



SCHOOL of
GRADUATE STUDIES
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University
Digital Commons @ East
Tennessee State University

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Student Works

5-2001

Mystery in a Common Place: A Supporting Paper for a Graduate Exhibition.

Jayne Marie Selser

East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Selser, Jayne Marie, "Mystery in a Common Place: A Supporting Paper for a Graduate Exhibition." (2001). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 30. <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/30>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Mystery in a Common Place :
A Supporting Paper for a Graduate Exhibition

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Art
East Tennessee State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Photography

by
Jayne Marie Selser
May 2001

Mike Smith, Chair
Anita Deangelis
David Dixon

Keywords: Photography, Surrealism, Documentary, Appalachia, Cartier-Bresson

ABSTRACT

Mystery in a Common Place:

A Supporting Paper for a Graduate Exhibition

by

Jayne Marie Selser

This is a supporting paper for a Master of Fine Arts graduate thesis exhibition of black and white photographs held in Slocumb Gallery April 2-7, 2001. The exhibit represents my major concentration of study in Art at East Tennessee State University. The photographs depict cultural aspects of the rural Smoky Mountains.

I begin with a description of the means used to suggest the mysterious aspects of human existence in everyday life. The second chapter discusses the influences of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Graciella Iturbide and details aspects of the Surrealist aesthetic suggested in this body of work. Other articulated contemporary influences include Emmet Gowin, Sally Mann, and Andrea Modica.

The content and treatment of five photographs from the exhibition is the main focus of chapter three. In conclusion, the photographs delineate an intimate portrait of several rural families and stand as a tribute to the mysterious in a common place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mystery in a Common Place, my graduate exhibition and thesis, is dedicated to the memory of my father, Isaac Montgomery Selser.

I wish to express my appreciation to the following people:

My mother, Marie Selser, for her unending support and belief in me.

Likewise, my brother and sister.

My friends, who encouraged me and lent a helping hand.

Becky, Ronnie and Alex who opened their home to me.

My fiancé, Tracy Jones, for his support, patience, and diligence.

Also, thank you to my professor, Mike Smith, and my other committee members, Anita Deangelis and David Dixon for their guidance.

Above all I wish to thank God for all that has been and will be accomplished.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
LIST OF FIGURES	5
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	6
2. CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES	8
Surrealism	8
Henri Cartier-Bresson	11
Graciela Iturbide	13
Emmet Gowin	14
Sally Mann	15
Andrea Modica	16
3. DISCUSSION OF SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS	18
Decoration Day	19
The Attic	20
Together in Dark Creek	21
Checking on the Boys	23
Riding Wildfire	24
4. CONCLUSION	25
5. REFERENCE	26
6. VITA	28

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Perception	9
2. Backyard	10
3. Decoration Day	18
4. The Attic	20
5. Together in Dark Creek	21
6. Checking on the Boys	22
7. Riding Wildfire	24

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The photographs in this exhibition are the result of my relationship with a family in a rural Smoky Mountain valley. After repeated visits during a two-year time span, I developed a close friendship with one family in a tiny east Tennessee community. The photographs offer a visual statement about the humor, the grit, and the beauty that co-exist in this rural Appalachian setting. Photographs like mine suggest mysterious aspects of human existence in everyday life. It is this element of photography that most holds my attention. Martine Franck, photographer and wife of Cartier-Bresson, explains the mystery of life in photography as “the unexpected side of reality that is constantly taking us by surprise, off our guard” (Frank, 1998. p. 11). In this same correspondence with John Berger, Martine states,

A photograph is not necessarily a lie, but it isn't the truth either. It's more like a fleeting, subjective impression. What I like so much about photography is precisely the moment that cannot be anticipated: one must be constantly on the alert, ready to acclaim the unexpected. (Frank, 1998. p. 10)

My work does not stand as a document of the “truth” about what life is for someone living in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains. It is my “fleeting subjective impression.” It is this acclamation of the unexpected that ties the process to Surrealism. Andre Breton, the “pope” of Surrealism, wrote, “...we have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, of finally becoming *one*.” (Breton, 1978/ 1934. p. 116). For the Surrealist this was accomplished through automatism. Automatism or automatic writing was a method for Surrealist writers to access their unconscious via uncontrolled writing. This led to rich metaphors and revolutionary connections between the unconscious and reality. In the photographic process the dream state (or interior reality) and the conscious moment (or exterior reality) can come together in a place and time on the picture plane of the photograph through the unexpected. Thus for some photographers (Cartier – Bresson, Graciela Iturbide, and myself), Surrealism has been an invaluable point of departure.

