Melissa, it had all been deeply traumatic and it ricocheted into a kind of amnesia. She told me she didn't remember anything about her mother; her voice, if her mother had a nickname for her, if she had ever said that she loved her. Years later, we did find a letter her mother had written to Melissa's father, saying she was going to get better soon, be a better wife, and that Melissa's dress and coat were in the cedar chest, a very detailed letter, and that's the only thing we have from her. Melissa was indifferent towards her father. I was very close with my grandfather and his third wife. I asked my grandfather several times, "Before you pass on, can you please write a letter to Melissa about her mother?" I wanted him to fill in the gaps. What colour did she like? Did she wear perfume? Did she play backgammon? Did she speak French? Anything, anything! I told Melissa that I had asked him to write that letter. After he died, Melissa searched absolutely everywhere in his house but there was no letter to be found.

Her father gave her a Pentax camera for her 18th birthday. Had she asked for a camera?

– There are several snapshots of my grandfather with a camera. Maybe he thought, "I have a camera, I should give her one." He didn't know



Melissa Shook.

Top. Page Street, San Francisco, 1967 (Krissy on her father's shoulder), 1967, from *Krissy* series, gelatin silver print.

Bottom. December 13, 1972, from *Daily Self-Portraits 1972-1973* series, gelatin silver print.

Right page. Krissy and Niki, Ellen's loft, circa 1969, from *Krissy* series, gelatin silver print.



he was helping her find her life's calling. She took the camera to Bard College. She studied English literature and I have an old resumé, where she wrote "Photography" under "Hobbies". There are lots of contact sheets of her college friends, especially Barbara Colby, who later became an actress. Sadly, she was killed in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles. Later on, Melissa took classes at Columbia University with Paul Byers about using photography in an interdisciplinary way, branching into anthropology and other areas. This was a very different time and my grandfather insisted she train as a typist to have something practical to fall back on. She did learn to type 90 words per minute. She might have worked as a typist in her early years. She had all sorts of odd jobs to make ends meet, she crocheted bikinis, did research for libraries in New York, worked as a dancing model. Financially, life was a real struggle for her. Late in life, she made a little recording, stating that if she hadn't sold some of her photographs to MoMA, thanks to John Szarkowski, she would have never been able to become a teacher, first at Dalton in New York City, then at MIT, then the University of Massachusetts in Boston. For the first time in her life, she had a solid job.

The documentary really captures the atmosphere on the Lower East Side in the 60s and 70s.

– When we were living on East Fifth Street, she befriended a wonderful commercial photographer named Will Faller and his ex-wife, Marion Faller, also a photographer, Will taught Melissa how to use the darkroom and she loved the darkroom. She and her friends would talk endlessly about darkroom work. Will was also a street photographer and Melissa would roam the streets from early morning to late at night with him and watch him take pictures.

I don't recall having seen any street photographs by her.

– Melissa didn't do street photography. She didn't feel comfortable photographing people she didn't know. She really needed to have a personal connection with people and spend time with them. In the 80s, she did a whole series on homeless women and only because she had volunteered at Pine Street Inn, a homeless shelter in Boston, for five years before starting the project. Somebody told her, "You have to do what you do, take pictures of these women and document their stories." Melissa wouldn't have thought of that herself, because again, these were other people's lives but she got to know them really well.



Your father, Darryl Clegg, appeared in the early part of the *Krissy* series and in the Super 8 films. You say in the film that it was you and her, and that he disappeared, as did other men in her life. – They had both studied at Bard College but didn't date there. He was the only student who was given his own art studio to paint in, indicating that he had real talent. Darryl had presence and people

Still from *Your Eyes and Love in Grain and Shadow*.

Above. Melissa Shook, *Untitled (Krissy with disheveled hair)*, circa 1974, from the *Krissy* series, gelatin silver print.

took notice when he entered a room but he had deep emotional scars. His mother had died of skin cancer when he was eighteen and it really crippled him. Melissa tried very hard to get him to stay in our lives but she couldn't make it work. She paid for his clothes and art supplies but eventually she said, "Darryl, I can't pay for your stuff and for Krissy's." Then he left us, eventually turning up with a new girlfriend. Visits that were supposed to last for hours ended up being 20 minutes. Later on, when I was in high school, we met up and I told him I was struggling with depression. His answer was, "Oh, well, it builds character", and I said, "No, I'm sorry, it doesn't." Melissa saw other men after he left. She would get so excited, and then they would leave but she understood that everybody comes with a certain amount of damage, so she never, ever got angry about it.



You were photographed by her on a daily basis. Was it ever irritating or bothersome?

