

HOLSHOUSER, HANNAH LOUISE, M.F.A. Darkland: An Artist Statement. (2012)  
Directed by Ms. Sarah Martin. 13 pp.

My thesis is about an exploration of photographing at night. I use a digital SLR Nikon D5000 camera, and print 13" x 19" and 23" x 35" images on an inkjet printer. I photograph in black and white. I wish to capture a moment outside of time by using long exposure night photography to transform the landscape. I look for the possibility of irregularity or oddity in the landscape. My images combine man-made structures and natural vegetation illuminated by available light.

DARKLAND: AN ARTIST STATEMENT

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2012

Approved by

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## DARKLAND: AN ARTIST STATEMENT

At the start of summer, 2011, I went home to collect my thoughts and be with my family. In Banner Elk, the summer nights are full of little bugs chirping and buzzing, creating a kind of warm vibration that makes you feel at ease in the dark. I walked out into my yard and looked up at the sky. It was like seeing the ocean for the first time. A thousand stars sat bobbing in this thick black sky. The moon, though, was hidden, and shadows bloomed. I realized how much it reminded me of the hours I spent hiding in my grandmother's living room (three walls lined with windows) when heavy fog would settle in our valley. My horizon became only the few trees bordering the yard. The rest of the world was covered in white and I felt protected. I could create a far more interesting reality beyond that splendid empty grey. The present darkness I witnessed that summer night blocked everything but what was illuminated by the stars, the moon, or a residual human made light. I looked up at my bedroom window, at the fan revolving, curtains glowing, and I knew my first photograph was there. I began taking walks at night around my home town. The heat made me feel safe but the darkness scared me. It became an exhausting thrill, hunting at night. My work evolved into an obsession of finding the light in the dark; more precisely about finding the miraculous or the surprising amongst the back roads and houses of my little town. Some places I wished to photograph simply because I had walked down them so many times in my dreams, always searching. I felt it was fitting that I reenact those journeys, hoping that my photographs might somehow

capture that feeling of urgency, isolation, and delight.

My photographs aspire to the sensation of wonder mixed with irregularity. I call this world “Darkland”. To elaborate, my images are not just beautiful pictures. I wish for my audience to question how this environment exists, because it appears to be a constructed or fictional landscape. I have not physically changed the spaces, but by using long exposure, I have transformed the landscape, creating an ideal in the place of the real. In this series the “ideal” image combines what is physically in front of my lens with the distortion of light and movement caused by an extended exposure. I seek to find the kairos of night, a moment outside of time. As in Edwin A. Abbott’s short story, Flatland, I believe “that while the wisdom of man thinks it is working one thing, the wisdom of Nature constrains it to work another, and quite a different and far better thing.”<sup>1</sup> For me, the night blends man-made structures and lights with natural plants and trees into something wholly new. This new landscape is peculiar and fictional in its design and this is what I seek to capture in my work. My photographs illuminate a moment of the night that remains invisible to the naked eye. As I open my shutter, I am ignorant of the outcome. I can only guess what the photo will be by what I see before me. At night, there is the unnerving mystery of never fully seeing your photograph before it has been exposed.

The series is printed entirely in black and white. This decision stems from my belief that color, as beautiful and vibrant as it can be in long exposure, distracts the viewer from the textural landscape; these aspects made prominent by printing in black

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<sup>1</sup> *Flatland*, Preface, pp. xxiv

and white. The landscape I wish to portray is fickle. My statement in this series is not about color, but rather about the feeling of oddity mixed with possibility. Formal elements such as line, shape, and light combine to center the subject of the photograph around the unnatural quality of a nighttime landscape transformed by man, and distorted by the camera. For example, in *Lake 21* the line of foreground trees forms a large black twisting silhouette which consumes the frame. The eye is drawn to a small flickering light behind the trees. The light is not organic but also not recognizable. The lack of detail in the trees makes them appear as paper cut-outs, rather than a natural forest. This darkness presents the viewer with an opportunity to imagine what might be within the indistinct silhouettes of the landscape. In *Lake 17*, the fog was so thick one evening, that depth of perception and clarity vanished. I was given another way of achieving mystery. The singular tree I photographed appeared painterly. The fog surrounding the tree transformed the sky into another form of mystery. The background was hidden with only a hint of objects in the distance.

My photographs also contain elements of precise focus, and clarity that reveals a portion of the image as recognizable to the viewer. What I wish to create is that feeling of recognition and at the same time a feeling of uncertainty. I believe this fleshes out my goal of a landscape re-examined. The images are distorted but not completely abstract. A part of reality remains. This is the key aspect of “Darkland”.

I have selected a small portion of my 250 images for my thesis exhibition. I believe the images must work with one another just as much as they need to be able to stand on their own. I will display a total of seven black and white photographs printed on

Epson Ultra Smooth Fine Art Paper. Their size is approximately 23 inches by 35 inches.

The printing process can make or break a photograph. Although I experimented with different digital papers, wet darkroom papers, and alternative processes, I continually returned to one of the first papers I used called Epson Fine Art Velvet Paper. It gave me a rich, tangible black that I could not attain elsewhere. The matte finish absorbed the darks, creating depth, unlike most glossy papers which flattened the image. This paper is unfortunately not sold larger than 17 x 22. I could not escape the urge to make the images larger. I wished for my photographs to become an environment for the viewer. I wanted the audience to experience the nights I have travelled, not just observe them. This is my reason for enlarging the prints for my exhibition, and using a paper that is very similar to Epson Fine Art Velvet Paper.

