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Meditation on the Middle Ground

Jennifer Creef

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design, and Art History

May 2014

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work and supporting monograph to all the strong and influential women in my life, especially my mother who has supported my art endeavors ever since I was a little girl.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the people who have guided and supported me throughout my time here in graduate school. Thank you to Rebecca Silberman, Corinne Diop, Jade Webber, Patricia Drummond, Eric Morris, Mark Rooker, Lisa Tubach and all the other faculty, staff and graduate students that have helped me throughout this journey. I have grown so much in this program and would not have been able to do that without you.

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Abstract

The installation of *Meditations on the Middle Ground*, is a space filled with photomontages, video and sounds that were captured during my expeditions out on the water, through the woods and by the shore. My work is a meditation on my relationship with the natural environment and how to form new realities out of these interactions.

Meditations on the Middle Ground

Jennifer Creef

Meditation

In the Wilderness

In my work I am searching for a middle ground, which encompasses both the wilderness and civilization, which I live in and call home. I find it of great importance to become aware of the natural environment around me, to understand it, to live in it, to interact with it and to navigate between the natural and civilized world we live in.

On my expeditions photographing in nature I focus on or near the water's edge. Water has always been a place where I find my strength and clarity. It is a powerful substance and I am drawn towards it. I feel we have an intimate connection with water: we come from it, we survive on it and we are made of it. I feel water is alive, it can comfort and nourish us but part of its awe-inspiring nature is that it can also overpower and destroy us.

Bill Viola, a contemporary video artist, also deals with the many aspects of water and how it relates to humanity. He suggests that, "art derives from the quality of

experience, depth of thought and devotion of the maker.”¹ This fundamental experience that he refers to is something I find very important.

Experiencing and exploring the natural environment drives my work as an artist. I have always been drawn to the calmness and clarity of mind I feel while immersed in the wilderness. Throughout the series of “Meditations on the Middle Ground,” I searched for a deeper connection not only with the natural environment, but with myself as well. Part of my practice entails spending long periods of time alone in nature, studying the small details. My work is a meditation on what I experience in my expeditions; I photograph and record the sights and sounds I come across. I have a very keen frame of mind while in this space with my camera; I slow my movements so I can notice the little things that I wouldn’t notice at a habitual speed. I feel that when I slow down I am also slowing down time; this way I make closer and more thoughtful observations of what is happening all around me in the environment.

I notice the subtle movements of the river and the details in the tree branches. I become mindful that an awareness of this space is connected to my awareness of self. There is an oddity to the imagery I collect on these expeditions. My challenge is to communicate the connection I feel when out in the nature to my audience in the gallery space.

This way of thinking echoes the sentiment in Buddhist philosophy, “One has to get into a contemplative frame of mind in order to have that sharpness of attention, that

¹ Mary Jane Jacob, “Bill Viola,” In *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 249.

focus, that precision. And this requires a willingness to see things other than the way we see them habitually.”²

In my imagery I try to capture more than just the reality of place. I aim to capture its essence in a way that not only shows aspects of nature but opens the mind to different interpretations of it as well. Viola comments on how we need to have moments of awareness like this. He suggests:

When time and space open up to you all of a sudden there’s a lot of room for you, in quiet moments you get an idea, or a thought, or a revelation that you wouldn’t have had if you were in a hurry to get somewhere. Our lives require quiet innocent moments like these, so we absolutely have to make spaces-particularly in our world of compressed time or else our spirits will get choked up. We must take time back into ourselves, to let our consciousness breathe and our cluttered minds be still and silent. This is what art can do and what museums can be in today’s world.³

² Stephen Batchelor, “Seeing the Light, Photography as Buddhist Practice,” in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 142.

³ Mary Jane Jacob, “Bill Viola,” In *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 254.

The Sublime

The Awe-Inspiring, the Little Things

The sublime experience is described as being “about the relationship between disorder and order and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space.”⁴ It is about reflection of our existence and an awareness of self within that space.

These moments of quiet contemplation come naturally to me when I am near or on the water. This is the place with which I am most connected. Hiroshi Sugimoto, a contemporary photographer who also deals with this subject matter, attempts to show throughout his work “ancient levels of human memory, individual, cultural or collective memory of humanity as a whole.”⁵ He suggests that we (as humans) come from the sea and that is why we have such a strong attachment to it.

