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To Till a Garden

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To Till a Garden

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Visual Art
by
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1. Introduction

The photographs presented in my thesis exhibition reflect an on-going commitment to investigating the visible world through the medium of photography. Synthesizing an array of photographic approaches and genres, the works manifest notions of documentary, portraiture, staged, manipulated and the serial. These photographs depict phenomenological encounters and seek to push the evocative potential of the singular image. Each photograph was made independently and are to be considered as autonomous parts to a larger whole. The architecture or project at large remains in question, for this exhibition demonstrates an attempt at bringing the photographer back into the frame to propose a critical engagement with photographic mediation of contemporary experience. Through such diverse explorations I seek to consciously create a space for inquiry. To be tuned in to the act of photographing is to be engaged with one’s surroundings.

I have consistently questioned the vocabulary of the photograph during my graduate studies and in the selection for exhibition, I openly explore the versatile nature of the photographic image today. Where does the medium stand, as perpetually in flux and ostensibly in conversation with an historical precedent? Importantly, what is my relationship to photography as a maker of photographic content?

Departing from a prior investment in documentary style (Evans, ASX) photographic portraiture, as explored in the body of work made with Angel, the photographs of my thesis exhibition depict tangible objects found walking into the ontological realm.
Only one photograph, *Decatur Boys* (fig. 1), employs this previous orientation to *documentary-style*, and operates as a lynchpin within the selection of works exhibited, which I will expand upon later in this paper. Objects depicted bear indexical traces of their environs imprinted upon their surfaces. Light, paint, dust, heat and wind, attract the curious eye. I seek through chance encounters. I may have a notion of what I am looking for, but my process is more of a give and take relationship to the physical field. Such occasions for productive encounters with the unanticipated, are of course completely unpredictable, and only *work* when I don’t try too hard. It is an art of openness, patience, curiosity and observation. There is some inexplicable alchemy of balance. I walk in search of interactions and objects that lend themselves to being photographed.

Most of the photographs on view were created within the past six months. Only a handful are analog film. About a year ago, I began photographing with a Sony A7RII mirrorless digital camera. Until this point, I was using analog medium format cameras to expose color negative film. I quickly found the immediacy favorable, as this digital process enabled an efficiency I’d been craving. Turning negatives into prints is time consuming and as I struggled to find the patience required to remove dust from scans, and move ideas into physical works, my practice hit a wall. The seamless nature of a digital lifestyle had permeated my artistic needs and desires and I think this rises to the surface in some of the works on view.
2. The Chance Encounter

My engagement with photography is contingent on the chance encounter. Even in my more structured artistic endeavors with the camera. *Native Son, Ayngel, Kari, the Cowboy*, and the rock. I want to speculate for a moment, as to why time and again, as frustrating as it is to center a practice around, I return to seeking out the chance encounter.

I often wonder what propels the desire to seek out interactions with people and objects. I know it relates to contact. Perhaps a stretch but is it biological, existential? I am the biological result of a passionate one-night stand between two strangers who met by chance one evening in 1984. United at a wedding, my mother caught the bouquet, father the garter, and some good ol’ passionate friction ensued. From the little I’ve learned my biological mother was 22, living in Atlanta and fully supporting herself, as she prepared to begin graduate studies in Art History, Curating and Museum Studies. My biological father was 36, living in Los Angeles and working as a successful lawyer. I was adopted at birth in 1985 and the privileged upbringing enabled me to pursue this incredibly chance oriented path of artistic pursuits. Bringing my feet back down to the ground, I think there is some validity towards this providing a catalyst for a subjective artistic practice.

3. A foot forward, a foot behind (Winter Garden)

Am I always attempting to return to the *documentary style* of working? Each move forward has been colored by the unresolved project, *Ayngel*, and I only bring this to attention, to formulate a context, trajectory. The first, and many portraits of Angel (fig.2)
deeply affected my progression. The project had become my *Winter Garden*. (He is very much alive and well, and I will be addressing the "project's" intended book post-MFA). The engagement with human subject, narrative, is still important to my practice. I arrived at a juncture where I wasn't clear whether I was simply following, rather than leading. I grew confused with intentions, but it pushed me to consider the accumulation of materials, of images, and how we as human beings assign and accrue meaning. Over the previous year, I have diligently worked to shed a some of the previous orientation, to really dig into a larger project addressing my own relationship to image making in a saturated society.

