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In Hiding...

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In Hiding...

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

Roderick J. Worden

B.F.A. James Madison University, 2008

May, 2011

Dedication

For my Grandfather Joseph Ward Wright, whose passion for art and photography, coupled with his constant love and support, served as a backbone for my growth as an artist and human being.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the entire graduate faculty for their constant support and help during my time at the University of New Orleans. In particular I would like to thank my sponsor Ariya Martin for all that she has done for me. I would also like to thank Cheryl Hayes, Richard Johnson, and Doyle Gertje Jensen for all their help along the way. Lastly, I would like to thank my former professor, mentor, and friend Rebecca Silberman whose guidance has been crucial to my development as an artist.

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Abstract

The conceptual foundation for my work lies in the idea of “interaction.” I work towards exposing this idea in its more basic and routine form, as well as the broad scope of it. Ranging beyond the common associations made with human to human interaction, my work enters a number of realms including environmental, architectural, and intra-personal interactions, working amongst the subtleties of each. I seek to create an image of relate-able experience, thus I feel the medium of photography is necessitated, as it is rooted in the idea of documentary and realism, in effect, cataloguing images of or influenced by the outside world.

Photography, Night Photography, Contemporary Photography, Exposure, Architectural Photography, Experiential, Street Photography

Introduction

The conceptual foundation for my work lies within the broadly scoped idea of “interaction.” Ranging beyond the common associations made with human to human interaction, my work enters a number of realms including environmental, architectural, and inner-personal interactions, working amongst the subtleties of each. Defined by Webster’s dictionary as, “mutual or reciprocal action or influence,” I seek to explore this definition as it relates to relationships which are universal in their existence, but often go unnoticed. The impetus for my work is an introspective investigation into this idea, often spurred by personal experience and/or recollection. I have often associated simple or routine experience with the sublime, and seek to reach a level of understanding as to why this is, but also, to relate this understanding on a larger scale as I feel the idea of “interaction,” is one which is applicable to all, but often unacknowledged.

For these reasons, I seek to create images of relateable experience. An image which, for the most part is direct and stripped of extraneous aesthetic and subjective components. I feel the medium of photography best suits these motives because it is rooted in the idea of documentary and realism, in effect, cataloguing images of or influenced by the outside world. I feel the idea of interaction is rooted in the outside world and is one which is often displayed in our daily activities, hence I often take a more simplistic approach toward translating this idea into a visual language.

My background within the visual arts is that of a painter concerned primarily with aesthetic formalism. As a painter, I took delight in exploring how basic elements of form, composition, color and line could converge in their basic properties to create a physical artwork which could then be associated with beauty. It was this fascination with the formal elements of

art themselves which directed my focus toward non-objectivity. However, I would eventually grow weary of this working process.

Tired of non-objectivity and its conceptual limitations, I arrived at a the realization that a vast majority of human action is influenced by the environment which surrounds us, hence non-objectivity became a moot point. It was this line of thought which turned my attention to photography and exploring reality's influence on human action, or how one's environment serves as the basis by which we create. When first approaching this idea however, I was overwhelmed by the broad scope in which it exists.

My focus became more direct as I began working within the genre of night photography, focusing in particular on man-made environments, which at the time, (of day,) that I photographed them were absent of man. Under ambient lighting both natural and artificial, I felt it became more clear and/or visible within the photograph why a building or place existed and to what purpose it was created, and hence, what associations of human interaction may be drawn as it relates to a specific location. Whether it was a main street sidewalk which should be brimming with traffic both automotive and pedestrian, or an empty bench created for one or several people to sit and relax. Allowing these places or objects to exist alone within the photograph, gave them a voice and a story, and a primary role within that story, whereas with the presence of man within the photograph, they likely would have receded to mere elements of a setting.

Painting and Formalism

At the outset of my artistic career, I was seduced by form in its most basic existence. I drew wonder from the idea of beauty and the sublime, but in particular, how it can come into existence based on aesthetic element alone. I feel common associations of beauty are often made with objects or subjects with which we as people can easily identify with. It was the existence of beauty beyond these things which piqued my interest.

This was exemplified greatly by the artist Wassily Kandinsky, whose work was often a stream of conscious reaction to music, which resulted in non-object form. His work amazed me in its ability to conjure emotional reaction when viewed, despite its absence of relate-able objects. It existed in abstraction and was successful based on the merging of formal elements.