While we have evolved over time, we are still animals. As such, I feel we should actively nurture our connection with the natural world in order to continue to thrive and understand it.

Nature represents and activates a higher level of psyche. It stimulates the brain, and the senses are able to come alive. This higher level of psyche or consciousness is defined as “an experience so complex that our inability to form a clear mental

⁴ Simon Morley, *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 12.

⁵ Hiroshi Sugimoto, “Noh Such Thing as Time,” in *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 205.

conception of it leads to a sense of the inadequacy of our imagination and of the vast gulf between that experience and the thoughts we have about it.”⁶

This practice of contemplation drives my work but it is by transforming the images I take near or on the water that the essence of this experience and the transcendence I feel there can really be expressed.

⁶ Simon Morley, *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 16.

PROCESS

Studio Process

After photographing and recording particular elements in nature I manipulate and stitch the images I found in nature together to create an otherworldly environment. There is a subtle beauty in the oddity of this manipulation and the combined imagery produced creates a new unsettling space. Throughout this process, the images become dramatically elongated in a vertical format. This creates a novel perspective and instead of suggesting a topographical landscape, the multifaceted images create a shift into a more psychological realm.

The imagery in each photomontage is merged with two or more different still images that are transformed with rich contrast to create a new hybrid landscape filled with visual mysteries and ambiguity. They produce an uncomfortable or ethereal scene that seems to be primarily untouched and lack horizons. There is fluidity in how different objects within each space weave in and out of one another. This interaction creates a never-ending dance of shifting shapes that move with the lights and shadows to create unfamiliar landscapes, which are more thought provoking for the viewer.

Process in Nature

While in the field, alone and vulnerable, I am forced to challenge my fears about being by myself in an unfamiliar environment. Through this, I have learned some new skills and gained some confidence in this setting. I also took a course in survival in order to feel more competent alone in the wilderness. This helped me to appreciate the

landscape with respect and careful awareness. Throughout this, I have learned that the wilderness is dangerously beautiful and unforgiving.

On one of my adventures equipped with my camera and camping supplies, I spent the weekend alone by the Shenandoah River. I had never before camped by myself and thought it would be a great learning experience. This excerpt is what I wrote while at the site:

I sit at the campsite I arranged and await the dark. I prepare my fire and anxiously stir, not able to become comfortable. I wander around the perimeter of the river's edge to try and familiarize myself with my surroundings before nightfall.

As night drifts in, the darkness consumes my surroundings and my visuals weaken. As I adjust to the night, new sounds and sights emerge. Lights shimmer on the river's surface and the sounds of the cicadas, who, after awaking from their seventeen-year hibernation, echo in the trees.

As the time pressed on I photograph, sit, and feed my fire. I am vulnerable, alone, and sleep does not come easy.

The sounds of the night fade into morning and I awake from my uneasy sleep to the sounds of the dew dropping from the trees and upon the ground. I emerge from inside of my tent and see that the fog is thick and creates a barrier between the river and the sky.

As I observe the transformation of this daybreak and the colors of the land and river brighten I hesitate in the nothingness, the quiet and in my thoughts. This place is unfamiliar but familiar and I am comforted by getting to know it better, to understand it, and to be mindful of it."

The experience gave me a sense of this particular place's mythology and current ecosystem. It gave me the courage I needed to venture to places like this alone and to have a stronger awareness of my surroundings. To have that vulnerability out in the elements and to document that experience with such keen awareness made me a more mindful person. This is my intention with my practice, to rekindle my knowledge and my interactions with nature, to understand it on a more intimate level and grow from that.

Courage

"Courage of Arrowheads and Knotty Pines,"(Figure 1) is one of the pieces I created while out on this excursion. The final montage is a collection of three images I interacted with during this time period and one of the few that are manipulated with only the images from one single journey.

I remember the roots of this particular tree on the banks of the river and its impressive mass of bones that were being exposed from the earth. They seemed vulnerable to the flowing river running alongside it but at the same time they felt massively unbreakable. I felt a particular energy in this space. The tree had been here for many years and its awkward position along the water's edge is what captivated me.

