Amalgamations

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Amalgamations

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Brennan Probst
B.A. Monmouth College, 2012

May, 2019
Acknowledgments

For my parents, Ken and Elizabeth, who always encourage me.

For my wife, Katie, who constantly puts up with me.
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Abstract

I explore time, memory, and the artist’s ability to convey experience through autobiographical photographs and drawings. In my compositions, I provide an intimate look into my life, while making wider observations about how my mind processes the world. My work is concerned with circumventing the objective, static qualities of photography. I attempt to create images that convey how experiences feel, instead of how they look through the lens of an optical apparatus. With my work, I do not wish to take from the world around me, but rather to create from the world within me. By utilizing multiple exposures and collage techniques, as well as drawings, I investigate how I experience and remember my life, and the people most important to me.

Keywords: photography; drawing; experience; process; memory; interpret
Part 1: Immortality and Obsession

My works are interpretations regarding how I see, not what I see. On the surface, my autobiographical photographs and drawings are voyeuristic, often abstract views into the life of a single person. At their heart, however, my works are larger than myself, and deal with broader themes such as time, memory, and the struggle to preserve and convey experience.

Perhaps photography’s greatest contribution to mankind is how it liberated visual memory. Before the introduction of photography, the only way to possess a physical image of a loved one was to commission a drawing, painting, or sculpture of their likeness. Creating realistic images in non-photographic media is a difficult feat, requiring a considerate amount of time and skill to accomplish. Only the richest could afford to have pictures created of themselves or their loved ones. As a result, the rich were remembered for generations through their expensive portraits, while the poor simply faded from memory.

Photography changed all of this. Photographic portraits required much less time and effort than any other medium, and were therefore inherently cheaper. Photography made it possible for almost anyone to afford to be remembered by their families, to have their likenesses physically preserved for future generations to view.

Today, most people have a few professional photographs of their great-grandparents stored away somewhere. Photographs of long ago possess the ability to peer into the past, but most of the portraits from photography’s early days say almost nothing about the people depicted within them, besides an idea of what they looked like. After all, how much can be learned about a person through a handful of strained, posed pictures, made against generic backgrounds? Many of these early photographs are nothing more than flat death masks. As camera and film equipment advanced, however, it became possible to savor and share fleeting, serendipitous moments.
Each of these technological advancements exponentially increased the amount of photographs being made, and each advancement made it easier to document moments as they happen. Each photograph I make reveals something about who I was in a given instant. My descendants will be able to observe a multitude of my collected moments, and therefore, come to better understand who I was as an individual. Over time, the act of photography went from simply preserving appearances to attempting to preserve all of life's experiences.

With the ability to permanently freeze any moment indefinitely within a picture frame, photography gives the illusion of immortality. I am terrified of growing older, and I find chronicling my life in photographs to be a soothing activity. It is a way to prove to others that I existed, and something for me to look back on as a visual diary. With photography, I can seemingly stop time's unrelenting flow. This being said, it is often far too easy to obsess over photography's promise of the everlasting moment. As Vilém Flusser writes in his book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, "People taking snaps can now only see the world through the camera and in photographic categories. They are not 'in charge of' taking photographs, they are consumed by the greed of their camera, they have become an extension to the button of their camera. Their actions are automatic camera functions." Flusser asserts that photography has turned a large portion of people into shutter-clicking robots, ceaselessly capturing the world with cameras. Until a few years ago, I was one of these robots. I constantly had a camera lugged over my shoulder, ready to pounce in any given situation.

Many photographers approach each experience as a photograph waiting to happen. Countless social and professional events are structured around cliché photographic opportunities, with the most notable offender being the obligatory posed group photo, where subjects sport wide, toothy grins. In a sense, these types of photographs create idealized memories. However, while viewing this type of photograph after the fact, all I can remember about the depicted moment is the painful attempt to wrangle everyone into formation, as well as

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the simultaneous, instantaneous release of all the forced smiles. In truth, for many events in my life, all I can remember are the photographs. Susan Sontag writes in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering . . . . To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story, but to be able to call up a picture.”

Many posed photographs attempt to capture and preserve experience, but end up revealing nothing about what it was actually like to participate in the event depicted.

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Part 2: On Being Present

In addition to creating false representations of reality, photography can temporarily remove us from it. Sometimes, this is a blessing. I do not perform well in certain social situations due to my introverted personality, but with a camera in my hand, I am able to hide behind my apparatus and avoid forced communication with people I do not know. I can happily make photographs in my own little world, and not come across as rude or uninterested in what is going on around me. I am able to remove myself from uncomfortable situations, while still maintaining the veil of involvement.

With events I want to participate in, however, the camera presents a problem. Like many people, I enjoy chronicling moments of my life through photography. However, to photograph is to observe, and when I observe, I cannot participate. The camera acts as a barrier between myself and the people most important to me. Any photograph, whether it is a posed or candid picture, represents a moment when I, the photographer, was separated from those around me.