It is with Kandinsky's mode of thought that I abandoned conceptual impetus for creation of artwork, and devoted my time to abstraction and sub-conscious painting. Relying entirely upon formal aestheticism, I began working on a larger scale utilizing a stream of conscious drawing style as a means of creating a preliminary layout for a colorful painting. In essence it was a working style similar to the abstract-expressionists of the mid-20th century, who believed that art should explore the limits of the medium itself. Though I was never an avid fan of the work of Jackson Pollock, I was influenced by his working style which for the most part attained a performative aspect to painting.

I was seduced by the idea of sub-conscious thought, and how painting can represent this in a non-object way. As I moved forward working in this fashion however, I found that the paintings I produced would often result with a conclusive concept or idea which often characterized a mode of thought or emotion which I was experiencing personally at the time. In this sense, the formal abstraction of the work was maintained, yet its sense of non-objectivity

was diminished in my view, and I feel this was characterized to an increasingly greater extent by three paintings in particular.

The first, entitled “The Great Wave,” (Figure 1) which was completed in 2006, was the earliest in my series of stream of conscious works. As I neared completion, I began to see the form of a wave swooping from the left to the right of the painting, overtaking two faces in the center of the work. In retrospect, the painting was created at a time of great personal self-doubt and worry. Aesthetic decisions were made in response to this state of mind as I completed the work, in particular painting the form of the wave.

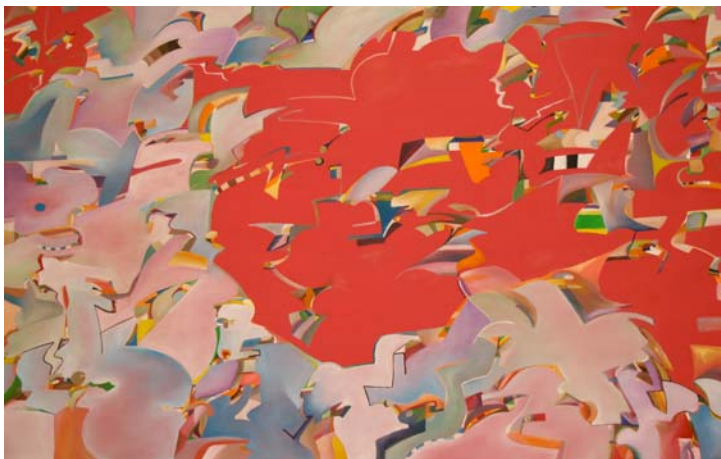


Figure #1: “The Great Wave,” 2006, Oil on Canvas, 60” x 108”

In the second, entitled “Two Nations Divided by a Common Language,” (Figure 2) completed in 2007, I made conscious aesthetic decisions which were based on the realization of my mode of thought at the time earlier in the work. As I progressed in the painting, I saw that I had left the streaming design of the painting open in the middle of the work. At the time, I had been studying how the use of common language can be used in a divisive sense, with religious fanaticism as a primary example. I decided to collage fanatic religious documents up the open

middle of the work, in a sense creating a religious divide amongst two very similar sides to the painting.



Figure #2: “Two Nations Divided by a Common Language,” 2007, Oil, collage, and stitching on canvas, 84” x 120”

The third and final work, which is also the last painting I have completed to this point in time, is entitled, “Adrift in the River’s Delta,” (Figure 3) completed in 2008. Here, my use of sub-conscious thought disappears almost entirely as I entered into this formally abstract piece with a specific motivation in mind. At the time, I had ended a relationship with a former lover. She often spoke in metaphors. Near the end of our relationship, she had described herself as a river which had stopped flowing and become stagnant. Conversely, at the end of our relationship, I was very confused with how she viewed us as a couple and me in particular. Thus I compared the end of our relationship to being lost adrift in a boat in a river’s delta, and I envisioned a painting which was confusing and directionless. A very complex concept for what in essence was a non-objective painting.



Figure #3: "Adrift in the River's Delta," 2008, Oil on Canvas, 60" x 60"

In this sense, I saw myself moving away from the ideals of Abstract-Expressionism and away from the idea of non-objectivity. At first, this change was brought on based mainly on a desire to explore and produce more conceptually driven art. However, this change was accelerated by a two-fold discontentment with the process of painting itself, and the idea of non-objectivity.

