

Jenny Metz
Impression/Expression
Artist Statement and Research
SMP in Art Studio, 2012

Photography is more than just point, shoot, move on. It's taking the world around you and figuring out what is important to show to the viewer. It's picking and choosing what to frame, what to focus on, perception, exposure time, etc. It's using an impression and expressing it in a visual image. Photography is defined as "the art or process of producing images by the action of radiant energy and especially light on a sensitive surface," but to me, photography is about more than just an all-encompassing simplified definition. It's more than just merely capturing moments. It's looking through the viewfinder, framing the image *just so* and focusing on the perfect spot. It's adjusting your body or the zoom to fully invest in the subject. It's using the camera and lens as part of your artistic team and altering the aperture and shutter speed to create that perfect image. It's making a million tiny decisions in mere seconds that eventually add up to something great. It's staying up until the wee hours of the morning in the darkroom or in Photoshop to get that *one* area of *one* image just right.

Over the past couple of years, my interests in photography have ranged from highly composed, formal images to experimenting with alternative processes such as cyanotypes and gum bichromate to my fall SMP work in which I created sculpturally-oriented photographic collages. I was inspired by the work of David Hockney and wanted to create images that addressed the difference between human vision and the camera's eye. For my final SMP work, initially, I wanted to continue and expand on this idea by creating photographic sculptures that existed as three-dimensional objects, encouraging the viewer to interact with the objects rather than viewing them as flat images. I had hoped these objects would embody my developing idea

of manipulating space with the ambition of creating large scale objects with images on all sides of the object. However, the midterm critique forced me to rethink my motivations and work: I was prompted with the idea that I was trying to reject and hang on to photography at the same time. I realized that I was not happy with what I was doing and that the objects I was creating simply weren't doing what I wanted them to. I came to the conclusion that I could still (and needed to!) examine the idea of the manipulation of space, I just needed to do so in a way that wasn't frustrating for me or confusing to the viewer. I decided that I needed to go back to the roots of photography: creating single, composed images but created in such a way that it played with the viewer's perception of the space that was being depicted. In short – I needed to recommit to the capabilities of the camera and monocular vision. I needed to tell *my* story and impression of the spaces I chose, still emphasizing the important areas that I had connections to but creating spaces that weren't quite as they appeared to be.

In *Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard states that place is an extension of the body: as we pass through places, we become part of the landscape.¹ As we become part of these places, we create specific memories and intimate experiences associated with that place, making them important to us. The experiences we have form our perception of the place and we remember our most significant impressions of the place. Over time our understanding of these spaces distills into what we perceive as the essence of the place. I aimed to take impressions and experiences of places that hold importance for me and express these essences through photographs. These photographs manipulate the space, taking away descriptive elements and leaving the viewer with a minimal image of my expression of the space. At times, the subject matter is recognizable, but other times, it is not. It is not important for the viewer to realize what and where the images depict, but rather to meditate on these images and create their own experiences with the space.

¹ Lippard, Lucy R.. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1997.

One of the greatest sources of inspiration for my current work has been the abstract landscape and bone paintings of American painter Georgia O’Keeffe. Her innate connection to the place she worked and the way she altered space in her paintings was a catalyst in my own connections to how I manipulate and portray space in my own work. O’Keeffe first became interested in manipulating how she portrayed her subject matter when shown the work of photographer Paul Strand. She was influenced by his use of the camera and its ability to act as a magnifying lens, prompting her to begin painting large scale paintings of close up natural forms, like her famous flower paintings.

In 1917, O’Keeffe made her first journey to New Mexico, where she was enamored by the landscape and from 1929 on, she returned every year and eventually moved there permanently in 1949. She described it as “perfectly mad looking country – hills and cliffs and washes too crazy to imagine all thrown up into the air by God and let tumble where they would. It was certainly as spectacular as anything I’ve ever seen – and that was pretty good.”² Her landscape paintings of the New Mexico countryside focus on the inherent qualities of the space. For example, in *Road to the Ranch* (1964), O’Keeffe simplified the landscape into basic forms and colors, while emphasizing the important qualities of landscape: the road, the mountains and the sky. The work is a departure from reality. By creating a non-representational image and removing elements that would indicate what exactly we are looking at, she effectively leaves the viewer with only an impression of the space.