It is not only during the moment of exposure that I am not present. Constantly searching for and pursuing photographic opportunities takes me out of the moment, and into a reality where all that matters is the potential picture. Novelist Italo Calvino writes in his short story, *The Adventure of a Photographer*, “The taste for the spontaneous, natural, lifelike snapshot kills spontaneity, drives away the present.”3 I admit I have created tension during vacations with my wife because I refused to put my camera down and just enjoy the time we had together. I remember specifically one trip my wife and I took to Charleston, South Carolina. As we walked downtown, I was fully concentrated on taking pictures. I needed both hands for my camera, and refused to hold my wife’s hand, which rightfully upset her, and made me feel terrible. My photographic obsession took me out of our moment, and ruined the afternoon for both of us.

There are definitely times in life when the camera needs to be kept in the bag, or left at home, because even the burden of carrying around a bag full of equipment can take away from an experience.

To further explore how obsessive photography can drive away the present, I created my time-based photographic piece, *Automaton*. For *Automaton*, I made a photograph every minute for an entire day, from the moment I opened my eyes in the morning, until I went to sleep that night. To keep track of time, I had an alarm on my phone programmed to go off every minute. At the sounding of each alarm, I photographed whatever I was concentrated on at that moment. My day lasted a little over twelve hours, and I finished with 762 photographs. To present the photographs, I created a book, as well as a video slideshow.

Creating *Automaton* was an excruciating ordeal. The one-minute intervals made it nearly impossible to focus on anything besides aiming the camera and tripping the shutter. Even when I was not actively making a photograph, the next exposure was constantly the primary subject on my mind. The process physically and mentally isolated me from people. Though I interacted with a number of friends and strangers during the making of *Automaton*, the camera and my lack of cognitive focus acted as a wall between them and me. In addition to this alienation, I also felt completely empty, as if I were no longer a real person. I shambled through the day in a camera-induced haze, worrying about nothing but the camera, and making it click, click, click.

It is not uncommon for a work to raise the question, “was it worth it?” While *Automaton* was a trying ordeal, and a process I will most likely never repeat, I am proud of having completed it, and happy with many of the resulting pictures. Because of the strict minute-to-minute structure, I made photographs at times and in places I never would have under normal circumstances. In the end, my whole day was recorded, at the expense of me not being able to truly participate in anything that happened. It was a day I will always remember, and a day I never lived.
As Automaton helps to demonstrate, photography can be a vicious circle. To not photograph an event is to say I don’t care if the event is forgotten. Inversely, to constantly make photographs during an event relegates me to the role of observer, unable to fully participate. In a visual sense, photography brings me closer to my world and experiences. Through the viewfinder of a camera, I observe and appreciate details I would otherwise ignore. My visual experience is heightened, but all other senses effectively disappear when I am engaged in making photographs. With a camera, I am closer, but further away at the same time. Concerning photography, there is a time to observe and record, and there is time to be present.
Before graduate school, I was obsessed with trying to capture the world with my camera. For me, photography was an excuse to explore and get out of my comfort zone. I constantly attempted to find unique and interesting scenes to capture on film. Back then, I was primarily interested in street photography and ruin photography.

Armed with a 35mm camera, I stalked the streets of Chicago after getting out of work for the day, desperate to photograph anyone doing anything interesting. I was on the continual hunt for Henri Cartier-Bresson’s illusive Decisive Moment. Cartier-Bresson defined this visual phenomenon as “the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.”4 I was so obsessed with Cartier-Bresson’s style of photography; I even went so far as to use the same camera as him. I pushed myself to get closer and closer to my subjects before tripping the shutter. I forced myself to be aggressive in my picture taking; I shot first, and apologized later, if need be. Street photography was an incredible rush; catching a moving subject in the crosshairs of my viewfinder while achieving perfect focus was extremely satisfying.

However, the high I felt from capturing subjects was always short lived. Once I developed my film from the day’s hunt and made a few prints, the results would always leave me unsatisfied. Even if the print was successful by aesthetic terms, even if it captured The Decisive Moment, I felt no connection to the photograph on an emotional level. I could not see myself in the image. These prints did not say anything about me or my experiences, except for the fact that within a fraction of a second, I saw and I took the likeness of a hapless stranger.

Looking back, it is a bit disturbing how gratifying capturing people on film felt to me at the time of exposure. In the epilogue of his semi-autobiographical novel, *Queer*, William S. Burroughs recalls his experience candidly photographing people on the street while visiting South America. He comes to the conclusion that, “there is something obscene and sinister about photography, a desire to imprison, to incorporate, a sexual desire of pursuit.” ⁵ No matter how many times I told myself I was doing nothing wrong by taking candid shots of strangers, I always felt dirty. To photograph someone is to be intimidating; pointing a metal object at someone and effectively pulling a trigger is an extremely aggressive action. While practicing candid photography, I essentially asserted my power of representation over another person. I took a depiction of someone, a depiction the person had no control over, and claimed it as my own. In my current photographic art practice, I allow subjects the ability to look into the camera and choose how he or she is represented, or at least give consent to the camera being present.