Emmet Gowin, Sally Mann and Andrea Modica have influenced other important aspects of my work. Gowin and Mann both photographed their own family extensively. Modica's process more directly paralleled mine as we both developed close ties to a family other than our own. An

intentional choice of limited subject matter with repeated exposure can lead to a high degree of camaraderie and trust. Through time, my role as a family friend deepened as I participated in weddings, birthdays, and other family events. This vantage point allowed me to be present and ready for the unexpected without altering the everyday occurrence. Surrealism became an underlying aesthetic and the rural family is the authentic context for the work.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Surrealism

Surrealism is the basis of my edit for this exhibition. As such it is the underlying link between the individual pieces. From the onset Surrealists recognized that photography is a medium particularly suited to their form of expression. As Susan Todd-Racque, art historian, recently said while speaking about Surrealism:

Photography has the ability through the process itself, to blur boundaries and to distort the visual experience. Photography has the ability to appear ambiguous and create an image that is open-ended. This open-ended quality and ambiguity is what makes a lot of photography interesting today. (Personal communication, November 15, 2000)

Many of my photographs are purposefully ambiguous and open-ended. Often the viewer does not know what is happening in the image. This is one of the surrealistic devices imbedded in my work. For instance in Perception (see figure 1) there is an unknown hand extending into the frame. We do not know if the hand belongs to a parent or a stranger, or if it intends to nurture the child or harm the child. The look on the little girl's face could be interpreted in many ways but undoubtedly has an eerie quality. Each viewer brings a different perception to the interpretation of this image. That is precisely my intent, to show the mystery in a brief, everyday moment.



Figure 1
Perception

As an art movement, Surrealism yielded many amazingly diverse bodies of work because it builds from subjective artistic expression. I have been influenced by the Surrealists' embrace of the duality of life and their use of chance and the idea that the unconscious or dream state can be accessed through the process of making art. Breton, leader of Surrealism, called for a transformation of the world, "I believe in the future resolution of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of *surreality*, so to speak." Breton quotes Aragon, surrealist poet and theorist, in this same lecture:

...the essence of things is by no means linked to their reality there are other relations besides reality, which the mind is capable of grasping and which also are primary, like chance, illusion, the fantastic, the dream. These various groups are united and brought into harmony in one single order, *surreality*. (Breton, 1978/1934. p. 126)

The lack of color in my photographs abstracts the subject and infuses the image with a dream-like quality. The world seems more imaginary when rendered in black and white. Photography by its very nature renders the world in a convincingly realistic form and yet it can distort the visual experience through its translation into the two-dimensional picture plane. For instance, in Backyard (see figure 2), doghouses appear as big as a playhouse and a rooster is rendered as big as a donkey. There are no dogs present and the dog's chain now appears to be linked to a kitchen pot. Appearances become nightmarish. This photograph demonstrates both everyday common reality and underlying elements of "surreality." It brings the elements of the unconscious to the surface through everyday objects that signify more than their mundane purpose.



Figure 2

Backyard

Many of the images in the exhibit are subtly disturbing. I believe that life has a disturbing side that is fascinating to acknowledge. As Todd - Racque put it, Surrealism looks for the subversive and uncanny in the ordinary. It embraces chance, accident, and the expression of psychological spirit and aura (Personal communication, November 15, 2000). Some of my images have an uncomfortable quality without being disrespectful to my subject. Later in

Chapter three I will discuss this disquieting effect as seen in *Riding Wildfire* (see figure 7), The juxtaposition of disparate objects and puzzling gestures adds to the ambiguity of the content. Bresson and Iturbide—who both make use of the unexpected elements of life to heighten the mysterious, the humorous, the exotic—have influenced me.