As it stood, I no longer saw a use for painting or non-objectivity within my oeuvre. I sought immediacy in my work, and a conceptual basis by which to produce it. An influence on this mode of thought was photographer Roy Decarava, whose work I had been studying at the time. Decarava took a similar path, beginning his career as a painter, but after several years began working as a photographer as he was attracted to, "the directness of the medium."¹ It is in this sense that I began to experiment with the camera.

¹ Coleman, A.D. *Roy Decarava: "Thru Black Eyes"*. Popular Photography, Vol. 66, No. 4, April 1970, pp.70.

Early Photographic Work

My work in, or perhaps better stated, my training in photography actually pre-dates the brunt of my work as a painter. I first stepped into a darkroom when I was 14 years old, but it was primarily out of interest in acquiring a new skill set, as opposed to exploring photography as an artistic medium.

My interest in the work of Roy Decarava and in particular his personal transition from abstract painter to photographer coincided with my desire to produce work of greater immediacy, and served as an impetus to explore photography as a means of artistic practice. Decarava's work in particular struck me based on its formal beauty in conjunction with its rich subject matter. His photographs are characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance and become symbolic of the omnipresence that the racial divide during the 1950's and 1960's held. His work showed me that formalism can both work with and enhance one's concept, whereas I feel many can become trapped by the elements of formalism, (as I was trapped for several years.) Decarava said...

"Photography is an intransigent medium, and it's very hard to express yourself. After you get a certain technical facility — and from the very first I took 'good' pictures — you've got to get at what you feel."²

My years of training in the darkroom had already afforded me the ability to take what Decarava refers to as, "good pictures," and my years of work within a formalist mindset had afforded me a good eye for composition and a near intuitive ability to properly frame a shot, based on elements of light, shadow, line, and objects within a photograph. Formally, I was confident. Conceptually however, I was directionless.

² *ibid*, pp. 71.

I sought to create images that held some form of meaning, whether personal or universal. I had however, worked for so long purely within the mindset of abstraction and formalism, that conceptually I did not know where to take my work.

Being aware of this problem at the time, I decided to experiment with the medium of photography and its technical aspects, as a means of expanding what I was capable of producing technically, but more importantly, being able to enhance a possible concept with good technical quality.

Working primarily in the darkroom I began producing black and white street scenes of where I lived at the time, in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The scenes were still based on formal aspects of composition, best exemplified by three images, “Train Tracks,” (figure 4), “Main St.,” (figure 5) and “Triangles,” (figure 6). These were mainly a response to many of the early street photographers such as Walker Evans, William Eggleston, and Alfred Steigletz. I was attracted by their ability to view a scene in front of them and manage to display a sense of beauty within it based on their eye for the formal elements and ability to contextualize the environment by which they were surrounded.

I came to look at these street scenes as a mere exercise. I began working with alternative processes of photography, beginning like so many others, with pinhole photography. I studied many other techniques such as the daguerrotype, cyanotype, gum printing, collodian, and emulsion techniques, but it was pinhole photography that slowly began to open my eyes to the ideas of long exposure and elapsed time within a photograph. In particular with these two concepts is the fact that a photograph is not only a document of available light within a scene that the camera captures, but it is also a document of time.



Figure 4: *Train Tracks*, 2006, B & W print



Figure 5: *Main St.*, 2006, B & W print



Figure 6: *Triangles*, 2006, B & W print

I take this idea of time in two ways. First, the idea of elapsed time during an exposure. This can range from a very quick exposure, say 1/4000th of a second, to an infinitely long exposure. When a picture is captured, it is capturing a moment in time and a set of physical conditions which only exist in that moment and can never be replicated. The second is the idea of capturing a scene in context of time, or more simply put, time in a historical manner. The picture serves as a document of a point in time, but also serves as a reference point to some mode of thought and/or some event which occurred in the past.

I am more intrigued by the idea of elapsed time during a photograph, and how this may relate to the experiential. In particular the fact that no matter how short or how long an exposure is, it is capturing a moment which can never be exactly replicated again. At this time I had been studying the work of James Turrell whose *skyspaces* allowed one to enter a space and experience the effect of light over a period of time and the many subtle changes which occur over time as it relates to color.³ I was always interested in particular at viewing photographs of his architectural spaces taken at different times during the day. I viewed these photographs as photography acting as impressionist painting, documenting how elapsed time can completely change the atmosphere of an environment based on available light, and the color it produces.

The idea of long exposure and my practice with the pinhole led me to a short series entitled *Dreams*, which, though a very short series, has come to be the starting point for my work over these past three years.

