For over fifty years, Roddy MacInnes has used photography as a tool to document his life and explore its contours. Since 2001, he has channeled his passion for autobiographical photography into teaching students at the University of Denver as an associate professor in the School of Art & Art History.

Growing up in Scotland after World War II, MacInnes first became interested in photography when he noticed how much his relatives enjoyed having their photos taken during family vacations to the countryside.

“In my developing awareness, a connection between photography and happiness was formed,” MacInnes said.

Since then, photography has served as a continued source of introspection, as well as a tool for exploring his personal relationship with the universe.

This spring, MacInnes taught a course called Experiences in the Visual Arts, in which students used photography to foster intergenerational dialogues with senior citizens. During an 11-week experiential course nicknamed “Life Walks,” twenty-two DU students were paired with twenty-two residents of the Clermont Park retirement community in nearby Greenwood Village. The pairs shared old family photographs, discussed significant memories, and staged new photographs of each other, getting to know each other along the way.

Both students and seniors were moved by the relationships they built over the course of this project.

“During an emotional group discussion after hanging the exhibition, there was much reflection about the importance of intergenerational engagement,” MacInnes said. “For example, some seniors had become estranged from their grandchildren, and some students had become estranged from their grandparents. Both groups expressed this as a sense of loss.”

In this case, photography served as a conduit for relationship-building between groups of people with vastly different life experiences and ways of understanding the world.

“I love photography because it stops time and mirrors reality, which makes it a catalyst for endless philosophical debate about existence,” said MacInnes. In the end, he hopes that “everyone took away from the class an enriched perspective about time and the importance of relationships.”
Recently, MacInnes received an AHSS Creative Arts Materials Fund (CAMF) grant for another exploratory photography project—an artistic collaboration with his brother Dugie, an expressive mosaic artist who lives in Scotland, and who draws inspiration from the geology and archaeology of Scotland.

The CAMF grant allowed MacInnes to purchase three high-quality camera lenses for this project, tentatively titled “The Argyll Boys.” The show is expected to be displayed in Scotland in October 2017 and in Chicago in winter 2018.

Through two distinct mediums, the MacInnes brothers will communicate their unique perspectives of a place that holds shared meaning in their lives—Argyll, their native home. Roddy MacInnes describes their difference in perspectives this way:

“My brother is introverted; his art is abstract. On the other hand, I am extroverted; my art is more literal.”

“My mother always joked that if we were out playing in the forest and a spaceship landed, I’d immediately run back to the village to tell everyone. However, you’d have to ask my brother if anything happened while we were playing—if you were lucky, maybe he’d tell you about the spaceship.”

It is precisely this divergence of perspective and method of expression that intrigues him.

For MacInnes, photography helps him explore the topography of places and relationships, illuminating difference and highlighting commonalities. For his brother, mosaic art serves a similar purpose, even though its visual outcome is completely different.

This interest in exploring the dimensions of human difference and commonalities spills into another long-term project of MacInnes’, in which he asks participants to identify a photograph they would bring with them when fleeing a burning house. He later photographs them with their chosen image.

“Regardless of a person’s background or ethnicity,” MacInnes said, “everyone chooses the same photograph. They choose a photograph of someone they love.”