In addition to street photography, my other favorite genre to practice was ruin photography. I was born and raised in the safe and calm upper-middle class suburbs of Chicago, so I liked to take risks from time to time by exploring abandoned buildings in the countryside. I enjoyed the danger and mystery that contrasted with my banal suburban life. Using mostly medium format cameras on tripods, I took photographs of dilapidated houses, factories, and hotels. Not knowing who or what was around each corner was a thrill for me. The resulting photographs were my prizes for surviving the sometimes harrowing experiences. I wanted the photographs to look like stills from old black and white horror movies. Though my methods for obtaining these photographs were not as blatantly aggressive as my street photographs, I was still exploiting my subject matter.

I most regret the photographs I took in the town of Cairo, Illinois, where I stopped for a few hours while on a trip to Memphis, Tennessee. Cairo is the southernmost city in Illinois. Once a population of over 15,000, Cairo is now home to less than 2,400 people. This extreme drop in population is largely due to ugly race riots that took place in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. Since the city sits on the border between northern and southern states, Cairo was a violent battleground for racial equality. As a result of the riots, people moved out, the economy died, and today, Cairo is a ghost town. The citizens are mostly impoverished African-Americans who cannot afford to move away. Block after block is lined with crumbling abandoned homes and businesses. I, a naive white guy, happily tramped through the town and took pictures inside a number of ruined buildings. I did not bother to educate myself beforehand on the dark history behind the “cool” abandoned subject matter. I simply trespassed, took what I wanted, and left. I took advantage of the outcome of racial violence without even knowing it. Those photographs were not mine to take.

As a photographer, it is important to learn the difference between making a photograph and taking a photograph. Ansel Adams writes in his essay, A Personal Credo, “Sympathetic interpretation seldom evolves from a predatory attitude; the common term ‘taking a picture’ is
more than just an idiom; it is a symbol of exploitation. *Making a picture* implies a creative resonance which is essential to profound expression. Like Adams, I do not believe photos made through predatory and exploitative actions can be considered art. When using a camera, I believe it is important for photographers, especially those who consider themselves *artists*, to stop and think about the context of their photograph, and whether or not they are perpetuating exploitation. I now always ask myself, “Is this really my story to tell?”

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Part 4: Originality in Photography

I no longer prowl city streets searching for the decisive moment, nor do I defile the ruins of others with my camera. When I look back, I often wonder what caused me to rise to such aggressive heights in the first place. It wasn't for enjoyment. I hated aiming my camera at people, and abandoned places, while exciting to explore, made me paranoid.

I committed these acts because I wanted original, unique photographs; photographs no one else could take. I desired to stand out from the crowd, to differentiate myself from all the Sunday snappers and Instagramers. As Greyson Perry succinctly puts it in his book, *Playing to the Gallery*, “We live in an age when photography rains on us like sewage from above.”⁷ Within an oversaturated medium like photography, I believe it is difficult for an artist to find his or her authentic voice. As a frustrated artist myself, I was obsessed with trying to find one-of-a-kind images.

Realistically, it is impossible to find one-of-a-kind images in the contemporary day. After more than one hundred and fifty years of photography, with billions of people using cameras all over the globe, it simply cannot be done. The internet only makes this fact more apparent. No matter how great I thought my candid street shots were, there were always a multitude of painfully similar, oftentimes better, pictures out there. No matter how secluded and hidden I thought my abandoned locations to be, other photographers would always beat me there, often producing images from the exact same angles. To make matters worse, many of these pictures were made by complete amateurs, often using their smartphones. I often grew embittered at seeing my exact same subject matter produced by the hands of novice photographers, who knew nothing about the intricacies of the medium.

The ubiquitous amateur has plagued the consciousness of many a serious photographer throughout history. It is an issue absent from every other medium, completely unique to

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photography. Susan Sontag states in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “Photography is the only major art in which professional training and years of experience do not confer an insuperable advantage over the untrained and inexperienced . . .”8 Since the introduction of the beginner-friendly Kodak camera, all the way up to the age of the iPhone, professionals have been threatened by the ever-increasing ease of picture taking.

Many photographers attempt to separate themselves from amateurs by means of equipment. Professionals typically spend tens of thousands of dollars on the latest and greatest digital gear. These photographers figure their superior image quality will allow them to stand out from the pack. On the other hand, artists often utilize archaic photographic materials to make themselves seem original. I fell into the latter category.