Henri Cartier-Bresson

Henri Cartier-Bresson pioneered the effective use of the miniature (35 mm) camera. In 1933 he began to use the Leica camera to remain inconspicuous and blend in with the environment (Capa, 1984. p. 100).

As a result, Cartier-Bresson is accomplished in the skill of making a photograph in the “decisive moment” when a banal, everyday happening can appear marvelous. Peter Galassi tells us: “By 1932...Cartier-Bresson definitely abandoned studio Surrealism [Maurice Tabard and Man Ray] and, like Breton and Aragon, gave himself up to the surprises of the street.” Galassi describes this as a “shift from hyperbolic fantasy to gritty realism” (Galassi, 1987. p. 34).

Bresson stated in ‘Un Reporter’, *Photo France*, no. 7, May 1951:

Although it is only rarely in these images that I show man’s monumental achievements, such as skyscrapers, roads or bridges, it doesn’t mean that I am indifferent to their grandeur or beauty, just that what really interests me is man the human being, not the builder. Everything he builds only remains up to a certain point, while the expression of his being can be caught in a fraction of a second or can escape you entirely. To my mind, capturing that fraction of a second is photography’s most significant function. (Montier, 1996. p. 18)

This fraction of a second in which an aspect of humanity is seized by means of the camera is also a cornerstone of my work. Many critics believe that Bresson's best work was in the 30s and based mostly on Surrealism and not photojournalism or documentation. “It provided, rather, a broader description of a place, its people, and culture, and the texture of its everyday life” (Galassi, 1987. p. 9). Galassi further describes Bresson’s approach as:

depaysment – to uproot an ordinary fact or incident from its expected spatial or narrative context, thus releasing a hidden poetic force. In a sense all photographs are details, framed and dismembered from the world at large. But Cartier-Bresson,

applied the principle with radical concision, often denying the viewer the bare minimum of clues necessary for a plausible reconstruction of the broad scene from which the cryptic detail had been snatched. (Galassi, 1987. p. 107)

The child in Valencia, 1933 is the classic Bresson example of this chance moment turned into the “found object.” An ordinary moment of a child catching a ball, without the ball in the photograph, becomes a moment about life, anguish, joy, as if transposed into a dream world. Galassi quotes Bresson: “Moreover, I was already fascinated by the dream, and I wanted to find places, acts and people who gave me the illusion of a dream.” (Galassi, 1987. p. 15)

Bresson was clearly influenced by Surrealism. However, Montier makes a relevant point:

‘...[As] in the case of other elements inherited from Surrealism, he alters its meaning’. Further, ‘He gambles on integrating chance into the necessity of the composition. The photographer-hunter’s concentration does not eliminate the role of chance but allows it to preserve its flavor and the value of the surprise.... Photography is only valid to Cartier-Bresson insofar as it grasps, captures and fixes, without destroying in any way, the incessant movement of life, which possesses the unusual and precious characteristic of sometimes producing powerfully ordered plastic forms charged with emotion’. (Montier, 1994. pp. 98, 100, 101)

Like Bresson, I am not held to its strict orthodoxy. Being “present in the world” and creating a harmonious image (“a concept totally alien to the world of Surrealism”) are both opposed to Breton’s concept of chance. “On the contrary, the sense of equilibrium, the intuition of a privileged moment, of a union of the elements are prevalent both in his [Bresson’s] photographs and his drawings” (Montier, 1994. p. 105).

Visually, photography for Cartier-Bresson is a matter of organizing the objects he photographs into an ordered geometry within the picture plane. From him, I learned to be constantly moving and perpetually studying my subjects and to be in a position to see the moment when formal order and emotional content come together.