³ Turrell, James. *Geometry of Light*. Germany, Hatje Cantz, 2009. Pp. 22-23.

Dreams and Night

A simple conversation with a friend served as the impetus for this series. In this conversation, we talked about our dreams, in particular, dreams we have on a regular basis. Although from time to time I do have a wildly vivid and surreal dream, more often than not, my dreams are little more than a fogged version of reality. In these dreams, I am normally in a location I am familiar with such as my house, or a library, or walking down a street, and am engaged in some activity such as eating or reading. These dreams often would go no further than this.

At the time, I had become more entrenched in the darkroom, and had been experimenting with night photography as well as a Holga camera. I decided to capture these foggy representations of reality by combining all of these elements.

I affixed the shutter on the Holga camera so that the shutter would remain open and allow me to take a bulb exposure, (a function where the shutter remains open for a long exposure, until it is manually closed by the photographer.) I did not use a tri-pod while making these exposures, instead steadying the camera against my chest and/or knees, so that minute movements of my body may develop a soft focus to the images, producing a blurriness to the images similar to a drunkenness or a tired stupor. An example of which can be seen in (Figure 7,) “Beacon.”

The concept for this series was a very simple and straightforward one, where I was photographing my dreams, which I considered to be rather boring. In essence, I feel I was trying to capture a memory which was about reality, but did not take place in reality. The series was short lived, only lasting for about two months, however, it served as a starting point for a body of work which would last nearly two years.

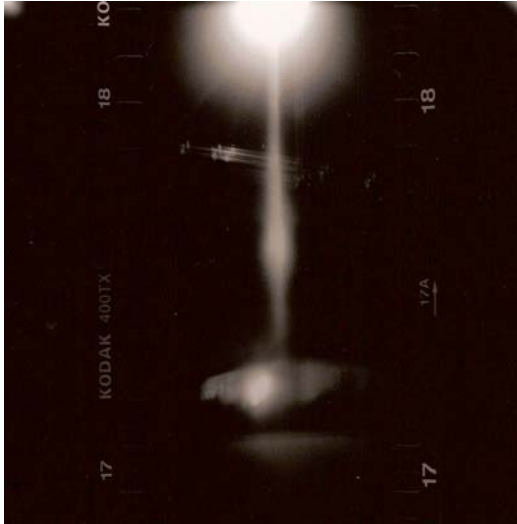


Figure 7: *Beacon*, 2007, B & W print

I had been exploring familiar environments at night and I became interested in how these environments are transformed at night.

At the time, I had been looking at the work of Edward Byrtynsky, and his long running series, “Manufactured Landscapes.” I was interested in how he captured vast landscapes which had been almost entirely transformed by the presence of man. Whether they be quarries, or shipyards, or landfills, his focus was centered on how these places although altered by man, were nonetheless a natural element of environment, one which had become familiar and accepted through time.

My interest did not necessarily lie in landscape and how it had been transformed, but rather with structure, and why it came to exist. While working on the “Dreams,” series, I began to notice how a familiar environment, (and by “familiar,” I mean an environment which I or others experience on a daily basis,) would take on a new character in the absence of man.

When one sees a building, an association can easily be made as it pertains to its usage. A restaurant might see a steady flow of customers. A warehouse might see a number of workers attending to some project or an array of materials. A house is meant for one or many people to

inhabit. All structures built serve some type of purpose and a resulting usage. People interact with and within these structures, but I felt these interactions were more noticeable and striking when people were not present or on display in and around them.

Overall, I was struck by how crucial these everyday interactions both with and within environment are a fundamental element of daily life, yet with our familiarity to our man-made structures, they often become mundane and forgettable. Under our own artificial lighting at night, I felt these structures take on a new level of importance, where their usage and purpose, as well as age and history are brought to the forefront, and in a sense, monumentalized.

It is with this thought in mind, that I began a new body of work simply entitled, “Night.” I sought to capture those aspects purpose and usage, and represent structures with a sense of monumentality.

I began shooting in color in this body of work. I felt that artificial or ambient lighting at night was a crucial element in allowing for a transformative representation of these structures and scene. James Turrell’s *Skyspaces* again were at the forefront of my mind in their display of how color can alter the atmosphere of a place. I am interested in how light, and its color temperature can change the appearance of a structure, in effect, dispelling how many commonly view these structures under daylight.