In two recent works, *Device* and *36*, I have intentionally employed a clichéd image. *Device* (fig. 3), floats on a plinth one inch off the floor beneath ¼" Plexiglas. The photograph is a photograph of my left hand holding an iPhone. The typical gaze downward into plane of device, is further emphasized by placement of work on the floor. One must peer over the edge to view up close. One may walk around, as if the work were a reflecting pool. A blank black void, an invitation and deflection. Peering in, you are denied full access to your self-image, as you compete with reflections of the interior architecture overhead.

*36* (fig. 4) has been a pivotal work, inspiring the creation of *Black Bag, PR5533* and *Yellow Phone*. *36* is comprised of 73 Ektachrome 35mm slides, projected onto a subdued white wall with a Kodak Ektagraphic III AMT projector. This analog projection advances at 20 second increments on a self-timer in continuous loop. Each slide projects an image of the ocean. The succession of slides depicts the ocean’s advance
and withdrawal. In the center of each frame a silhouetted rectangle stakes it’s claim, hovering on the wall as projected image, obscuring a totality of the landscape, and by extension, the event. This rectangular object in shadow is held at arm’s length in my left hand. The gestural intervention repeats in each slide however the registration is not precise, occasionally I miss the intended dead-center alignment on the horizon.

The structure for photographing is straightforward. Identify the calculated time of days’ sunset. Drive to Venice, walk across the north end of Venice Beach to the shore and stand in place facing the event so that body is in line with the sun. Begin photographing 36 minutes prior to calculated sunset. As each minute advances, make one analog exposure of arm outstretched holding device in horizontal orientation, dead-centered in frame, exposing a single roll, totaling 36 exposures. Do not change the f/stop or shutter speed between exposures. F/8 @ 1/250s. If film continues to advance beyond 36th frame, expose same view, minus intervention.

The event marked by the manual advancement of the apparatus. The temporal advancement records a slice of daylight’s gradual fade upon the landscape. Similarly, in a separate time and space, the projected light simultaneously anchors, denies and flattens out the experience upon the gallery wall. The analog projector itself an increasingly obsolete apparatus, colors the experience with the mechanized soundtrack. The advance of a slide synchronizes with the pressing of camera shutter. The body of the artist replaced with mechanized body.
Incidentals enter and exit frame: birds, a surfer, figures walking, running, etc. One may imagine the absurdity of my physical gesture over 36 minutes in public, or perhaps, no one was really looking. One may literally and metaphorically step into the frame. 36 is a subtle work, and a pivotal one in the trajectory of my practice. It is photographic, spatial, performative. I utilize the camera to document a direct intervention, repeated, over an expanse of time. Light imprinted, and light projected. The analog slide projector eschews nostalgia, appropriately serving intention, and identifies with a history of analog projection works emerging from Post-Minimal and Conceptual practitioners. The depicted content confronts and appropriates a site of nostalgia and I assert my presence in the frame.

To quote Barthes, the very essence…of Photography is that it refers to the fact that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. …in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred (Barthes Camera 77). As I revisit this passage in Camera Lucida the intensity to Barthes’ philosophical revelation strikes me as quite pertinent to my interests in photographic mediation. As explored in the projection, there is the fact of being-there, yet the pleasure of experiencing event immediately emptied out, as the intervention redirects our fixation through tension. The work retains a contemplative experience but leans toward the sinister or sublime. This reflection on mechanized saturation is analogous to a hammer driving a nail. The intervention of photographic plane itself recalls Ai Weiwei’s photo series Study of Perspective, 1995-2003 (fig. 5). And, I suspect this projection work came as an attempt to work out the
influence of Bruce Nauman, notably his *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967 (fig. 6).

Not to link Nauman to Barthes, but to return, Barthes continues, “*That-has-been* is not repressed but experienced with indifference, as a feature which goes without saying” (Barthes Camera 76-77). The series of projected images may strike indifference to the casual viewer. Aren’t we indifferent to the sunset as we’re blocking it with our devices? We perform this photographic gesture almost without consideration. Auto-reflex. Why did I interrupt the frame? I think to impede my own faith in the photographic medium, to complicate and deflect beauty, and to pull the viewer in to a process of inquiry and reflection. To reach for the object at hand, the object which permeates my very psychological well-being. Coincidentally, and unbeknownst to a viewer, this smartphone device was broken, therefore not recording sound or image. This work was conceived shortly before I created *Black Bag* early last Fall, as I was exploring various strategies to break through a roadblock in my photographic practice. I believe it bears significant influence on the trajectory arriving at this point.