Graciela Iturbide

Graciela Iturbide carries on the tradition of Surrealism with straight black and white photography. She assisted Manuel Alvarez Bravo in the early 1970s and met Henri Cartier –

Bresson who became a significant influence on her work. (Iturbide, 1996. back cover). Bravo had met Breton and also exhibited with Bresson in the heyday of Surrealism. Thus, Iturbide's work can be placed in direct lineage to Surrealism. She too juxtaposes the ordinary in such a way as to reveal a world far Kahlo and Alvarez Bravo is inextricably tied to their national heritage. But the photographs become more than documents about a culture because the ideas of Surrealism are applied to the act of image making. Aragon wrote: "Men pass their lives in the midst of magic precipices without ever opening their eyes." Christopher Phillips describes it this way:

He [Aragon] believed that if one were attuned to the fleeting gestures, enigmatic objects, and veiled eroticism glimpsed in the street, an unsuspected pattern of affinities – a new kind of poetic knowledge – might be revealed.

(Hambourg, Phillips, 1989. p. 65)

Bresson and Iturbide reveal this poetic knowledge in their work.

One of the challenges of Surrealism was the merging of inner and outer realities. Iturbide describes how she responds to this challenge:

"I retain in images casual external encounters and internal finalities. I seek to trap life in the reality that surrounds me, remembering that my dreams, my symbols and my imagination are part of that life. In human beings I search to discover my own nostalgia." (Iturbide, 1996. p. inside cover.)

My photographs from this Smoky Mountain valley are longings for experiences and things belonging to the past.

Iturbide also affected me in her method of working. She states:

I'm not one of those photographers who shoots with a telephoto; I'm not a photographer who hides. I usually get to a town with my camera and I introduce myself as a photographer. I tell the people that I plan to stay for a while. I live with them in their homes and they know what I am there for. I tell them that I am going to photograph their rituals, their traditions. I like it when people know that I am taking their picture. Complicity, for me, is looking at someone and discovering that they are looking back. If I don't have that answering look, I don't get results. (Kaufman, 1995. p. 46)

Photographers like Graciela Iturbide take the raw material of our world and use surrealist precepts to show us a world alive with ambiguity and the marvelous. Capitalizing on chance as in Cartier – Bresson’s “decisive moment,” blurring the boundaries of the internal and the external world, juxtaposing disparate objects to stimulate the mysterious, the humorous and the exotic, removing the subject from its environment, and working in black and white, all create the illusion of dream. The surrealists left a rich legacy that continues to influence contemporary photographers.

Emmet Gowin

“The challenge of photography is to show the thing photographed so that our feelings are awakened and hidden aspects are revealed to us.”

(Emmet Gowin Photographs, 1990. p. 5)

Emmet Gowin, like his teacher, Harry Callahan, took a close look at his family. Keith Davis says, “The intimate bonds of family, friendship, and nurture are central to the work of numerous photographers of this era [60's and 70's]” (Davis, 1999. p. 451). Carter further states that Gowin's early work of his wife and children “finds poetic universality in the intimacy of a family ‘snapshot’.” Many of Gowin’s subjects stare at the camera with that “answering look” that Iturbide wants. There is often a play of one disparate look contrasted with another, much like the father and son in my photograph, Together in Deep Creek (see figure 5).

Emmet Gowin’s work is clearly rooted in his ability to express metaphor. Gowin states that: “...from 1966 to 1970 my admiration for the homemade picture was highest. I was becoming alive to certain essential qualities in family photographs. ... Sometimes the frame cut through the world with a surprise. There could be no doubt that the picture belonged more to the world of things and facts than to the photographer” (Green, 1974. p.8). One powerful image by Gowin shows a young girl, her arms intertwined, holding two eggs. The moment is real, yet there is a deeper meaning as the eggs transform into symbols of fertility with a foreboding.

Emmet Gowin’s photographs make use of the drama of light and shadow. Gowin explains: “The problem for me is always to find the shape of the gesture, the feeling of space, a light, which holds again a sense of touching reality” (Green, 1974. p.8). Gowin was drawn to photograph his wife’s family in Danville, Virginia, his hometown. His new wife, Edith Morris, and her family were “freshly different” from his own. (Green, 1974. p.8).