I worked almost purely as a street photographer. Walking and exploring the streets at night, and setting up a camera and tripod wherever I saw fit. At the time, I sought to create images which combined the formal composition of the street photographer’s such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, with the surreal clarity and beauty of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Hence, I often spent much time, surveying a scene, positioning the camera, and taking numerous exposures, as opposed to purely working in a snapshot or “quick-shot” aesthetic. The

scenes I photographed were not, (physically,) manipulated by me, yet the compositions were still painstakingly thought out and set up when the picture was taken.

In this sense, the contemporary debate within the world of photography of technical craft versus subject matter became an issue within my work. I have often felt that good artwork cannot solely exist as either “formally beautiful,” or “very interesting,” but rather should work to find a balance between the two wherein good craft serves to enhance one’s concept. It is my belief that although a work may be interesting, it still must be able to function aesthetically, and vice versa. I have often looked at the work of Alec Soth as a great example in an artist finding a balance between strong concept and strong craft, in particular his series “Sleeping by the Mississippi,” wherein Soth presents a body of photographs which were meticulous in the way they were shot (with an 8x10 view camera⁴), and composed, yet display richly developed themes of loneliness, of a downtrodden area of the United States, and of a geographic region which had seen past glory which has since been forgotten in the present.

In retrospect, I feel my background as a painter whose sole focus was formal aesthetics, ended up being the downfall of the *Night* series. Though I felt comfortable with the subject matter of the photographs, over time, I began to see their formal beauty overriding their subject matter to the point where the sole focus of the work was a technical exercise. Two photographs in particular from this series raised this red flag. “Dayton in Green,” (Figure 8,) and “The Tire Farm,” (Figure 9,) both worked formally as aesthetic works of art, but just felt dry in terms of subject matter, the latter of which I feel is unrecognizable as a night photo. I felt elements of composition became the most interesting element of the photograph, particularly in “Dayton in

⁴ Elbies, Jeffrey. “*Stream of Consciousness: Alec Soth Looks for Dreamers Along the Mississippi*”. American Photo, January/February 2005, pp. 96.

Green,” and though this could have been a direction to work toward in terms of a body of work, it was far from the work I desired to create.



Figure 8: *Dayton in Green*, 2007



Figure 9: *The Tire Farm*, 2007

Overall though, the work felt directionless. The scenes I photographed were not necessarily related, as some focused more on particular components of a setting such as a storefront window, or as in “The Tire Farm,” a particular corner of a garage front. While some were more expansive landscapes involving road and sky along with structure. The only unifying component of all the images was the fact that they were all taken at night, a fact which I felt was both too broad and too simple when applied to my reasons for creating the work.

Towards the end of this series, I began focusing more on the work of Robert Irwin and his transformation as an artist from an abstract-expressionist painter, toward ideals of

minimalism and conceptualism. I felt his work over time exhibited a transformation in which he continuously removed extraneous elements of process and aesthetic quality to where they became subtle yet effective works of art which played off of a persons experiential perceptions.

Irwin's transformation could be applied to the *Night* series, as the images could be simplified to bare essential elements core to the base idea by which I began the series.

Focusing more directly on walls, doorways and structure fronts, I felt the photographs could benefit by becoming simplified and vague. "Fortress," (Figure 10)



Figure 10: *Fortress*, 2008

best exemplifies these shifts in focus. This photograph, and others created in this new vein held up better to the core concept of representing a buildings usage and purpose, in that they existed in a more subtle manner. I felt it was better for the photograph to raise the question of what purpose a building serves, as opposed to being a more direct representation of this idea. A doorway became symbolic in this sense, as it is natural for one to wonder what lies behind it.

A sense of mystery, and a lack of object, size and dimension within these photographs produced the most intriguing images of the *Night* series. In "The Red Wall," (Figure 11,)



Figure 11: *The Red Wall*, 2008

the only apparent objects aside from the wall and grass, is the shadow of a fence and several power lines. The photograph is more suggestive, yet less descriptive and allows one to ponder its location, purpose, usage and age.

Although I felt this new direction in the *Night* series yielded the best photographs from the series, I began to feel that the work had leveled off with respect to where it could be taken. It was at this time that I ended work on the *Night* series, and returned for a short time to experimentation. This time however, my experiments focused more on subject matter, and how I could approach it, as opposed to an exploration of photographic processes.