In order to photograph this tree's roots I maneuvered myself in between a small and awkward hill that rose above the riverbed. If I wasn't careful, I could have slipped and fallen into the river. This tiny space had an unsafe feeling about it and created a tension making me very cautious and aware of what I was doing.

This still image of the roots I photographed still resonates with me. It symbolized for me, strength of perseverance and life. The fragility of the tree's positioning and its

ability to stay alive in this odd and unusual exposure felt of interest. It felt precious, as do all the places I have reflected on and paid mindful attention to.

I took many different photographs of the shells located in this area as. These shells differ from those I have found at the beaches of my home; they were unfamiliar and their shapes and abundance were fascinating. I noticed a leaf near the river seemed to be cradling one of these lone shells. This odd arrangement of the two objects interested me and although they are not seen as a leaf and shell in the final image due to the lack of color and deep shadows, unless one really looks hard. This was the initial reason for taking the shot. How did this little shell get on top of this leaf? Had it floated down the river like this or did the two collide while stopped along the river's edge?

The image of the surface of the river that is seen at the top of this piece was taken when the sun rose that morning after the long and uneasy night. It reflected and sparkled on top of the water's surface and it became a symbol of triumph that I successfully made it through the night and prevailed in facing one of my fears.

Using these images in my photomontage helped me figure out why I connect certain objects and how they fit together into an unreality of my own creation. I am using these images to tell a story for myself but am also asking the viewer to make sense of the subject matter to create their own.

This image of the Shenandoah River, the root, shell, and leaf merged together creates a visual chronicle of my experience. They represent a vertical scroll that has characteristics of having a beginning, middle and end.

Merging Technology, Society and Nature

This series functions as a threshold for the viewer into the natural environment. I captured the images in nature but I am using technology (photography, video, sound recordings) to produce the montages. I then use technology (printers and video/sound software) to project visions of surreal nature within the whole installation. However, the purpose of my work is, on a fundamental level, to encourage active participation out in the world.

The writer William Cronon says nature is “the one place we can turn for escape from our own too muchness.”⁷ Cronon states that “idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live.”⁸ Cronon suggests, “people should always be conscious that they are part of the natural world, inextricably tied to the ecological systems that sustain their lives.”⁹ This is something I work to relay to my audience because I feel it is deeply tied to my process. I bring technology (which represents civilization) with me into the wilderness in order to then create the feeling of what the wilderness inspires in me for my viewers through my art making. This does not mean we need to travel far to experience wilderness; this environment is everywhere around us.

⁷ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground*, (January 1995): 1.

⁸ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground*, (January 1995): 16.

⁹ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground*, (January 1995): 17.

Psychological Spaces

Black and White Imagery

I intentionally create my pieces in black and white because it has richness, and the stark contrast of chiaroscuro light helps to create a place where nothing is what it seems. The photomontages in the exhibition are layered with deep shadows and shifting shapes and each shows movement and fluidity. I create new worlds in black and white out of what I photograph; images become more ambiguous and mysterious. Extreme contrast and highlights can be pulled out in this monochromatic palette and many other shapes and details emerge. The images are not about photographic reality; instead they are about transformation and transcendence. I intend for them to point to the wilderness inside of each of us.

In each of my photomontages there is not a wide, vast scene as one would see in a typical landscape photograph. Rather, this otherworldly environment suggests a steep almost claustrophobic space, which can seem calming but for some while also filled with angst for others. I believe this is what nature is or at least can be. It is a place where one can experience a sense of freedom but also sense of vulnerability.

Vertical Formatting

The individual environments I have created show a psychological space in which I hope the viewer curiously tries to redefine his or her own reality. The striking seven-foot vertical formats of my photomontages create a long and narrow space, like a doorway. They are permeable tunnels that the viewer is invited metaphorically to enter.

Questions I wish to evoke in my audience include: How does one live in this environment? How does this space shape who we are and how does it influence us? How is this space a part of our own making and how do we fit in this environment? The presentation of the vertical formatting suggests that the topographical aspects of space are lost and a more contemplative reflection of the imagination immerses.

