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In the Landscape

As I became interested in landscape photography, I found myself looking at many iconic images in the genre. The traditional landscape images that I found seemed to follow a canon with their greatest variable being their unique geographical locations. The norm is a photograph taken from a perfect vantage point with no signs of human presence and nothing to impede the vista. This omnipotent point of view often covers a large distance and gives the viewer the feeling that they occupy a special place from which they can survey the scene. As the viewer looks at the photograph they see dramatic moments, which highlighted through perfected printing, encompasses a large tonal range. The rule of thirds creates a strong foreground, middle ground, and background, thus dividing the photograph into thirds where the horizon line coincides with one of these divisions. Ansel Adams, a household name in photography, set these ideals that I have come to know. One of his most famous photographs *Moonrise, Hernandez* emulates the ideals of a perfected landscape photograph. He captures the moonrise illuminating the landscape beneath it, freezing the perfect dramatic moment. The significant depth of field with its sharp focus makes the viewer feel as if the moment is endless. Adams captures the moment in a rectangular shape, emphasizing the horizon line and containing this seemingly endless view. These ideals of what a landscape photograph is supposed to look like are what I refer to as the *grand view*. I have created a series of landscape photographs that take issue with this norm. My work rejects the *grand view* approach to constructing landscape images in order to represent an experience in the landscape. I want the viewer to be placed within the image; this changes where the audience is located and therefore what they see.

When I started taking photography classes, I found that going on walks was my favorite way to take pictures. I tended to take pictures of the objects that surrounded me, views of the landscape that changed depending on where I took my walk. As this body of work has developed, my walk became more important, and I found myself taking photographs that

represented the action of the walk itself. In this series of photographs I am attempting to represent limited, intimate moments in the landscape that give the audience a subjective, engaged view of nature, which digresses from an omnipotent view. I have come to believe this subjective view is how we truly experience the landscape.

As I researched into different ideas of how we experience the landscape, I was interested in looking at different ways of how we experience the landscape. I was interested specifically in the difference of looking at the landscape from close up or further away. I found a discussion about how western culture represents the experience of a place versus less dominant cultures within the art world. In, *The Lure of the Local: senses of place in a multicentered society*, Lucy R. Lippard discusses how a Native American photographer, Victor Masayesva captures landscape in his film *Hopiit*. She comments on how he does not look for the *grand view* within the landscape, but is representing the natural world with his own aesthetic. She notes; “The Film’s pace is leisurely but not really “harmonious” in a western sense; watched from an Anglo vantage point, it is slightly disturbing, a curious combination of distance and intimacy, which is the way so many of us experience place.”¹ Contemplating Lippard’s idea of distance and intimacy helped me analyze where I looked on the walks and made me expand my ideas behind what could create a photograph that steeps further from the *grand view*. I realized as I made these images that my audience would be looking at photographs that altered their normal orientation to how artwork represents the landscape. But in doing so I hoped to bring my audience and myself to seeing and spending time with smaller moments in the landscape.

My research into Andy Goldsworthy, an earth works artist, brought my attention to the importance of my walks. I found a connection to his process through watching his film “Rivers

¹ Lippard, Lucy R. *The Lure of the Local senses of place in a multicentered society*. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 74.

and Tides.”² Here he reveals how he makes his decisions about materials and location; Goldsworthy walks, explores, and climbs around the landscape he is in. In my body of work the images look up, down, and out at small details of the landscape. As I explore the landscape that surrounds me my camera is aimed at where my eyes gaze, capturing the moments that are quickly seen, but not focused on. For Goldsworthy the land dictates everything in his work, from the material to its performance and location. His total involvement in nature is why I feel a strong connection with his artwork. In both his work and mine the landscape has control over the product in that the product is a direct result of the artist’s reaction to the environment, a reaction that we both capture in a photograph.

Because my work is reactional, when I go on my walks I need to take photographs easily, so a point and shoot camera is the best option. This is the same reason why many street photographers have chosen to use 35mm cameras. Traditionally, landscape photographs are taken with large format eight by ten inch view cameras that capture more information and allow for greater depth of field and detail clarity. These cameras are bulky, require tripods, and are hard to aim into small areas. The Holga camera, which has become the only camera used for this body of work, is a medium format camera made of plastic, making it lightweight and easy to point and shoot. This allowed me to have a larger negative and be able to easily take pictures. I was also attracted to this camera because the lens is also made of plastic, unlike most cameras, which contain exceptionally well-made glass; the plastic alters the aesthetics of the photographs (which I will comment on later.) An important aspect of the medium format camera is that its negative is square, unlike the larger view camera whose format is rectangular. This changes the way the image is looked at, the square format abruptly cuts off the feeling of an endless horizon line. The square also diminishes the drama that is felt by an image that spreads horizontally across the wall.