Within Yourself

After my abandonment of the *Night* series I worked for a short amount of time on a variety of simple “one-off” ideas in hopes that one may show potential to be expanded into a larger body of work. These ideas more often than not however, yielded unspectacular results. A new body of work entitled *Within Yourself*, began out of a simple selfish desire. I had always wanted to see a photograph of me having an argument with myself. “The Argument,” (Figure 12,) was the result.



Figure 12: *The Argument*, 2009

After completing this photograph, I saw great potential in its capacity to be expanded into a body of work.

From a conceptual standpoint, I felt it to be an interesting exploration into the idea of intra-personal interaction, or the idea of internal argument, debate, wonder, and thought. The idea of the thinking process as it relates to our decision making and course of action was an interesting one, as behind every action we perform, is inevitably a list of ramifications that we consider beforehand. Different aspects of personality hold influence over our own actions and I felt “The Argument” was a simple, yet effective display of the different aspects of one’s own personality clashing with one another.

From a technical standpoint, I saw it as a way to investigate digital photography more directly. Although I had been shooting digitally for the *Night* series, I still rarely used photoshop for image alterations and approached my work no differently than I would had I been using film. I was aware of other artists creating work of a similar vein wherein there were multiple images of oneself in the same image, most noticeably the work of Anthony Goiclea. I felt however, that much of this work suffered through use of a green screen, where digital manipulations were more apparent when viewing the completed work. I wanted to create work which looked more authentic, realistic and intimate in its multiple representations of the same subject, and saw this as an opportunity to take digital manipulation in a new direction.

I abandoned use of the green-screen and instead developed a process where I would set up the camera in a fixed position, and would take numerous images of myself in different spots within the scene. I would then carefully merge the photographs in Photoshop. To make sure the photographs merged seamlessly, the lighting conditions of all the scenes were fixed as well, hence the vast majority of work within the series was either taken outdoors at night, or indoors. The result of this process made for a more intimate image, where the figure was more naturally represented within a scene and its lighting.

At first, I focused on broad themes within each individual image. An example of this is a work entitled, “Delusions of Grandeur,” (Figure 13) which represented the rather clichéd idea of how one dreams of being a rockstar. Other themes included an argument, a decision being made, and/or the thinking process itself.



Figure 13: *Delusions of Grandeur*, 2009

With these first images displaying broadly scoped themes, I placed myself within the image as an archetype not unlike many artists who have done so in the past such as Arno Minkinnen as exemplified in “Jamestown, Rhode Island,” (Figure 14) where Minkinnen contorts his body through the act of diving into water, and thus allows himself to become a natural element to a natural scene. I quickly began to feel that the work was too broad based with its clichéd themes, and perhaps would be more interesting as a self-exploration.



Figure 14: Arno Minkinnen, *Jamestown, Rhode Island*. B&W Photograph. 1974

The series would become a more direct use of self-portraiture, as I began to focus more on the many facets behind what could be considered rather simple and routine daily actions.

“Cleaning Up,” (Figure 15) is an example of what one goes through when



Figure 15: *Cleaning Up*, 2009

waking up in the morning and preparing oneself for the day. The photo shows me clean shaven and brushing my teeth in person, but my reflection in the mirror displays an annoyed and disheveled self. In another example, “Out of ideas,” (Figure 16) my profession as an artist is on display where I am sitting at my desk drawing out ideas in a notebook, but throwing out an idea represented by a crumpled piece of paper into a trash can which is being held by myself in the left of the image.



Figure 16: *Out of Ideas*, 2009

The series worked well in terms of its exploration of the inner-self and the many aspects of personality which are exhibited in our most simple and routine actions and decisions.

However, I quickly began to feel that the series had little room to grow. In reviewing the images, they accomplished what I wanted both technically and conceptually, but the directness of the images took on the character of a “One-Liner,” similar to the conceptually driven work of Bruce Nauman, which were often a literal play on words.⁵

A quote from Jackson Pollock that has always stuck with me, took on new meaning with my reasons for discontent with the *Within Yourself* series and reads...

"The pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, and an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely."⁶

With this, I have always felt that good artwork is direct only to the point that it guides one into a line of thought, but does not reveal an answer. Good art needs to raise intrigue, but not end that intrigue at the same time. I felt that *Within Yourself*, though a solid body of decent art work, was too direct and straight-forward, and I came to the conclusion that it could not exist otherwise. Hence, I abandoned *Within Yourself* and revisited my series *Night*, and what I had come to view as the positive aspects of that series and how those may be taken to another level.

