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Art SMP 01/02

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WATCH YOUR STEP

I am not a studio photographer. I am a photographer who primarily documents life with film. This project, WATCH YOUR STEP, is a street photography project that depicts my current home base, Washington D.C. The district is not the pretty thing you see in Postcards. In D.C., the Political is Personal. The personal is also highly constructed. By my very nature, I am a constructor of image. This work is, however, a communication of something much more honest than a political campaign. It's a portrayal of a real D.C. by someone who stomps those streets everyday.

The icons I choose to shoot are things that I personally associate with the place. I do not take a tally, or create an online poll. This is not unusual, Street Photography, it should be noted, is almost always the world through that photographer's eyes.

The photograph is made by a photographer, it's record involves a certain amount of choice, therefore the photograph is biased. The photograph, traditionally associated with the "photographic truth", is no longer trusted. More and more people doubt the evidence of the photo; most of my viewing audience has the ability either to edit images themselves, or are aware of these technologies.

Instant photography, I theorize, has a more believable relationship to the truth. People trust Instant cameras, In addition to the remnants of the photographic truth; the instant photo development process can be easily seen. The image is created right before their eyes. Instax cameras have a very small range of settings. It lacks the aperture and speed control most photographers take for granted. It has no zoom and a fixed focus. Instead of these luxuries, I have 5 settings: Hi Key, Very Sunny, Sunny, Cloudy and Indoors. In addition to having little -to-no options for manipulation, the process of developing the film is completely transparent. The

image can be observed appearing on the film. Blue comes first, and then magenta and yellow. I am specifically using Instax film because it is the truthiest of film. It has much more realistic colors than the other option for instant film, the Impossible Project. The Impossible Project is a company that is trying to replicate the classic Polaroid film, the acting verb here being trying. The film they produce has an unusual colorcast, which is interesting, but not realistic.

I use an Instax Mini instant camera. The camera I use is highly visible. Cameras of this model are typically brightly colored and loud. My camera is a pretty, pastel blue reminiscent of a macaroon. It's a girly color. It's a type of camera which is viewed as children's toys or as the camera of self-obsessed celebrities. They are viewed as extremely unthreatening. I intend to take advantage of other people's misconceptions.

In D.C., a photographer always has eyes on them. When using my other cameras, I've had dealings with secret service, general security, police, and a man in a grey suit that watched me for a period of time. This camera looks like a child's toy. The lack of a professional appearance with this camera makes it the perfect weapon of choice for critical photography. It can take photos where no other camera can.

The Instax process provides the perfect contrast to the opaqueness of Washington DC. Washington is the city of government. The government is never opaque. D.C. is a city of pollution stained marble and rusted construction ironwork. More importantly, it's a city that is always under construction. The images, the substructure, the people, are constantly being redefined.

Dash Snow was a fellow photographer and his process is similar to mine. We both use/d instant cameras.¹ We both document the world around us and often cover topics such as rebellion and violence. Dash Snow was the heir to was the de Menil family. He was, by his own choice, an "outsider, a penniless "downtown Baudelaire" obsessed with drugs, sex and self-destruction."² I did not choose to be in

¹ "Dash Snow (Artist Profile)." Saatchi Gallery. Accessed April 21, 2016. http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/dash_snow.htm.

² Feuer, Alan, and Allen Salkin. "Terrible End for an *Enfant Terrible*." *The New York Times*, July 24, 2009. Accessed April 21, 2016.

D.C. or to be effected by the other issues I am in dialogue. I am socially conscience of the issues that work often touches on and I do not try to glamourize mental health issues, the violation of the rights of women (among others), or surveillance. While his medium, instant photography was viewed as authentic; he did not grow up surrounded by these. He also glamourized a sex and drugs life style, while I critique society's views of serious issues that often intersect with a sex and drugs lifestyle.

I don't document a glamourized lifestyle. I often document places because, as a Navy brat, my family moved a lot when I was a kid. When I was young, I watched America slip by the windows of my mom and dad's car. I saw red desserts, Joshua tree scrub, moody north Florida forest, and hazy mountains all from that back seat. In addition to seeing the world, I was also forced to be aware of my outsider accent, my outsider slang, my outsider knowledge and my outsider status. I learned to adapt to adopt these localisms. In this work, I distilled the identity "I. In this particular work, In WATCH YOUR STEP, I made a conceptual and physical likeness of America's capital city of Washington D.C. I photographed D.C. because I'm interested in how the city constantly changes.