Emmet Gowin's photographs of this period reach deeply into the psyche of the family culture and reveal specific moments in time charged with mystery. It is precisely what Brian Arnold wrote about Emmet Gowin's photographs that has inspired me, "I saw them to be full of beauty and fear, peace and confusion, pictures that represented something of the incredible mystery of life" (Arnold, 200. p. 1).

Sally Mann

Two of Sally Mann's books, At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women By Sally Mann and Immediate Family, have influenced my work. Like Emmet Gowin, she gets a straight- forward look of acknowledgement from her subjects. She has gained their trust. Whether her children or someone else's, Sally Mann takes the time needed to gain their confidence.

The strongest impression I get from Sally Mann's work is that the imagery is dramatic and theatrical in a common environment. The photographs in both these books verify that life is a paradox, totally satisfying and ungraspable all at once. The moments are intimate, transporting us back to a time when a childhood secret meant everything. The symbolism expands outward to encompass an adult world full of fear and the unknowable. Mann has the ability to take the viewer deep into an ordinary occurrence that is both unexplainable and monumental. An everyday object transports us into the realm of the unconscious as in one photograph where Sally Mann's son is "sprawled in a watery ditch, enacting again (maybe unknowingly) his birth ..." (Mann, 1992. p.7 Afterward). In many of Mann's photographs she relies heavily on the symbolic nature of objects.

After visiting an exhibit of Sally Mann's work at Emory and Henry in 1999, I became aware of the extent to which darkroom manipulation could control the picture plane. Mann, who studied with Ansel Adams, is a master at darkening areas of the picture plane to subvert unimportant content and focus a heightened attention to the main theme. As a result, she creates a rich beauty through the darkness. She adroitly expresses the dual meaning to be found in the photographic image. The work becomes an abstract reproduction of real time and space and transforms into mythic proportion.

Andrea Modica

Like Sally Mann, Andrea Modica concentrates on family in her work. Rapport with her subject is important, and she says her subjects respond to her, the camera, and the setting (Minor League, 1993. p. 5). In Treadwell, Modica renders a specific child's world as fantastic and mysterious. The images in Treadwell are intimate, and yet, there is tension and a level of discord that runs through the collection.

When I interviewed Andrea Modica she said it was difficult to say who influenced her because that changes all the time. She cited Julia Margaret Cameron as a strong influence for her form and the way that Cameron's photographs of babies and maids were both real documents and yet transcended life, a world where babies become Jesus while remaining in a gritty reality. For example, she explained, "The baby that becomes the symbol for Jesus still has dirty feet and is of this world." Andrea Modica also told me that the first photographer she looked at was Diane Arbus. She was impressed with how Arbus "brought her own world to the work. That it was autobiographical while appearing to be documentary" (Personal communication, March 21, 2000).

Modica's work is characteristically spontaneous, despite her use of an 8"x10" large format camera. Barbara, the main subject in Treadwell, often has an awkward or mysterious pose. While remaining spontaneous in appearance, many of the photographs in Treadwell are rich in detail. Modica makes use of natural light that is often soft, delicate, and non-directional. This even light adds to the delineation of details and creates a subtle and rich range of dark tones.

The photographs in Treadwell portray enigmatic moments that accentuate the mysteries of childhood. Barbara's ambiguous gestures encourage the viewers to make their own interpretation. Sometimes the Surrealist idea of the found object comes in to play when she crops the subject tightly. The photograph translates into a found object when we are not given enough information to know the facts of a situation. The object is separated from its context. In addition, Modica uses the properties of the camera to confuse the spatial relationships between background and foreground objects. Unrelated objects become analogous due to repetition and similarity of shapes. Some combinations of gestures, objects, and people suggest strange rituals. What appear to be ordinary moments on the surface lead to other interpretations. They delineate both fact and fantasy.