⁵ Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996. Pp. 814

⁶ Ibid. Pp. 22.

In Hiding...

My most recent body of work came to be through a tedious review of both the *Night* and *Within Yourself* series, wherein I sought to figure out where both series succeeded and failed.

I enjoyed the *Night* series immensely, but felt it was directionless and depended too much on formal aesthetics. I felt there was potential for it to be improved as I began to view the work of Gregory Crewdson whose surreal nightscapes displayed formal beauty but were rich in subject matter. His high-budget sets reminded me of a comment I had often heard from people who had viewed work from my *Night* who claimed that the images, “Looked like a movie set.” This was something I had never considered while working on the series; although the scenes were never physically manipulated or arranged, they appeared as though they were fake and built specifically for the image.

Within Yourself had given me a taste of directness in subject matter, as well as how heavy-handedness could both benefit and detriment a photograph. I began to realize that in the *Night* series I had been too vague with my subject matter, and in effect, gave the viewer too little, whereas in *Within Yourself* I had been too direct and both raised and answered questions within the images.

These realizations spurred me to revisit the *Night* series, but in a more direct and heavy-handed manner.

I began to realize that elements of the *Night* series were as much about myself and my own interaction with and within these scenes at night, as they were about the structures which I had chosen to photograph. The fact that I had “chosen,” these scenes as well, displayed a personal belief in the importance and beauty of these places. Hence, I saw it a proper step to

leave elements of this personal interaction with these places, and the fact that I made the choice to photograph this place or thing in particular, within the photograph.

I decided to focus the images more squarely on objects I came across at night, such as a bench, game table, grill, boat, etc... This as an objects usage and purpose is easier to define as opposed to drawing that definition from an image of a building's exterior. "Empty Bench #2," (Figure 17) and "Ping-Pong," (Figure 18) are perhaps the best examples of the earliest images of this series.



Figure 17: *Empty Bench #2*, 2010



Figure 18: *Ping Pong*, 2010

In the earliest work of the series, I sought out these objects in areas lacking any ambient source of lighting (aside from skylight.) I took with me a small lighting rig which I would set up around the object, lighting it and bringing it forth out of an otherwise pitch black area. To display my own personal choice in choosing these objects to photograph, I would leave the lighting rig within the photograph, more often than not in a subtle manner, as seen in “Empty Bench #2,” where a faint outline of the light bulbs is all that is visible from the lighting rig.

My goal was to highlight the importance of our usage of these simple objects by displaying them prominently lit, but absent of action. For the most part, I felt these early photographs were effective, however, there were elements that I felt were lacking. In particular, I still desired to have elements of setting and scene present within the photograph, an aspect which I felt these early photographs lacked. Their darkness and singular lighting of a specific object within that darkness began to turn the photographs into pure still-life’s in my opinion, and I felt that a viewer could too easily reach that same conclusion.

I moved forward taking similar photographs, but allowing outside elements of an object’s setting to be more visible. “His Workout,” (Figure 19,) best exemplifies this, as a person’s weightlifting bench is shown where it exists on that person’s patio outside their house. The lighting rig has become more visible, but still an out of place element to the scene which highlights my involvement within the photograph.



Figure 19: *His Workout*, 2010

I felt there was a need to put the objects I chose to photograph in context of their setting. The weight-lifting set on it's own could exist anywhere and in any situation, whereas in “His Workout,” it exists in context of a person's house and is clearly seen at the very least, recent usage by that person. Although the image is more direct, elements of narrative are still left to interpretation.

For about six months, I continued working in similar fashion to “His Workout,” leaving aspects of setting within the photograph and highlighting specific objects with one or several lights. I however began to view the lights as becoming problematic. Although they served the purpose of highlighting my own interaction with these places and objects well, they were becoming a visual gimmick in my opinion. I felt as though the light rig was becoming a character within these photographs, and were too heavy-handed.

I began to draw back from leaving the light rig within the shot, and instead opted for a more direct involvement within the scene. I began triggering the camera remotely, while I would walk through the scene lighting certain aspects of it in explicit fashion during the exposure. I saw this as a means of giving a new life to the objects within the scene, and in essence personifying

aspects, or objects within the scene, while still allowing my presence or involvement within the photograph to be visible, albeit in a more vague manner. In “Forklift Farm,” (Figure 20) I am underneath the truck trailer popping a powerful strobe light during the exposure. Hence, the main light source is from underneath the trailer, and serves to illuminate the many forklifts which sit in front of it. I feel this photograph takes on numerous subjects including my own personal interaction within the scene, the purpose and history of the forklifts sitting together in this lot, and the usage of all equipment within the photograph.