² *Andy Goldsworthy: Rivers And Tides, Working With Time*. DVD. Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. 2004; New York, NY: New Video Group, 2004.

This is because it moves evenly in all directions, confronting the viewers' gaze instead of allowing their eyes to travel along one line across the photograph.

From my study of photography I discovered an aesthetic preference in a type of camera and shape of the negative. Sally Mann is a photographer that I have contemplated through out my studies and as I started this body of work I became interested in the camera choice she made and how it affected her photographs. Her most recent book, *The Deep South*, is fully devoted to the landscape photograph. For this body of work Mann uses the classic eight by ten inch view camera, however she uses old glass plate negatives, which are scratched, dinged and have cracks in them, all which show up in the images printed from them. For Mann, these landscape images are about embodying a sense of place as history. So it is not surprising that Mann chooses to use a liquid emulsion on antique glass plates similar to the process of the great civil war photographers. The use of liquid emulsion makes the exposure uneven, creating an imbalance in the tonal quality of the photograph. All of these imperfections make the photographs similar to those in the mid 1800's, grey in tone, varied in exposure, scratched and dusty, and perhaps not in focus. Each of these attributes are considered imperfections because later photographers perfected their craft and eliminated these variables, thus resulting in the iconic image we are familiar with. Mann's material unites her conceptual ideas with the image the audience sees.

Like Mann, the camera I work with greatly affects the aesthetic of my photographs and their meaning. The plastic lens of the Holga camera affects the light as it hits the negative, creating a few serendipitous effects in the picture. The vignetting in the corners of the negative focuses the viewer's attention to the center of the photograph much like I focus when I walk. Since the camera does not have a strong depth of field, only part of the image is in focus, which makes the scene unequal. The unequal focus is similar to how we see when we are in motion, as we move things that are extremely close or too far away are not in focus. The effect of the short depth of field reveals how one would actually experience a place while walking by. This gives the viewer a limited sense of space, contrary to the limitless image that Adams produced.

Because the lens affects how the light hits the negative it manipulates the tone and color creating a monochromatic look to the photograph. The lack of a viewfinder keeps me from seeing what the camera sees, which has led me to simply aiming the camera in the direction I am looking disabling me to fully control and comprehend what is being captured by the camera. All of these attributes aesthetically distanced my work from the concepts of the *grand view*, and overtly controlled the outcome of the photographs.

Another contemporary landscape photographer, Thomas Joshua Cooper, also redefines the practice of landscape photography. But unlike Mann, Cooper's perfectly crafted and tonally balanced black and white photographs feel akin to traditional practice. Cooper breaks the rules by using formal elements; he turns his camera down as a way to "Take away the navigational aid of the horizon, and you create a different psychological construct."³ My attraction to Cooper's work led me to experimenting with ways of holding the camera; I no longer concentrated on having it parallel to the horizon line. When you go on a walk your eyes do not follow along a horizon line; by removing it I feel the landscape is being viewed in a photograph in a similar manner to the actual experience. In the photograph the viewer no longer drags their eyes across one line, but is free to explore the image. When you go on a walk, your eyes move all around; down at where you place your feet, up at the leaves of the trees. These are the bits of visual information that your eyes collect and make you understand what you are exploring. Often when following a trail there is a point where you reach a scenic overlook; revealing the omnipotent view of the landscape you previously experienced. By choosing not to photograph the horizon line in my images, I am recalling the experience within the landscape. Parts of Cooper's titles attempt to activate his photographs with human interaction. An example of part of a title of a work is (*One of the two Northernmost Points of Nova Scotia- and along the site of John Cabot's Canadian discoveries of the New World for the English*) His use of historical references is meant

³ From an interview with the artist, January 23, 2001. Weintraub, Linda. *In the Making Creative Options for Contemporary Art*. (New York: Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2003), 183.

to represent human interaction, but you are viewing a photograph that is made with his responses to the landscape.

The moments I represent on my walks reveal the landscape in a way that attempts to bring the viewer into the landscape, instead of looking out at it. When looking at the image of the tree roots developing into the bright, blue sky the viewer finds themselves in a place that forces them to be up close with nature. They are not given the distanced vantage that would reveal the entire tree; it is a brief look at the beautiful detail of a tree that has been uprooted. My aesthetic attempts to further the photographs from representing an iconic moment seen from a far off, omnipotent vantage point. The dark shadows in the corners, caused by vignetting, and the soft focus caused by the limited depth of field bring the viewer into the center of the image. This evokes smaller episodes within the landscape; the textures and the light that define each landscape. As the photograph surrounds the viewer, a sense of intimacy is revealed in a personal approach to the landscape that is gathered through the action of my walk.