I
n this innovative exhibition, Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and artist Jill Evans Petzall questions what it means to take a photograph, as she explores the fickleness of meaning within travel photography. This multi-layered work alerts us that the photographic image creates a world of its own—and has the power to mediate our relationships to the world around us.

Blending documentary style with poetic imagery, the exhibit offers photographs that Petzall shot over three years while in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Singapore. Based on her belief that all images contain untold stories, Petzall challenges gallery viewers to bring her work to life by playfully imagining stories for the photographs. Visitors to the exhibit can invent and record their own stories about the images, adding their unique interpretations to the installation. In the gallery's immersive display, the images are interspersed with quotes by well-known authors, critics and artists including John Berger, John Cage, Thich Nhat Hanh, Michael Ondaatje, Susan Sontag, Alfred Stieglitz and others.

A related website also offers the entire range of 57 photographs with a growing selection of visitors’ recorded stories. This website provides a wider general public a chance to see, hear, and contemplate the evolving exhibit—any portion of which they can share through social media beyond the gallery space. www.stillliveswithstories.com.

The interactive installation actively alters viewers to explore what snapshot photography does to themselves and to the world alike. Her photographs and visitors’ corresponding (often contradictory) ideas challenge us all to question the thorny relationship between photography, memory, and truth.

Jill Evans Petzall strives to make art with moral meaning, whether in video, film, photography, poetry, or animation. Winner of four Emmy awards, among other honors including the Distinguished Alumna Award from Washington University’s School of Arts and Sciences, and a Maya Angelou Award for Media Literacy, Jill’s works have been on broadcast and cable television, shown in art galleries and international film festivals, and used as advocacy tools to promote the rights of women around the world. Her graduate degree in the philosophy of aesthetics nurtured her ideas about the interplay between image, narrative, language, and silence. Jill grew up with radio, and is committed to the oral tradition in her media art to help make change she wants to see in the world.

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Created by Jill Evans Petzall, this display uses digital art that invites community interaction to explore the complex relationships we have with our cameras and our self-images. Cutting across commonplace assumptions, this interactive series shows how images cannot do without, but instead, must require and inspire stories about what’s visible and invisible. Each story that viewers tell about a photograph lets us all see the world through someone else’s eyes. In this open space of art, the main story is about interpretation because all voices matter.

“Photography is an illusion that is also a fact.”

—Alfred Bazin
You’re Invited…

As gallery visitors, you are invited to interact with the photographs by recording your narratives or brief responses to single images – bringing the photographic still lives to life. Take your time to consider any image framed along the gallery walls. Please schedule a date to record your voice, with the help of the artist, by contacting plincoln@thesheldon.org. Curated stories about the images will become a powerful and lasting part of the installation. All images with their stories can also be accessed at any time at stillliveswithstories.com.

When you pose like a still life for a photo, how do you ‘picture’ yourself?

Jill Evans Petzall’s interactive installation penetrates the ways that Western values and biases proliferate across cultures through stereotypes in travel photography. Shot in Southeast Asia, the photographs show posed mannequins paired with posing tourists – strangely static human bodies that become metaphorical ‘still lives’, inspiring the title Still Lives with Stories.

This installation interrogates the intense relationships we have with our cameras, and questions how our idealized images impact attitudes about race, gender, other cultures, and our own identities.

Have snapshots become the single proof for our memories and perceptions? What other messages do our photos preserve beyond ourselves and our poses?

By exploring images set in changing contexts, viewers can connect their own ideas to these questions, rather than remaining outside of them. In this installation, Petzall asks us all to become active collaborators and discover what our snapshots reveal about us beyond ourselves and our ‘selfies.’