4. **To Till a Garden**

Fresh, raw Earth, bright sun

Crisp skies, deep shadows

Water

The warmth of 8AM, high noon, 3 and 7, horizon

A pale blue 8, muted colors, tones, mood
Nighttime, at rest, in the absence of, long exposure, burst of firefly

Seasonal anchors

Solitude

Immersed, crowded streets, rows

Body

Seeds, frames, memory cards

Cultivation, stimulation, absorption, regeneration

Record, observe

Harvest

I extend one leg through two wires carrying electrical current, I am struck

By the scent of tomatoes on vine

Bees zip bud to bud, squash

Black plastic roils under an August sun

I pick off a wax bean

Snap

I look down to a sound

Black plastic whips in a warm October wind

Dust on tongue, scratchy eyes

Hunched, I plant elbows firm on knees

1/1250 sec; F/11

A burst, fifty-eight exposures

Black Bag
Fig. 7. *Black Bag*, Archival Pigment Print, 2018
5. Detour (Like a Rock)

It was here, I befriended the rock. I pulled off to inspect the anachronistic architecture propping up the billboard. Something about it denoted the Frontier mythology I’d moved West naively seeking. My attention rattles. A severed head, images from war. A hanging heart, Noah Purifoy, Gabriel Orozco. The assertive arm and saucer in Vandalism. Duchamp’s Fountain. (fig. 8a – 8d). This rock catches my eye and speaks muse (fig. 9).

Evidently, this aggregate props the shabby chain-link erect. I find the rock’s tectonic materiality attractive and this manifestation of weight suspended by a line, a nice metaphor. I’d been considering the analogy for some time. The weight on my back, around my ankle. I take note of an indentation, hinting at a previous utility. I suspect came from the dirt, initially existing as concrete base for fence pole. For a second, I wonder about the labor involved, hands tightening and releasing. Free. I observe a community of homes nearby and what might be some kind of farm a few ball fields South. Is this part of the Superfund site? I raise the camera’s lightweight body twisting vertical to my left eye, squint right, and compose in the little window. Reality realized. The “R” that advances the revolution in resolution with higher sensitivity, response and refinement (Sony.com).

This unexpected encounter is peculiar and inspired a serial investment. Each day I drive out to the studio, I visit the rock. Exiting the 60, two rights, I pull-off to make a sequence of pictures, look for anything else that might catch my eye, and continue on. After two weeks of daily visits accumulate, the incidentals: shifting light, color and movement,
seemed rather unremarkable, suitable as studies. Completely puzzled as to why I should carry on, I reasoned the initial decision to commit to a process was important to respect. To push around within a frame, perhaps discover something through sustained engagement. I needed to eliminate a habit of anxiously overthinking to the point of stasis, failing to take a risk. A page of strategies for potential manipulations led to intervention: first with silver spray paint, second with blue spray paint and flash. The manipulation with paint proved a more compelling engagement than pure observation of the fairly inactive physical form. I recalled John’s recollection of his first engagement with silver spray paint. I sheepishly leapt forward into this language and history of intervention, a touch reactionary, emotive.

The selection of PR5533 (fig. 10), a later photograph of this rock (*the rock*) painted blue is curious. This photograph was taken from a distance much further than the more compressed, close-ups I’d been fixated on, and producing in February and March (fig. 11). This pulling-back literally signifies distance, whereas the tightly-cropped depictions revel in all of the tangible registers that hold my attention and sustained the return. In PR5533 I can no longer reach into the printed photograph, stick my fingers through the chain-links and feel this rock. It is more of an objective point of view. *Yellow Phone* (fig. 12), is a flat-footed example of this desire to reach-in, take hold, and seize as image.

What was I looking for in repetition? As mentioned, not purely incidental differences. Likely, the accumulative, metaphorical weight. This relationship to images began years back with my first iPhone. Taking photos as a form of note-taking, indexing observations or objects for reference. The image replacing post-it, hard drive replacing album or box.
I imagined a room full of rocks suspended, which became a fixation. The rock stripped bare. The literal display of time felt powerful. And yet, the thesis exhibition only shares one version of the rock.