In *Pelvis IV* (1944), Paul Strand’s influence on her work is obvious: the painting is a magnified and cropped view of an animal’s pelvis bone. In this work, she manipulates the perspective and scale of the subject matter, leaving the viewer with the impression of a vague

² Lynes, Barbara Buhler, Lesley Poling-Kempes, and Frederick W. Turner. *Georgia O’Keeffe and New Mexico: A Sense of Place*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

subject and focusing on the stark contrast between the white of the bone and the bright blue of the sky.

Though already very familiar with her work, I returned to it in more depth after the second semester mid-term critique. I had realized during this critique that I needed to start creating single images to embody my ideas rather than attempting to create sculptural photographic collages. I realized that I needed to alter the viewer's perceptions of space, taking recognizable, ordinary subjects and turning them into unrecognizable, ambiguous spaces. O'Keefe used various painting techniques such as washes, a limited color palette, lack of descriptive detail and flatness of space to create images that distorted the viewer's perception of the space. In particular, in *Road to the Ranch*, O'Keefe used a palette consisting of only three colors (purple, red and blue) and created washes from them. In doing this, she simplified the landscape into its most basic forms and tones. By simplifying the landscape into its most basic colors, she also removed descriptive details in the work and flattened the space, making the viewer unable to recognize the subject matter. In *Pelvis IV*, a limited color palette is also used (white, blue and brown) and by magnifying and cropping the subject matter, O'Keefe removes details from the image and flattens the space.

The photographer, while limited by the camera's function of capturing images of reality, can also use the camera in a way that takes advantage of its unique technology: the lens and light exposure can alter space in ways similar to a painter, for example, removing details and flattening the space. For my final work, I began creating single, composed images of spaces by taking my own impressions of the space and using a shallow depth of field, light and selective focusing to express and emphasize what I believed to be the most important aspects of these spaces. The result are images of vague and distorted spaces that seem to only exist within the

photograph and ultimately force the viewer to create their own notion of what the reality is. Also like O’Keeffe, I focused on photographing places that I was familiar with and had emotional ties to, resulting in work that digs deeper than the initial surface layer of a space that most people see.

After I had created my first rough set of images, my advisor, Colby Caldwell, suggested I should look into the work of contemporary photographer Uta Barth. In her work, she experiments with depth of field, focus and framing to construct abstract images that merely suggest places. By photographing her subject matter out of focus or absent from the image completely, Barth removes any descriptive elements of the photograph that might serve to pinpoint an exact location. Like me, Barth is interested in how human vision is different from the camera’s eye. In her *Ground* series (mid-1990’s), the images “were chosen by seeking out the stereotypical, vernacular, visual vocabulary of what might constitute an idea scenic or picturesque backdrop.”³ The images were created by shooting open spaces and focusing on the empty foreground, thus creating scenes that appeared completely out of focus.

These works are not about what is being looked at, but rather the physical act of looking. She stated, “If the ‘subject’ is not fixed within the image on the wall, but instead is indicated to be in front of that, then the ‘location’ of the work hangs somewhere between the viewer and the wall, in that empty space we are looking through. In some images, when you locate the camera’s point of focus, you will find it to be that of an extreme close-up. The location of the implied subject is pushed so far forward that it aligns itself with the very place one is standing in front of the picture. So suddenly the imagined ‘subject’ and the viewer are standing in the same place.”⁴ In the majority of Barth’s works, the image is completely unfocused, giving them an ephemeral quality. My work, however, has a single line or point of focus, which I feel grounds the work.

³Barth, Uta, Sheryl Conkelton, Russell Ferguson, and Timothy Martin. *Uta Barth: In Between Places*. Seattle, Wash.: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 2000.

⁴ Barth, Uta, Sheryl Conkelton, Russell Ferguson, and Timothy Martin. *Uta Barth: In Between Places*.

This point of focus pulls the viewer's attention to a specific location in the work, drawing their attention to what I have chosen to show them. This single area of focus also creates a hierarchy within the work: since the viewer's gaze is automatically drawn to that area of focus, the in-focus part becomes the most important part of the work.