I love analog photography and the darkroom process. However, I used film as a crutch in a vain attempt to make my photographs original, instead of focusing on new ideas. My actual images were just as amateur as the average smartphone camera user who happened to be at the right place at the right time. My pictures had no meaning, as the subject matter had no connection to me. They were simply found images, readymades that had nothing to do with my interpretation of the world.

I ceased trying to find images. Instead, I now focus on creating images from the world within myself. For me, showing what is inside, rather than what is in front of me, is the only way for my photographs to be sincere and unique.

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Part 5: Methods and Materials

I used to be a film purist. Digital images always seemed like “cheating” to me. The instant playback with digital cameras always felt anticlimactic; I loved the anticipation film created, along with the intense satisfaction brought by creating a successful darkroom print. For a long time, I convinced myself digital photography was not real photography. I pigeonholed myself into only using film cameras in order to help keep real photography alive, as well as elevate my fragile ego. My exclusive use of film acted as a safety blanket while viewing superior photographs by more talented artists. I constantly lifted my nose at any image not made in a darkroom, especially if I knew deep down that it was better than my own work.

Once I got over myself and my near-religious devotion to film, my images began to improve as I embraced digital technology. What I appreciate most about digital cameras is how they allow me to attempt new ideas at a rapid pace. With my DSLR, I am free to experiment without worrying about the high price of film and chemicals, or the excessive amount of time it takes to process film and make prints.

I do not believe my work could have advanced to where it is today if I was still hung up on the darkroom process. The instant playback I used to loathe with digital photography became its most valuable asset for me. And while I still use film cameras, I usually only use them if the work I am producing calls for analog photography’s innate characteristics. For example, I use film cameras for long-term in-camera multiple exposure pieces.

Multiple exposures and negative stacking techniques make up the majority of my current photographic work. I first thought I liked multiple exposures because of how they enabled me to distort reality. Over time, however, I realized I was not distorting reality, but distorting the photographic perception of reality seen through straight photographs. As someone who has grown up around photography, I often try to view and remember the world as seen through real or imaginary photographs. Even without cameras, I attempt to create mental stills of people,
places and experiences in my mind. To me, multiple exposure photographs are a more honest depiction than straight (single exposure) pictures.

The layered images within my multiple exposure photographs demonstrate the flow of time and changes in space that straight photography cannot. The techniques I utilize abstract and layer moments similar to how I experience and remember them in my mind. With multiple exposures, I attempt to circumvent the objective, static qualities of photography. Subjects within my amalgamated images are not static; they are constantly shifting, moving, and changing, much like how I perceive them through my eyes, and in my memory.

My multiple exposure pictures have so much going on in them, the viewer has to pause and look to process exactly what is happening in the image. So much information is stored in my photographs that people can look at my photos over and over and still find new details each time. Upon repeated viewings, even I am often surprised to find elements within my own photographs that I previously had not noticed.

The use of multiple exposures gives my photography an inherent messiness, which I embrace. Much of my work has a somewhat casual, vernacular style, and I worry less about sharpness and tonal range. Much like life, my pictures can be rough and messy, with unclear purpose. These gritty photographs connect with everyday existence, as life happens quickly, and is rarely well composed. I am less concerned with physical representation than I am with the feeling and mood of an experience.

Throughout his groundbreaking 1958 book, *The Americans*, Robert Frank focused on the concept of mood. In a modernist period when photography was about capturing fleeting life and decisive moments, Frank was a rebel. He used grainy, underexposed, out-of-focus images as a means to channel an uneasy feeling throughout *The Americans*. Unlike modernist storytelling photography of the time, Frank did not seek a cohesive narrative, but rather an abstract personal statement.
Uninterested in capturing singular, pregnant moments to explain an event, Frank created atmosphere and mood through a series of seemingly unrelated vernacular pictures, arranged in a set order. The individual photographs in Frank’s book work together to form a cohesive personal narrative of dread and confusion. Unlike other modernist photography of the time, Frank’s photographs created a visual statement of how he felt. Gretchen Garner states in her book, Disappearing Witness, “Frank’s personal note is a turning point, marking the end of an out-directed, sympathetic interest in the social scene and the beginning of seeing it as a projection or mirror of the self.”9 I appreciate what Frank did to liberate photography from the outer world, and am inspired by how he created personal, unified statements through collected “amatuer” photographs.

Robert Frank, Elevator – Miami Beach, 1955

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There are similarities between my work and Frank’s, even though he did not work with multiple exposures. Like Frank, many of the individual exposures I make are messy, with haphazard framing and questionable focus. However, when stacked together in a multiple exposure image or collage, these combined exposures, or moments, form a unified picture and personal statement of the depicted experience. My multiple exposures create a mood that would be impossible to convey through a single straight photograph.
Part 6: My Life in Pictures

Making art is a way to show who I am, as well as a way to document my life for myself and others to look back on after I am gone. Though I will die, my art will live on for at least a little while longer, which is a comforting thought. Errol Morris writes in Believing is Seeing, “. . . perhaps we too can be saved from oblivion by an image that reaches beyond our lives, that communicates something undying and transcendent about each one of us.”¹⁰ This idea of transcendence may be wishful thinking, but the thought comforts me. I am obsessed with time’s relentless flow, and worried by my inability to remember the majority of my experiences, which is why I turned my camera (as well as my pen) upon myself.