I wonder about the spectral: in the absence of a human subject-muse, I’ve set out seeking the next human engagement, but ended up with a collection of rocks. I’d spent considerable time questioning the challenges and my intentions with portraiture-representation: it is always slippery. As I’ve struggled to ignite even a brief exchange, I’ve continued to photograph these found objects with a similar sensitivity, empathy and enthusiasm. The interest is contact, whether physically experienced in the hand of the artist, cerebral from artist to viewer, or photographed to reveal contact by action or force. A thread uniting these portraits of contact. Several of these recent photographs however, do embody more of an analytical, detached gaze. Less empathetic, more matter-of-fact. Portraits of people still exert representational concerns and challenges, of which I am committed to working through. A freedom comes with an object: I can essentially do as I please to manipulate an object found in the field.

6. The Severed Hand, Recovered

Throughout my time in graduate school I have explored the desire to re-introduce the hand, whether manifest in the physical assemblages of found materials brought into the studio from external sites, the considered tabletop arrangements, or literally depicted, as in Red Glove (fig. 13).
As I consider the works presented in this thesis, I notice multiple depictions of the absent, severed hand. The left-hand figures prominently by default: being right-handed this one intuitively rises to the occasion, such as an assistant to *Yellow Phone, Device*, 36 and *Grip* (fig. 14). Our hands are busier than ever, fingers typing across keys and screens, and *lending a hand* to our mechanized devices, inert in our palms, mediating our contemporary experience. Interesting how this subconsciously rose to the surface in the fairly intuitive editing down to sequence for exhibition.

*Grip* presents the hand of another, evoking iconographic representations such as the clenched fist of solidarity. Labor, absent but referenced in the strain of muscle and bone, perhaps the torn hole in fabric. Grains of sand cling to this masculine forearm and most striking aside from the shadow in palm, are the four sharply focused fingernails evoking spade and tombstone. The context is unclear. An uncanny, uniform blue. What to do with a severed arm? One anticipates the release of the grip, slipping from metal, but the viewer is left in a state of suspension.

Barthes defines the *obtuse meaning*, in his essay *The Third Meaning*. The obtuse being *at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive* (Barthes Image 54). It is not necessarily immediate but latent, embedded within or just beyond the photograph, it *seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely*...*the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information*... (55). Similar to *punctum*, for Barthes the obtuse may arouse affect, *wounding* as you will, the observer. This rhetoric leans on the side of anachronistic, nevertheless, I believe applicable and relevant to
nuances of how I attempt to describe my approaches to reading the visible world through photography.

In the introduction to Philippe-Alain Michaud’s book *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, Georges Didi-Huberman writes on Warburg’s radical approach to establishing a *critical iconology* evolving from an analysis of Renaissance art:

By placing emphasis on the phenomena of transition over the treatment of bodies at rest, on what divides the figure over what pulls it together, and on becoming over the motionless form...According to Warburg, what Renaissance artists derived from ancient forms was...they recognized in these forms a tension, a questioning of the ideal appearance of bodies in the visible world. Their works bear the stamp of a force that is not harmonious but contradictory, a force destabilizing the figure more than pulling it together. (28 Michaud)

Warburg’s contradiction of and assertion of an alternate method for interpretation has been useful in the shaping of my thesis works. Scanning the landscape looking for material, I am particularly drawn to motion, sites of becoming, signifiers of flux and dissolution. Entropy is key here. Robert Smithson’s *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, 1967 comes to mind (fig. 16).

I am interested in the social-landscape; infrastructure, patterns, cycles and the ruin. It is here I find fertile grounds for observation. This external process - walking through the city or along the peripheries, is analogous to the interior exploration. Walking through a field of abstractions, the camera taking notes. Walking/experiencing, thinking/processing, observing/interpreting...Photography is analogous to stream-of-consciousness writing. Aside from *36* or *Black Bag*, rarely is there a predetermined numerical structure. After having collected discrete photographic observations, I re-visit the accumulated raw material, to reduce, attempting to identify relationships harmonious,
conflicting, or unclear (the photographs that stick out, point or speaks to me). I am particularly drawn to the ones that deny or complicate logic. It is most exciting when I can’t explain a logic of attraction. Many of the photographs in the thesis exhibition retain this quality of the inexplicable beyond formal relations.