After I decided to photograph D.C., I started immediately taking photos of things that were icons of D.C. I researched the lists of top tourist places, D.C. walks, images of D.C. and more. I eventually decided to photograph the things I remembered from my trips to D.C. as a kid. This was very different from the father of American Landscape painting, Thomas Cole. Thomas Cole used images that were uniquely American, but he also saw these things from the point of view of an European. He believed that the U.S.A was dramatically different from the European landscape.³

The American landscape might be different from the European landscape, but much of the things that are now considered ironically American, actually come from European culture. The Washington monument is an obelisk, something that comes from Rome, and before that, from Egypt. The Jefferson and Lincoln memorials are also descendants from Greco-Roman architecture. Thomas Cole, in his

³ Cole, Thomas. "Essay on American Scenery." *The American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1836).

representations of non-American, often analogous landscapes, uses Greco-Roman architecture to symbolize logic and reason. I however use iconic Greco-Roman buildings to make the viewer question the validity of the values they represent, and to interrogate the federal government.

Thomas Cole influences the orientation of the work. WATCH YOUR STEP would be vertically oriented. That was decided early on in my process. A horizontally oriented work would be a land to be conquered or consumed. The horizontal form descends from the panorama, and Thomas Cole was an early adopter of this format. The panorama is a wide view of a scene or landscape. It enables the easy visual consumption of a place.⁴ A horizontally oriented work tends to be artwork that is there for your gaze and domination. The original Panoramas were used for entertainment. I am not here for your entertainment and neither is my work. The vertical orientation however recalls steles, monoliths and royal portraiture. It is the format of dominating art. The Mural, or the landscape format is much too peaceful and passive. It instead would be vertically oriented. It later became a monolith so that it would not be seeable from all sides. I did not want D.C. so easily seen or known. The image of D.C. would rather consume the viewer, or at the very least tower over them as a statement of power.

After deciding that the work would be monolithic, I started to work on how it would be installed. The installation is inspired by construction. Construction represents two things, the constant rebuilding of structures in D.C. and the constant construction of image, whether that refers to a person, group or place. I communicated this quite literally, by using mostly materials found in an industrial context. The layering of a ward map over a map of the mall also reveals the construction of image. These types of mapping both impose a view of that area, and are government issued ways of thinking.

The installation is supposed to be rough. I typically eschew Academic Finish. It's institutional, and I have a rock to throw at the institution. When I use polish in my work, it often represents the unattainable, or a smooth surface that's hiding

⁴ Bjelajac, David. "Thomas Cole's Oxbow and the American Zion Divided." *American Art* 20, no. 1 (2006): 60-83. doi:10.1086/504062.

something. Individual photographs in the installation use polish. In my Watergate image in, I represent the building as a nearly solid surface. The surface of the Watergate complex hid political corruption. Two images, the image of the Jefferson Memorial and image of the Washington Monument, feature icons of political power. The actual buildings almost disappear into the sky. Their images are much clearer in their reflections, which are seen in the smooth waters of the Tidal Basin. These images represent the distance from the values we believe embody these Political figures, and the actual men and the actual government.

While I took my typical tactics toward polish and roughness, I did use less noticeable text than is my usual habit. In this work, I used less text and I used it less prominently than in my other work. This is partly because of technical limitations, but also because I wanted the viewer to clutch at any specific meaning or idea like the people clutch at a belief that makes a chaotic world seem legible. The lack of legibility makes it more difficult to consume the work.

The first text in the first row of Instax photographs states “Welcome to Washington D.C.” and then much more subtly has text that states “NO WARNINGS” and “Bud light”. The Welcome immediately sets the viewer in the place. They then get introduced to two political players, money and law. The combination of welcome and warning also recalls the dual hostility and concern of the title. The next text, which is in the last image in the first row, is a small sign indicating the city and the number the city has assigned to the bridge. This reasserts the location, and reasserts government control of a place. The bridge is denied from having a name or identity outside the city. These two images frame the first row of images.

The next row has three images of photos with text. This row too is also framed by text. The framing images in this row reassert the power and how it is held. It starts with the Watergate, clearly and helpfully labeled by the building’s own sign. The Watergate was the site of one of the most famous cases of Political Corruption. The other half of the frame is text reading “Police”. This is the row with “Stop”, whose effect will be discussed in a later earlier paragraph discussing the use of silence in my work.