INSTALLATION

Still Images On and Off the Wall

The installation of “Meditations on the Middle Ground,” (Figure 2) is a space filled with photomontages, video, and sounds, which were captured during my expeditions out on the water, through the woods and by the shore. The space has two light boxes, many framed images on the walls and a video projected onto a wall in a dark back room. (Figure 3)

The velvety, non-reflective quality of the canvas paper I used to create the prints allows the viewer to become absorbed in these environments. Traditional photographic paper gives a more documentary, weighty feel to the imagery; I wanted a texture that would suggest immersive qualities.

The images in the light boxes show deeper space and feel more inviting because of their wider scale. “The Hissing of a Snake by Remnants of Abandoned Conch Shells” (Figure 4) has a great deal of white space in the lower half of the image, and it is the only one like this in the series. This empty space creates breathing room in a somewhat eerie environment. The images merge in and out of one another creating chaos and disorder but the glimmers of natural beauty help the pieces to arrive at a serene and peaceful state. The images fluid qualities of their compositions help to relieve the disruption of reality. Having the images off the wall and lit from behind suggests viewer interaction; it is as though one might walk through the frames that hold them upright and enter the world of the work.

Video

The video I present in the series is layered as well. I selected clips, filmed in the same locations as the still images, which have similar dark, ambiguous qualities as the photomontages. They are an extension of my experiences out in nature that are overlapped and woven together to create an ethereal environment filled with tangible movement. They are pieced together by small sections of time and are thoughtfully interwoven to create language of imagery that suggests one is in an immersive dream of digitally captured environments. They are moments in time that aim at involving one's senses to create an altered mental state while watching.

Sound

Along with the video and still photomontages, I have recorded and edited sound bites from my adventures and incorporated them in the installation. By activating the space with more than just a visual display, the sounds create an intimate mood.

Bill Viola talks about sound and the spiritual qualities in electronic digital media. He suggests that sound has one foot in this world and another in a world that is not placed in reality. He states "the effect of sound is very physical and real ... sound is also unconscious and metaphysical ... sound envelops you in a way the image can not."¹⁰ With the combination of sight and sound I want the viewer to feel more mindful in the space so that the installation of this hybrid nature can impress itself upon them.

¹⁰ Mary Jane Jacob, "Bill Viola," in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 252.

MIDDLE GROUND

My work is about meditating on the middle ground. It is a place where we can rekindle our relationship to the environment. Christopher Manes an award winning author, journalist and documentary film-maker on deep ecology, said “Rediscovering our place in nature is not about some kind of devolving into a lower life form, where we have only some basic existence and we don’t have beautiful things around us. What I’m saying and what I think environmentalist and artists should say more about is recapturing the rich poetic wild ways we can relate to nature and ourselves.”¹¹ I have held on to this quote since the beginning of my exploration here in graduate school and it has been by my side as I evolved my practice.

It has been my search to find a deeper understanding and a closer connection with the natural environment. It was about “finding a middle ground which encompasses civilization and wilderness that we can recognize and call home,”¹² and how to present this awareness through my artwork.

I am drawn to the natural world; it has a quiet truth that whispers in wind, trickles down the stream, breaks in the crashing waves, and cools my bare feet. It is alive with meaning and it has been my explorations with my camera that has drawn me nearer to it. Translating this feeling of my connection with the environment and rendering that into an

¹¹ Richard Shusterman, “Breaking Out of the White Cube,” in *Conversations Before the End of Time*, ed. Suzi Gablik (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 100.

¹² Sarah Dunn, “Response to William Cronan’s *The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*,” *National Park Landscape Art and American Imagination*, Accessed April 9, 2014, <http://arthistory327.wordpress.com/2012/09/17/response-to-william-cronons-the->.

image while also creating a space where the mysteries of the world are elaborated upon is at the heart of my work.

It is the little things that keep everything together and it is the smallest details that allow a bigger picture to arise.

List of Figures



Figure 1: *Courage of Arrowheads and Knotty Pines*, 2014. Digital Photo Montage.



Figure 2: *Meditations on the Middle Ground Installation, (Front) 2014*



Figure 3: *Meditations on the Middle Ground Installation, (Back) 2014*



Figure 4: *The Hissing of a Snake by Remnants of Abandoned Conch Shells*, 2013. Digital Photo Montage.

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