The central image, *Snow 6*, is of my grandmother's house. This is one of the last photographs I took, on a very clear night. The moon cast shadows on the house and the long exposure accentuated the light from the windows. It is confrontational, stark, and has become for me, the center of my work. I believe it sums up the feeling of mystery and isolation experienced when walking at night. The glowing windows acknowledge occupants, but withhold any further information. Alone in the darkness, the windows represent both safe harbor and a hint of a story within. I also see them as eyes, like my camera lens looking out into the night. The works I have selected become more emotionally compelling when enlarged. The expansive black space is reinforced by this greater size in *Porch 2*. Plants blow about the edges of the frame, while the center remains a dark void. The larger the image, the more consuming the void becomes to the



viewer. I used the shadows on the stairs of a house in *Street 6* to flatten perspective and make the shadows appear as part of the architecture of the house. These heavy black shapes also contrast the delicate light from the oval window in the door. *Lake 22* took place on a very foggy night. My digital camera read the refracting moonlight on the water vapor as it would read moving water in low light. The areas covered in fog appeared noisy and grainy. The horizon beyond the path devolved into a white wall of digital noise. To me, these large undetermined shapes or blank spaces in my series produce the feeling of my childhood world where what I could not see became the most intriguing, most interesting part of the landscape. In that space was possibility. As I had with *Snow 6*, I chose a simple and direct horizontal view as a way to enhance the vastness of the fog. This and the delicate vines barely visible along the horizon were my intended subject.

My photographing methods are straightforward, especially when it comes to night work. I have to keep in mind that focusing might be tough, and there will be wind. I set my camera on a mid-setting of F8, ISO 320, and my shutter usually remains on Bulb. I want a lower ISO to decrease grain. It will make the exposure longer, but that is why I counter with F8. If the night is exceptionally still, I will stop down to F16 in order to get a wider depth of field and more of the shot will be in focus. This is handy when it is a very dark night, and I have to guess at focusing. I also use my digital screen back (if I have enough light) as a way to focus on a far away object, by selecting live view and zooming in on my intended subject. Exposure time is approximate. I judge the available light, make a decision on a starting time, open the shutter, and count to myself, sometimes using a stopwatch to be accurate. If alone, it is a meditation to keep my nerves

at bay. Being out in the dark is unsettling and your mind plays with your confidence. Is it in focus? Is there someone out there watching me? When photographing, especially at night, I had to accept failure and frustration on a regular basis. There are no foolproof plans.

Artists who have influenced my work, such as Richard Mosse and Anton Ginzburg, have shown me a way to see the world in a surreal sense. What is brutal becomes spectacular and what is a passing glance becomes epic. In “At the Back of the North Wind” Ginzburg forces his audience into a trance. He highlights the absolute beauty in an everyday landscape, and then with a red smoke jars that meditative beauty. That tension becomes part of a mythology, a fairy tale, a memory of childhood. Alternatively in Mosse’s “Infra” he knowingly photographs with an obsolete infrared film that depicts flora as pinks and reds. He does not change the scene in front of him, but his film does. I believe I work in a similar fashion with long exposure as the key component in the manipulation of my landscapes.

Hiroshi Sugimoto doesn’t work at night, but he is a master of light. Showing *Seascapes* in a gallery setting, he deliberately lights only the photograph, so the image itself seems to glow. One of his newest series, *Lightning Fields*, is yet another way of using light, in this case electricity, to create a fictional landscape on the film. His work inspires me to observe the potential of different sources of light. Night photography can rely heavily on available light, and the more I understand how these different sources are affected by long exposure, the more chances I have to correctly use and take advantage of that light to achieve an effect.

I credit artists such as Alfred Stieglitz, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Brassai, and present night photographers Todd Hido, Andrew Sanderson, Tokihiro Sato, Adam Moore, and Matthew Lennert with influencing my present work in the night landscape. Stieglitz's images are a playful observation of the world, embracing the photographic process as a fine art. There is both a high-spiritedness and a rigorous control in his scenes which fall together seamlessly. For instance, looking at *The Ferry Boat* from 1910, I immediately see the connection between the people on the boat and the pilings. A simple gathering of line and shape happily opposed. I find this to be one of the pleasures of being a photographer. I delight in recording contradictions or finding spontaneous beauty amongst the mundane. Matthew Donovan Lennert's published series *Answer Yourself* is a present day example of night photography. He works in a similar fashion to me, walking alone at night. I think his images are not so much about creating a different space, as they are about embracing the beauty of long exposure. His landscapes retain their original identity. The lights (man-made and starlight) only add decorative flares to the image, rather than distorting the main subject to create a fictional place. I do feel a connection with this artist because I believe we look for the possibility of a photograph. When I frame my image in my camera I have to judge not only what is visible but how the light (car light, star light, house light) will change and enhance the photograph through long exposure.

This series is my attempt to express my immediate response to the landscape through framing while also giving the photograph permission to create itself by way of long exposure. The result is a fiction, yet for me it is still a document of my personal

experience. The night presented me with the opportunity to discover the world I imagined when I was a child. In these photographs I found a place where what is hidden from sight is just as thrilling as what is seen. I also believe “Darkland” as a series is still unfinished. My goals change each time I return to the night to photograph; the personality of the series morphing, its purpose shifting. Night photography, the pursuit of the unusual, resonates with me. I have an entire year of recorded nights, and I plan to continue into the summer months, perhaps in Banner Elk where my journey began.

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