– Not at all! Maybe it's my genetic makeup, or a New York thing. I'm quick to grasp what people are about. And my mother came with a camera! The *Krissy* series came about, photographing me endlessly. Not because I was a cute child, not because I was biracial, but because Melissa wanted to save memories because she had lost all her memories of her mother and early childhood. The beautiful thing was, I had all this freedom that she didn't have in her childhood. I danced at the Henry Street Settlement, in our apartment. I would paint walls and we would sit on the floor and eat our food. It was the 60s and 70s on the Lower East Side, everything was sort of funky. You didn't have to have rules and regulations. I didn't have to pose for her. Some of the pictures are out of focus, and Melissa loved that, because I was being me, and so were my friends, whom she photographed in their lofts and apartments.

You grew up in New York on the Lower East Side when it was pretty buzzing and wild, and in some parts dangerous. And then you moved to Boston. What was that like?

– It was a culture shock. I loved the Lower East Side. I didn't really pay much attention to the junkies and the drunks. There was a great vibe and anything went. Melissa's friend Jeanne Lee was a great jazz

musician. I was friends with her daughter Naima, and all the others that you see in those childhood pictures. We would go to their homes in the afternoon and stay until late. Melissa had a tremendous amount of support from friends, telling her, "Go there and show your work." I never wanted to leave New York. I also felt being mixed race and kind of wild, that New York was the place that I fit in but Melissa needed a stable income so we moved to Boston. Jim Hughes, editor at Camera 35, helped her fill in the application to teach at MIT. She included seven of her photographs and got the job. We lived in Brookline. I made some wonderful friends but they lived in homes with couches and matching arm chairs, had dinner tables with table cloths, very different from homes on the Lower East Side. Later on, I moved back to New York to study at Sarah Lawrence College on a full scholarship.

She did have exhibitions, but in the context of the gallery world, they were pretty low-key. Why didn't she manage to establish a career as a photographer?

– She did have a few shows when I was growing up. I remember walking through SoHo, seeing a Krissy show at one of the galleries. The thing was, Melissa was incredibly shy. I have been told that, at gallery openings, she wanted to run to the bathroom and hide out there and until it was over. She just didn't



have that kind of moxie personality that it takes to break through in the art world but she was very solid when it came to her photography. Her friend Sally Stein and other people have speculated that had she not left New York, she would have been forced to get herself out there and I think people would have rallied when they saw the work. Instead, we went to Boston and hit the ground running. She carried on teaching and doing her incredible work with me until I was 18, later with homeless women and other projects. These days, when Miyako Yoshinaga shows her work at the fairs, there are always people who were students of hers coming to the stands, saying how important her classes were to them and how they deepened their passion for photography, making them decide to become photographers. She tried to interest galleries in the 80s and 90s but at that point nobody was interested in the 60s and 70s. She kept all of her rejection letters. It must have been deeply depressing for her. She would have liked to have seen what's happening now, but she had no regrets about being a photography teacher.

What were her last years like?

– She was working on a series on aging, photographing herself, documenting it with newspapers and writing. Melissa had made a wonderful friend, a dancer, and he got her dancing again. I watched

them dance in a beautiful dance room in Cambridge that you could rent for \$15 an hour. I regret I didn't get up and dance, but I wanted to just watch my mother dancing. Later on, we went to have tea and coffee, and she said, "It's like the 70s again!" and she was so happy. And then she got sick. She was diagnosed with brain cancer. It came at a point when she was so busy creating art. I packed my stuff and came back east and took care of her for the last two years of her life. I was honoured to do that because she had done so much for me.

She passed away in 2020.

– We went to see a lawyer to go over everything, and she said, "I'm giving you all my photographs!" She told me about all the things she had wanted to do, books, shows and a documentary. I promised to make books of the *Krissy* series and the series of daily self-portraits taken 1972-1973. Those were the two series that were most personal to her. And then she passed away. I panicked because I was sitting there with boxes and boxes of photographs so I contacted Sally Stein, pleading, "Sally, please help!" She told me that she knew a gallerist in New York, Miyako Yoshinaga, and that she had done wonders for Ken O'Hara as well as other photographers. Within two weeks we had a conference call. About four weeks later, Miyako came to Boston. We met at my place.

Melissa Shook.

Left page. Just before going to Washington D.C. for Vietnam protest march, circa 1967, from *Other Self-Portraits* series, gelatin silver print.

Right. Krissy and Melissa, August 1973, from *Daily Self-Portraits 1972-1973* series, gelatin silver print.

Bottom. Krissy, Short Street (Boston), circa 1975, from *Krissy* series, gelatin silver print.



She spent four hours looking at photographs and was very impressed by what she saw. She opened her suitcase and started putting photographs in, and I had to hold back and not shout, “Hallelujah!”

It led to her gaining the recognition that eluded her in life.

– It has been unbelievable. We have shown her work at Paris Photo three times now, and at Photo London this year. Miyako has reintroduced her to a wide

audience. Some people knew her, and most didn’t. My mother wasn’t a talker like I am. She communicated through her photo-

graphs and it has been emotional to see visitors respond to her work, that the photographs speak to them on a deep and personal level. It has been a dream come true. As for the documentary, I think Melissa would have loved it.

To see the trailer and request a link to the film, go to miyakoyoshinaga.com/video