Exemplified in the oeuvres of photographers Alfred Stieglitz, Harry Callahan, Lee Friedlander, and Emmet Gowin, the photographer’s wife is a distinctive subject in twentieth-century American fine-art photography that fuses the domains of public and private life through the conflation of art and marriage. The transgressive nature of this juncture can be located in a confluence of gazes - the artist’s, the subject’s, and the viewer’s - that are embroiled in constructing subjectivities. The phrase “photographer’s wife” underscores an assumed imbalance of power reflecting a binary of active/passive, artist/model, and husband/wife. It is this study’s contention that the complexity of the wife’s role in the inspiration and production of her husband’s creative output and the fluid nature of this interdependency are significant factors in images of her made by him and that they undermine the efficacy of this binary. A discursive examination of the subject, with an emphasis on Gowin’s Edith series, will determine how perceptions of marriage affect the viewing of those images.

Since the early 1970s, Gowin has guided the critical reception of his photographs with a distinctly anagogical reading of the works. This study contrasts Gowin’s narrative with a discursive reading, allowing the works to be examined suprapersonally as a means of determining the larger dynamic traditions from which they derive. The subject implicates numerous discourses that are examined within the areas of gender and power, portraiture and self-portraiture, representation and identity, and viewer reception. Additionally, images in the Edith series often traverse the genre formations of photography. By defamiliarizing family, snapshot, documentary, and art photography, Gowin’s images create intervals between genres allowing them to be viewed intertextually as contained by the boundaries of genre formation and outside of it. This aspect of the work illustrates how images of the photographer’s wife can be viewed at the interstices of the public and private worlds of art and marriage, as well as across photographic genres. Viewed discursively, the photographer’s wife can be examined as a dynamic production of knowledge that is shaped and reshaped over time.
When photographer Emmet Gowin wasn’t taking pictures of moths, his wife Edith was a favorite subject. In this nighttime photo, Gowin captured a time-lapse tracery of illuminated moths in flight is visible behind Edith’s out-of-focus face. Cana Mine town. A new book of photographs showcases the spectacular colors and patterns of nocturnal moths from Central and South America, revealing them to be just as vibrant and diverse as any butterfly. “Mariposas Nocturnas: Moths of Central and South America, a Study in Beauty and Diversity” (Princeton University Press, 2017) collects over 1,300 color images of moths — some of which have never been documented alive before — taken by photographer Emmet Gowin, an emeritus professor of photography at Princeton University. Collection of Emmet and Edith Gowin ( all images © Edith and Emmet Gowin and courtesy of Pace MacGill Gallery, New York). There are at least three exhibitions in Hidden Likeness: Photographer Emmet Gowin at the Morgan currently at the Morgan Library & Museum (May 22–September 20, 2015). The first and largest one consists of Gowin’s photographs and objects, and the various drawings, books, illuminated pages, anonymous snapshots and other items he has selected from the museum’s permanent collection to pair with them.