Barth is also interested in manipulating the space. Through the reduction of subject matter, and the removal of clarity, the viewer becomes confused. Barth states, "Certain expectations are unfulfilled: expectations of what a photograph normally depicts, of how we are supposed to read the space in the image, of how a picture normally presents itself on the wall... This kind of questioning and reorientation is the point of entry and discovery, not only in a cognitive way, but in a most visceral, physical and personal sense. Everything is pointing to one's own activity of looking, to an awareness and sort of hyper-consciousness of visual perception. The only way I know how to invite this experience is by removing the other things (i.e., subject matter) for you to think about."⁵ Barth's intentional removal of concrete subject matter forces the viewer to create their own point of entry into the work and makes them hyper-aware of how the work is being portrayed. In my own work, I too attempted to make the viewer hyper-aware of their perception of the work by focusing on a single element in the image and reducing the subject matter to simple blurred forms and colors.

Originally, Barth concentrated on generic places that were familiar to the viewer, such as a beach or a cityscape, focusing on the empty foreground of the image. Through the use of generic subject matter, Barth emphasized the reading of the space as "empty." By choosing such obvious subject matter, Barth comes close to the "choice of no choice."⁶ I feel that my work is

⁵ Barth, Uta, Sheryl Conkelton, Russell Ferguson, and Timothy Martin. *Uta Barth: In Between Places*.

⁶ Barth, Uta, and Jonathan Crary. *Uta Barth, The Long Now*. New York: Miller, 2010.

similar to this: by choosing locations and objects that I am so familiar with, it almost doesn't seem like a conscious choice to photograph these spaces.

I feel that my artistic concerns and my work best address the ideas of Impressionism. Impressionism was an art movement in the 19th century characterized by the depiction of the overall visual qualities of a scene, utilizing intense color and movement within the work. It originated with a group of Paris-based painters who derived the style from Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1872). Associated with *plein air* painting, Impressionism emphasizes the changing qualities of light, ordinary subject matter, movement as an element of human perception and experience. Like the name suggests, Impressionist paintings focus on recording the artist's impression of the space rather than complete visual accuracy.

At the same time, photography was also gaining popularity and so the composition of Impressionist paintings often resembled snapshots: images that were part of a larger reality.⁷ Because photographs were able to capture short moments, Impressionist painters were thus inspired to capture these fleeting moments, but at the same time, pursue other means of expressing depictions of reality. Because photography devalued an artist's skill in replicating reality, Impressionist artists began to focus on expressing their own perceptions of natural spaces.

Later, Impressionism influenced the work of Pictorialism, a photographic movement roughly defined as the manipulation of a photograph into "creating" an image, rather than simply recording reality. Pictorialist photography is characterized by a lack of sharp focus, a range of colors outside of black and white and possible physical manipulation of the photograph's surface.

⁷ Rosenblum, Robert. *Paintings in the Musée d'Orsay*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang :, 1989.

The manipulation of reality and the expression of impressions is what characterizes my work. I don't focus my camera on the entire scene, trying to capture every single element that makes up the scene. Instead, I focus on my impression of the scene: what resonates for me, what particular element of the scene tells its story, what I think is important about the place I'm photographing. Like Impressionism, I try not to replicate reality through my work. I base my images off of my experiences with the space, capturing single moments through a "snapshot" of the space. I use intense color values in my work: it may be through the high saturation of color in the work (the entire photograph might be shades of green) or through the high black and white contrast with few, if any, gray tones within the photograph.

Impressionism's influence on Pictorialist photography was mainly notable in the lack of focus in the images. In my work, the vast majority of the image is out of focus with only a single line or point of focus in the work. I remove the viewer from reality as they are unable to fully recognize the subject matter or the location of the image.

In conclusion, the major goals of *Impression/Expression* were to create an impression of the location where I photograph, removing the viewer from reality through lack of focus and reduction of recognizable subject matter and prompting the viewer to create their own relationship and experience depicted in the image. Through distorting and manipulating spaces, I present them as realities in the form of photographic images. These realities are more immediate and tangible to the viewer than the actual space, and this perspective of the space becomes more real to the viewer than actual reality.