Figure 20: *Forklift Farm*, 2010

In “Incoming and Outgoing,” (Figure 21) I am hidden behind the blue dumpster to the right of the new shed, and am popping the strobe in all directions from behind the dumpster. The dumpster becomes the object of action, one which has seen much daily usage, and becomes an object by which trash is discarded and removed, whereas it sits next to a shed which is obviously very new and clean. The new and the old are highlighted in what becomes a rather ironic relationship, and my own interaction within the scene is hinted at by the odd sourcing of light behind the dumpster.



Figure 21: *Incoming and Outgoing*, 2010

“Forklift Farm,” and “Incoming and Outgoing,” exhibit the most recent characteristics of this body of work. I feel these images display the most successful evolution of this series to date wherein I have finally found a proper balance between formal / technical elements of photography, as well as conceptual strength. These photographs are less direct in their subject matter, yet still pointed enough that one can read into them. They are formally well composed images, yet I feel their technical efficiency does not override their subject matter, but rather enhances it.

Conclusion

The focus of my work has long been on the idea of “interaction.” Exploring this idea in a broad sense of the term as it relates to environment, structure, and intra-personal interactions. Interaction interests me in its omnipresence in daily-life, yet rather routine nature of existence. Over the past three years, I have produced three main bodies of work which speak to this idea; *Night, Within Yourself*, and *In Hiding...* I feel the latter body of work was most successful in effectively presenting this idea in terms of visual works of art. The photographs portray this idea, but in loose definition, which allow for intrigue to be raised in viewing of the work, but not too overt in their narrative.

It is in this line of thought that I believe the images work well within the context of contemporary photography, wherein as I have described, I believe there is a dichotomy which exists between those who opt for technical and formal mastery, and those who opt for subject matter over the importance of technical efficiency. I feel this has arisen to an extent because of the onset of the digital age and digital photography. Technical wizardry as it relates to photography is now within closer reach by the masses, and while many have embraced this, many have also attempted to de-value it by re-dedicating themselves to darkroom, film, and alternative processes. I feel that many within the latter group focus too greatly on process itself, and art-work suffers as a result. I also feel that many who embrace the digital age lack diligence in process and understanding on the aspects of formal aesthetics. Broad generalizations perhaps, but I will be the first to say that there are many great artists who work to bridge that gap, and I feel these are the artists who best exemplify good contemporary photography. I think highly of Mitch Epstein and Sally Mann, two artists whose concept is brought forth in stunning fashion through their technical mastery. Epstein’s “American Power,” series in particular I feel best

exemplifies formal mastery with rich subject matter as seen in his photograph “Amos Power Plant, Raymond, West Virginia,” (Figure 22) where Epstein presents a small town in the shadows of a nuclear power plant. An image which is formally beautiful, yet also tells an interesting story as it relates to the American public’s relationship to and dependence upon energy. I feel that this is a direction that contemporary photography must be, and is perhaps already heading in for photography itself to be more readily accepted as an art-form inseparable from other mediums such as painting and sculpture.



Figure 22: Mitch Epstein, *Amos Power Plant, Raymond, West Virginia*. Chromogenic Print, 2004.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a former lab assistant of Ansel Adams named Dennis Purcell. Mr. Purcell told me that had Adams been alive to see the onset of digital photography, he would have been at the forefront of this revolution, as Adams loved new technology and what new possibilities were now achievable with it.

I believe there will always be a place for darkroom, film and alternative processes, just as I believe that new technology should be embraced and understood. Regardless of philosophical belief, as fine-art photographers, our goal should be to create effective fine-art images first and foremost. Process should simply be a component to how one’s work is achieved and technical

mastery should be meant to enhance one's concept. I believe all elements should work in balance, and it is this which I hope to achieve within my work.

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Vita

Roderick Worden was born in Alexandria, Virginia in 1986. He obtained a Bachelors of Fine Art from James Madison University in 2008 in the field of Fine Art. He entered the Graduate program at the University of New Orleans in 2008 for Fine Art with a concentration in Photography. Roderick has shown in numerous galleries in both Virginia and Louisiana, and recently opened his M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition titled *In Hiding...* at the University of New Orleans St. Claude Gallery.