An artist who influences me to make work about my own life is Chris Verene. Verene is a contemporary photographer whose photographs are autobiographical. Through revealing his world with vivid colors and full frontal flash, he documents the lives of his family and friends in rural Galesburg, Illinois. Verene tells the story of his life, while focusing on his environment and narratives of people important to him.

For me, Verene’s most poignant photograph is Grammy Waves Goodbye. To date, this is the only photograph made by another photographer that made me cry. The piece depicts Verene’s grandmother waving goodbye to him through the screen door of her home. It is the last time Verene saw his grandmother, as she died shortly afterwards. The piece directly inspired me to make my photograph, Mom Waves Goodbye, which shows the process of me leaving my mom after visiting her in Chicago. My mom has terminal cancer, and each time I leave her, deep down I am always afraid I will never get to see her again.

Viewing Verene’s autobiographical work, especially *Grammy Waves Goodbye*, made me realize the emotional impact one’s personal photographs can have on a total stranger, and that one does not need to *take* photographs from outside their own story in order for the images to make an impact. Autobiographical works invite the viewer to make connections to their own lives, while coming to a greater understanding of the artist. While my work is largely personal, my hope is that viewers will be able to relate their own lives and experiences to my pieces. With my autobiographical photographs, I want viewers to feel an appreciation for time, as well as question how they capture and view their experiences through pictures.
Mom Waves Goodbye, 2017
Part 7: The Ghosts Behind My Eyes

I have moments in my life when I feel completely alone in my personal eternity, full of memories, experiences, and thoughts no one else can begin to comprehend. There are times when I feel helpless and isolated within my mortal body, forced to witness myself and my surroundings change and disappear. This reverence I have for time inspired me to create my self-portrait series, Myself Through Time and Place.

As people, there are no physical constants in life. David Bayles and Ted Orland write in their book, Art and Fear, “To a remarkable degree the outside world consists of variables and the interior world consists of constants . . . We simply exist, perhaps watching from an imaginary point a little behind our eyes, while the scene we observe from that steady vantage point changes constantly.”¹¹ This exterior world of variables is what I strive to demonstrate within the photographs of Myself Through Time and Place.

Every portrait within the series is comprised of four separate exposures of equal strength. As the title implies, I made each exposure of myself at a different time, in a different place. I intentionally placed myself towards the bottom of each photograph in order to convey my submissiveness towards the passage of time. To make sure each exposure lined up, I drew dots on the focusing screen of my 35mm camera to indicate where my head and feet needed to be. Many of the exposures were done by my wife, or anyone who happened to be with me.

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Though my head and feet were always in the same uniform position, I often held
different items in my hands to give hints as to what I was doing during each exposure. Because
I made these multiple exposures in-camera over week-long, or even month-long periods, I often
forget the context of each exposure. As a result, I pore over these images to find clues as to
what was happening in the individual captured moments. I enjoy deciphering each photograph,
and hope viewers engage in this process as well.

I want *Myself Through Time and Place* to be a view of my constantly changing self, as
well as a documentation of my fluctuating environment. Each image in this series is an
amalgamated glimpse of my existence. My goal is for viewers to realize for themselves that
nothing is permanent, that humans are transient beings, for better or for worse. I want people to
see there is no reason to try to avoid change, as change is a part of life.
My portrait series, *Family*, is another body of work where I explore the transient nature of human beings, as well as how I remember the faces of my loved ones. For *Family*, I rephotographed family photographs using multiple exposures to show the amalgamated physical appearances of members of my immediate family.

I believe photographs are the foundation of how I remember people in my mind's eye. Subconsciously, my mind combines photographs in order to create pseudo-complete images of people important to me. I say "pseudo-complete," because these mental images are still quite weak and ghost-like. Vivid memories also figure into my mind's mental image of a person for a while, but these contributions inevitably fade over time.

Once my loved ones are gone, and my memories fade, all I have to fall back on are photographs. When I think back to my grandmother, who died when I was young, my mental image of her is the result of the few photographs my family possesses of her. I am lucky both of my parents are still alive, but one day they will die. I dread the day when my vivid memories of their faces fully deplete, and photographs are all I have to remember their countenances.