The Third row does not have the same use of text as the other two rows. It does have first, and last images that are text images, but the text is much less noticeable than in the other rows. The first image again reasserts the barrier to entry. It's text reads "No Entry At all Time". This text is in the foreground so this text immediately strikes the viewer. The second piece of text is the second to last image. It shows a dark and stormy sky with my favorite museum, the Hirshhorn in the mid-ground, and the sign, that asks "What's Happening?" .. This text represents many things, the viewer, and the artist, are some of them. . I love that museum. The Hirshhorn is an institution that is the reason I became an artist. It is however, for better or worse, part of the government's institution. It's on the mall, a major stage of political activity where the white house, capital, among other government buildings also are. The last image, and the right side of the frame have text that is barely legible. The text is from a protest sign, what it says doesn't really matter, what matters is that the tent of the protestor is made at an almost equivalent size to the white house. This final image sets the viewer, who, like the protesters is in the foreground, at odds with the center of Political power. This image asks what is going on, in the government that we are not allowed to see.

I am a photographer and installation artist interested in dynamics of power. I am not an artist who typically makes submissive work that serves itself up for consumption. To extend the metaphor, my work is a medicine that upsets your stomach in an attempt to improve the "health" of the world. Unlike other critical works that function as a placebo. These Placebo works are easily digested, they might make you feel good. Not all Political Art is useful; some of it is the equivalent to slacktivism. My work is not meant to have a clear and definite meaning. It is not easily digestible. I want the viewer to feel deeply and complexly. I don't want them to pity my subjects. When I show mental health issues, the complexity of beauty, the violation or celebration of sexuality, real love, and yes anger at the institutions, I don't want the viewer to feel good. I want them to feel some measure of the emotion I put into the work. The work uses power dynamics to create meaning. In WATCH YOUR STEP, I used power dynamics of installation, and photographed compositions in a way that communicated power dynamics.

Another photographer who is interested in power, and makes complicated critical works is John Gossage. John Gossage is also another photographer who has documented D.C. His work, both in D.C. and out often documents power and uses both his development techniques and his own visual code to symbolize power. He is an expert print maker. He often uses contrast to create meaning. In *The Thirty-two Inch Ruler*, he represented the neighborhood of Kalorama and its wealth and political power in Washington D.C. He used symbols like champagne and skulls, which have a meanings in mainstream culture, but other images are far subtler.⁵ A wrought iron house number sign with several deer set into brick is a fairly normal sign. It can represent home, or represent a value system that includes nature. In Gossage's hands the sign becomes a sign of the fear that is the product of power, and the institution that supports these abuses of power. The deer appear to flee, and the brick becomes an institutional support.

In my work with D.C., I hope to show corruption, power, and control in a governmental city. I also, however want to show the dissolution of the old temples of power. I wanted to show a chaotic world in my work, much like the chaotic world we live in. This power is represented both with the monuments and police presence. The chaos and dissolving and reinstating of political power is shown in the appearance of skies which are blue in on and stormy in the next, in how the Jefferson and Washington dissolve in the real world and appear clearer in their reflections, and the occasional use of text which barricades the viewer from comfortably entering the space. The two images featuring the dissolving of the monuments are the most picturesque. This is no coincidence. These images show a world that many believe in, and fight for but suggest that this is idealistic. It also suggests that the values our history classes assign to these famous white men might be clearer in those that fight for a better world, than the institutions and the men they represent.

The silences in this work are deliberate. The first one falls after an image showing a parking garage and shouting Stop! This silence gives the viewer a chance

⁵ Gossage, John R. *The Thirty Two Inch Ruler; Babylon*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2010.

to breath, and forces them to obey the image. The second silence is far darker and more anonymous. It enters the sequence after the image of the Lincoln memorial. It suggests that the call for justice has been denied, or ignored. The memorial is the scene of Martin Luther King's famous I Have A Dream Speech. The silence and the use of the corner suggest that, while we have moved forward, there is still a great ways to go. I hope that these silences make the viewer realize what is missing from Washington D.C. Silence is a powerful tool in art, where the viewer expects to see something and doesn't, it challenges their preconceptions. And now, I leave you with just that, silence.