7. Beauty, or a sensibility

In his essay Undressing the Institutional Wound Timothy Martin discusses beauty and photography, specifically, as manifest in the photographs of Christopher Williams:

Working…on the side of the image, Williams indulges the desire beautiful photographs create and creates in his photographs the beauty desire wants, although these are often somewhat perverse aspects of his practice, and ultimately have little to do with the idealizing tendency Benjamin condemns, in his critique of Albert Renger-Patzch’s Die Welt ist schon (The World is Beautiful) (fig. 17).

Williams’s diverse interrogation of photography has been an increasing source of inspiration, and to swing towards an opposite end of the spectrum, yet with some overlap, Torbjorn Rodland (fig. 18). Both are relevant in regard to this brief reflection on beauty as it arises in my own photographs.

My interest in beauty does not align with the Modernist project of someone like Albert Renger-Patzch’s Die Welt ist schon (The World is Beautiful). I am suspicious of a purely aesthetic enterprise through the image. Wouldn’t it be more interesting to subvert? I am interested in the pleasures of looking and I understand how to employ beauty. But, from a conceptual standpoint, my interest in beauty is as an aesthetic device to behold attention. Beauty as formal hook and bait. As Martin identifies Williams’s predilection for the perverse twisting of expectation, I too, seek to complicate one’s notion. In discussing beauty and Renger-Patzsch, Martin cites Walter Benjamin’s criticism of Die
Welt ist schon: “For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment” (Martin 34). This is a constructive critique to index moving forward with interests relating to documentary-style practice. As a relevant, very squeamish aside, at the thesis opening, someone viewing my work, asked my partner Emily “Where’d all the homeless people go?”

8. You can take the boy from Decatur, but you can’t take Decatur from the boy

Four boys sit on the concrete steps of a gazebo in what appears to be an urban context. Each boy’s gaze cast down into the screens of their devices. Red shirt, white shirt, blue shirt, yellow shirt. Three Caucasian, one African-American, centered in the frame. He gently leans right to the boy in white, as if to share what he sees. The boy in white looks on with interest. These two share the top step with the boy in yellow. The boy in yellow sits slightly askance, his expression indicates that he may be aware of fact he is being observed. The rest are oblivious, immersed. The lighting is fairly even, nearly flat. A subtle sweep of late afternoon warmth rakes the frame bottom right to left. If you train your eyes on the boy in yellow, you will see. Look for this slice of light on bare calf, left of center, blue jeans. Is this staged? We see a contemporary scenario, but something undermines the contemporaneous. The dated architecture, patina and the weathering green paint on the handrail which formally splits the image from bottom center towards one o’clock. This rail traces the boys’ seating arrangement. I am looking at the boys looking, and I suspect I am being observed. Where are they looking? Where do you look? This photograph is an outlier in the exhibition, and as installed, suffers from a lack of wall space, but it remains vital, just as Device and 36. Decatur Boys (fig.1) is exactly what you see. A casual observation and mechanized assertion. A window, a mirror.
Abstraction, Specificity. I made this picture in 2016 thinking of 1985, while visiting Decatur, Georgia seeking friction between contemporary and past.

In speaking of the paradoxical tangle between presence and absence in such a photograph, Barthes writes:

What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the “here-now” and the “there-then.” It is thus at the level of this denoted message or message without code that the “real unreality” of the photograph can be fully understood: its unreality is that of the “here-now,” for the photograph is never experienced as illusion, is in no way a “presence”…its reality that of the “having-been-there,”…evidence of “this is how it was,”…a reality from which we are sheltered (Barthes Rhetoric 44)

9. Towards a Conclusion

How diverse can one’s visual vocabulary be? When is it a singular project? When is it a sequence or a book? How does one deal with archive? I am excited by work that seeks to go against the grain, push against established conventions, strives to carve a new path forward, rather than operate within the parameters of established methodologies and discourse. What is the model, and how do I move forward? What is possible?

Reading through notebooks a few weeks back, I found a reflection made while reading Hito’s point of departure: rather than submit to the overwhelming, avalanche of images, why not dig, probe, turn it inside out, employ the devices towards revealing something potentially true and authentic about that search for cultural observation?

I think in my second year here I grew lost feeling overwhelmed, tightened up, tread water, and somewhere along the line, I let some air out. I’m not claiming the works of my thesis exhibition to be entirely successful, but I believe I made several confident
steps forward, and I look forward to seeing the progression. As a photographer considering the field of artistic practice, the only way forward is to enter the stream.
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