My mom, dad, younger brother, and I are depicted in *Family*. To create their individual portraits, I first went through hundreds of photographs of each family member. To ensure facial features roughly lined up in the finished prints, I chose old portraits with similar front-facing poses. From the many available photographs (my parents save everything), I selected around sixteen photographs for each person. These sixteen photographs represented an approximately even breadth of ages for each family member. For instance, to create *Family: My Father*, I found and selected old photographs of my dad from when he was three, all the way to seventy-three.
After finding photographs I was happy with for a family member, I re-photographed each old photograph on a copy stand. I made sure not to advance the film in my camera after each exposure, and made an exposure of all sixteen photographs on one negative frame. Like with *Myself Through Time and Place*, I made marks on the camera’s focusing screen to help line up each exposure. I repeated this process many times for each portrait, since even slight changes in the multiple exposure copywork created drastic differences in the final negatives. From the chosen negatives I made a print of each family member.

Though the faces in these compositions are relatively abstract, I made sure that the eyes were always the clearest element of each portrait. To repeat a cliché, the eyes are the windows to the soul, and as I previously stated, I believe a person’s soul, or eternity, is a person’s only constant. I wanted a clear view into the soul of each subject; I wanted to show that even though
each one of them has changed drastically on the outside, they are, and will always be, my family.
Much of my work centers around how I remember experiences, and how memory relates to photography. I have challenged myself to convey visual memory through photographs, even though the medium has little in common with how my memory works. I investigate this relationship between mind and machine in my series, Memory and the Mind’s Eye.

Photography was originally conceived as an augmentation for the mind’s eye, a replacement for visual memory. George Santayana writes in his essay, The Photograph and the Mental Image, “The eye has only one retina, the brain a limited capacity for storage; but the camera can receive any number of plates, and the new need never blur nor crowd out the old. Here is a new and accurate visual memory, a perfect record of what the brain must necessarily forget or confuse.”

Photography affords the ability to capture and preserve split second moments, but the medium is too accurate, and gives us a distorted view of past experiences. Although time is one of the vital ingredients to photography, photographs are unable to depict the act of spending time. A single photograph cannot fully convey a life event, as much more occurs before and after the subject smiles and the shutter is tripped. With Memory and the Mind’s Eye, I want to give a deeper, more complete picture of what experiences are like, within a single image.

The preciseness of photographic images is unnatural compared to images conjured by my mind’s eye, which are much hazier and ghost-like. Mental images of certain meaningful moments are ingrained in my memory, and stand out against the near limitless latent images of routine and banal moments. Sooner or later, these moments begin to fade, obscured by time.

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12 George Santayana, The Photograph and the Mental Image, from Photography in Print, pp. 259-260
and the influx of new memories. Each photograph in *Memory and the Mind’s Eye* is made up of five exposures: one “main” exposure, and four “sub” exposures. The main exposures in these photographs are obviously the most distinct and clear, but the other exposures, as well as the intentionally large film grain, obscure them.

*Pensacola Trip, 2017*

With these images, I want to give viewers a more complete picture of an experience, as well as demonstrate what my memories look like in my head. I want to show how behind every vivid memory, there are innumerable forgotten moments that also took place. With *Pensacola Trip*, for example, my most memorable, “main” exposure is my wife, Katie, playing in the surf. When I think back to that trip, our time on the beach is the most vivid in my mind. The “sub,” or less important moments I experienced on the trip, are also visible, but are mostly sunken into the background. These moments include activities like shopping at Walmart, or watching Katie play on her phone at a restaurant. There is also a faint image of a stray cat we stopped to pet.
buried in the image. There was at least one other exposure made within this photograph as well, but it does not stick out clearly enough for me to decipher it. Though I don’t often think about it, forgotten memories help shape who I am. They make me whole. Likewise, each of the images from this series would have turned out drastically underexposed and useless if the main exposure had not been amplified by the sub exposures.

*Durations* is a series of multiple exposure color photographs which attempts to show the passage of time within a single, continuous experience. Similar to *Memory and the Mind’s Eye*, this series also tries to demonstrate what experiences look like when I close my eyes and try to remember. The photographs are quite phantasmic, similar to what memories visually look like to me.

Each photograph within *Durations* is made up of six to ten individual exposures. Unlike the photographs in *Memory and the Mind’s Eye*, where there is one prominent exposure on top of less powerful exposures, the exposures in *Durations* are all evenly weighted. As I created each exposure within each *Durations* image, I maintained a constant connection with my subjects, often moving alongside them. In a way, this movement also inserted myself into the image. While making each exposure, I kept the subject’s head in the same location on the camera’s focusing screen. This helped the resulting photograph from being completely indiscernible.

I do not believe an experience can be understood on an emotional level though a single instantaneous image. John Berger argues in his book, *Another Way of Telling*, “In life it is an event’s development in time, its duration, which allows its meaning to be perceived and felt.”  

To *feel* an experience, to convey the broad emotions of a scene, is part of what I am trying to achieve with these pictures. The multiple exposure technique I used to make *Durations* gives each image an aura that could not be perceived within a straight photograph. Amalgamated time and energy emanate off each subject within *Durations* photographs.

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Durations (A Serious Talk with Matthew John), 2018
Part 9: Space Travel

Unlike time, photography excels at representing physical space. The world is full of landscape and architectural photographs that showcase both indoor and outdoor settings in great detail. Through the use of different lenses, it is easy for a camera to transform a three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional image. However, it is much more difficult for photographs to depict the experience of moving through a three dimensional space. This is a challenge I undertook with my multiple exposure series, Passages.
To create *Passages*, I made in-camera multiple-exposures with my digital camera as I moved through various spaces. To emphasize depth and distance within the pictures, I used a wide-angle 20mm lens. I kept the vanishing point in the center of each composition to unify the completed photograph, and to prevent the image from becoming too confusing. With my camera I turned each space, as well as my experience of walking through said space, into an amalgamated abstraction. In my visual memory, I do not remember moving through these spaces as the perfect split second image the camera typically records. My memory is much messier, similar to these photographs.

I make most of my photographs in spaces I regularly inhabit. As a result, many of my images feature suburban environments, such as housing clusters and shopping centers. My *Gentilly* series depicts various blocks of houses in the cluster I live in, called “Burbank Gardens.”
With a medium format camera, I walked up and down different streets around where I live, and made an exposure of each house I passed. Each image within this series is made up of around 32 exposures of 32 separate houses. The result is an amalgamation of each block, as well as an interpretation of my walk down each street.

David Hockney, *The Crossword Puzzle, Minneapolis, 1984*

David Hockney’s work is a strong influence regarding how I investigate the concept of space. Hockney’s photography functions largely as a critique on the photographic medium. His photographic collages, which he calls *Joiners*, seek to show more than just the one moment photographs typically depict. His collages are comprised of multiple moments and focal points from within a single experience. Hockney’s collages force the viewer’s eyes around the image to visually experience the scene as he himself experienced it. He is not concerned about what is portrayed in his photographs, so much as how they are viewed, as his work is about the act of looking. Hockney says in Paul Joyce’s book, *Hockney On Photography*, “. . . The most ordinary can be the most extraordinary . . . . I’m suggesting that the subject matter is less important. It’s
the way it’s seen that’s more important.”¹⁴ Like Hockney, the actual physical subject matter in my photography is not as important as how that subject matter is viewed and experienced. The study of Hockney’s philosophy and techniques behind his *Joiners* work led me to create my *Journeys* series. *Journeys* photographs are a combination of collage and multiple exposure techniques designed to explore how I process experiences and move through three-dimensional space.

![Streetcar (From City Park to Canal Place), 2018](image)

To make these gelatin silver prints, I used a 35mm camera or a half-frame 35mm camera. Throughout an experience, I made photographs of everything around me. While making the initial pictures, I intentionally cut each exposure by one-fourth. After processing the

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negatives, I taped them together onto a 4x5 inch glass carrier to form a large, amalgamated negative of the experience. From there, I printed the constructed negative using traditional darkroom techniques. The decreased exposure of each negative let me stack multiple negatives on top of each other to show multiple moments at the same focal point within the final pictures, without the image becoming an overexposed mass of pure white. Collaging transparent negatives allows me to show overlapping moments, unlike with a typical collage, where each opaque image completely obscures the one beneath it. Certain images within Journeys show space moving around me, while others show me moving through space.

Streetcar (City Park to Canal) depicts the entirety of a trip in a downtown streetcar. For the whole ride, I made pictures of my surroundings, both of the interior of the car and the city passing by outside. The resulting collage shows overlapping time and space, as well as the movement of my eye. The collage also portrays the change in scenery both inside and outside of the car.

While Street Car (City Park to Canal) shows space moving by me as I sit stationary in a seat, Bike Ride (From Home to Work) exhibits me actively journeying through space. As I rode my bike over five miles from my house to my job, I made exposures of anything that caught my eye. After processing the negatives, I collaged the scene back together as I saw fit, according to my memory. To stop the final picture from becoming completely incomprehensible, I made sure to keep the horizon line approximately level, and each individual image aligned with a vanishing point.

Each individual image within each Journeys collage has its own time. Hockney writes in his book, A History of Pictures, “When a human being is looking at a scene the questions are: What do I see first? What do I see second? What do I see third? A photograph sees it all at once - in one click of the lens from a single point of view - but we don’t.”15 With Journeys, I

15 David Hockney and Martin Gayford, A History of Pictures: From the Cave to the Computer Screen (Farnborough: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 83.
attempt to show how every experience is made up of near-infinitesimal instances, and that the eye is always moving, taking in new information. I believe *Journeys* succeeds in subverting the photographic norm, and is a strong effort to demonstrate movement through space using a two-dimensional medium.

*Bike Ride (From Home to Work), 2018*
Before I picked up photography during my undergraduate studies, I primarily practiced drawing and painting. However, these works were mainly done from photographs. Over time, I found this method of working from photographs monotonous, and discovered enjoyment and creative potential through learning more about photography. I eventually cut out the tedious drawing and painting step entirely, and began to make work solely as a photographer. For a long time, I barely did any drawing or painting; photography was the only medium for me.

The monopoly photography held on me changed a few years ago. I started to draw again, and focused on cross-hatching and line work skills using artist pens. However, I fell back on my old ways of using reference photos to draw from. I made some incredibly detailed drawings, mostly using grid based copy systems, and the process pained me both physically and emotionally.

While the style was pleasant to look at, my drawings did not say anything the photographs they were drawn from could not say on their own. Today, I generally view drawings and paintings copied from photographs to be superfluous and uninspiring. Photographs are powerful because they are pulled directly from reality. But when working from photographs, the artist is effectively twice removed from reality. Time is spent making a copy from a copy, which seems pointless to me now.

The biggest influence on my drawing style is the contemporary illustrator Landis Blair, who uses fine-tipped artist pens to build up intense shadows through cross hatching. Studying his work has taught me not to shy away from building up rich, powerful blacks in my drawings. I find cross-hatching with small pens produces more satisfying results than with shading, as it is possible to independently view each stroke, and come to a greater understanding of how the drawing was created, as well as how much time it took. While Blair uses his skills to create
intricate drawings based upon Surrealism and Magical Realism, my work is more crude, and concerned with observable reality.

Regulated Garbage is an ongoing series of drawings I make from pure observation. Each day, I depict an experience by drawing on an object I acquire from within said experience. I spend anywhere from thirty minutes to three hours on each individual drawing. Ultimately, my goal is to complete at least one full year’s worth of drawings - 365 in total.

I appreciate the precious nature of the Regulated Garbage drawings. Each drawing is one-of-a-kind, drawn on a unique found object, so one can never truly be copied or mass-produced, unlike a photograph. Just like the experiences the drawings represent, they can
never be repeated. I also enjoy the rawness of my *Regulated Garbage* drawings. Though often a bit rudimentary, these pieces are direct interpretations of my surroundings, translated straight from myself to the object I am drawing on. There is no large, bulky camera to get in the way. With drawing from observation, my subjective views are not forcibly filtered through an objective photographic apparatus. There is also the matter of the found objects I use to draw on. Each drawing I make is a combination of a physical object from an experience, superimposed with my subjective interpretation of the depicted experience.
Similar to my multiple exposure photographs and collages, each *Regulated Garbage* piece I make is an amalgamation of the experience I am conveying. During the course of making a drawing, the scene in front of me often changes. People move, situations develop, environments alter, and lighting shifts. While drawing, I have no choice but to adapt to the circumstances each situation presents to me. My finished pieces are scenes as I experienced them, rather than scenes as they precisely appeared at one given moment.

Unlike with a straight photograph, where a depicted scene is instantly exposed and time is universal, every mark I make with my pen is a separate observation and time. Each drawing is made up of thousands of little moments that come together to form a complete vision of my environment. I like to build up each drawing with as many marks as possible, so the final image is brimming with time. Like my photographs, these drawings force me to closely observe commonly forgotten everyday moments, and bring me to a greater appreciation of my life as a whole.
Part 11: To Conclude

With my work, I try to convey how experiences feel, and how they are preserved in my mind, rather than simply how they appear to an objective camera lens. Many photographers feel the constant urge to preserve moments, to freeze them perfectly in time and save them from oblivion. Conversely, I embrace the flow of time, and do not try to fight it. Through multiple exposures, negative collages, and observational drawings, I investigate how amalgamated buildups of time and space affect the way I comprehend my experiences, as well as myself.

The cold, mechanical nature of straight photographs is unsatisfying to me. Vilém Flusser writes in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, “The ‘best’ photographs are those in which photographers win out against the camera’s program in the sense of their human intentions, i.e. they subordinate the camera to human intention. It goes without saying that there are ‘good’ photographs in which the human spirit wins out against the program.”¹⁶

Like Flusser argues, I believe successful photographs need to circumvent the static objectiveness of the camera’s program, and present an image that is both subjective and personal. Good art needs to have meaning, and good art needs to have a soul. Soul cannot be obtained, and human experience cannot be conveyed, simply by aggressively taking from the world, armed with a camera.

With *Amalgamations*, I do not wish to take or steal images. My work is created from within myself. Each individual series of work within my thesis exhibition is designed to interpret my experiences and memory in a unique manner. My hope is that viewers will come away from *Amalgamations* with a new appreciation and understanding of art, and how art can be used to translate life.

Works Cited


Vita

Brennan Probst was born in Chicago, Illinois. He obtained his B.A. in Art from Monmouth College in 2012. After exhibiting in multiple juried shows and working in a Chicago art gallery, Brennan began the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of New Orleans in 2016.