In our interview, I was delighted that Modica is still photographing Barbara. She revels in the challenge of photographing one person for so many years. She says,

It is a useful assignment because you can't keep making the same photograph.

More than any other medium it is easy to flit away when you get bored. It is so much more informative, instructive and exciting to stay with one project.

((Personal communication, March 21, 2000))

At this point in my career, Andrea Modica's approach and working methods inspire me more than any other photographer.

CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION OF SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS

This body of work not only reveals certain cultural aspects of the rural Smoky Mountains but also articulates an intimate portrait of one small community. Like Andrea Modica, I revisit the families over and over forging a familiarity that allows me to come and go as casually as any family member. I am there for all common activities from a boring sweltering summer afternoon to a chilly Easter Sunrise Service. I participate in the family activities, and always my camera is there. I am ever watchful for the mysterious aspect of human life to present itself for procurement.



Figure 3

Decoration Day

Decoration Day

Decoration Day depicts a familiar neighborhood event. This graveyard lies in the heart of the valley. The headstones recall the earliest burials that began with the first settlers in the late

1800's. Family members will travel for long distances to join other church members for this annual pilgrimage to honor the long since and recent dead.

However, that is only the superficial content of this image. I wandered in and out of the gathering looking and watching intently for some mysterious, uncommon moment to present itself. My impression of the event would be charged with surreality. As I descended the opposite hillside the congregation of people began to resemble the headstones—the repetition, the rounded shape of their shoulders, the way they appeared to be planted solidly into the ground. In the foreground, crudely shaped stones without inscriptions mark the graves, suggesting a lack of identity. One man stands tallest among them in his ironed white shirt and Sunday hat. He resembles the tallest and most sculptural marker in the cemetery. His head is remarkably juxtaposed in the three thin utility wires sweeping the center of the frame as if it were a note in some hidden score of music.

The moment before I released the shutter, I was graced with an element of chance. Two figures approached from my left. The small child, dressed in camouflage, mimics the flowers on the graves in the foreground. It is this element of chance and serendipity that most intrigues me in the picture making process. The child looks to the camera, curious, questioning, and pointing his stick down toward the graves.

An intimidating bond to the dead is suggested in the camera's low proximity to the ground and several graves looming in the lower left corner. The two figures also on the left disrupt the frame's edge. The hill is lined with people, as alike and subtly different as each stone marker. The community of human markers appear wedged between the earth and the distant mountain.

This setting deeply connects cultural aspects of this rural community, the gestures, the emotional underpinnings of life and death, the ordinary event, and the uncanny link between man and the objective world.



Figure 4

The Attic

The Attic

I have learned to be ever ready for the fleeting instant when “chance, illusion and the fantastic” emerge, collide, and just as quickly disappear. When the grandmother shut the door and the small child reached upward, I was ready. To me, the child’s figure in this picture becomes the universal symbol for “the child within.” To quote Breton, the “interior reality and exterior reality” become *one* (Breton, 1978/ 1934. p. 116). The exterior reality of the child playing in the attic door becomes transformed, through one unexpected spontaneous gesture. The image now suggests a dream. Like a nightmare we can relate to the experience of being trapped, held back by a door and a wall that just won't open or give way. The reflection of the organic outside world beckons. The child in the image might symbolize the curious child searching for answers, relief, and a way out. To me this image represents vulnerability and stand for change and growth.

To others this image is quite disturbing. The child appears trapped behind the door. There are no steps to provide escape. The asbestos shingles represent danger. However the reflection of the outside world is disorienting and to some appears inside the room with the child. This image expresses the dual nature of life lying in our own interpretation. This child's world is alive with ambiguity and the marvelous.



Figure 5

Together in Dark Creek

Together in Dark Creek

The assumption is most often made that the two people in this photograph are father and son. Their hands tightly gripped, the child's arm pale, soft, and weak, while the man's arm is a dark tan and muscular. The clasped hands show the adult's desire to protect and guide the boy who is surrounded by the turbulent waters of youth, the man standing solidly in calm water.

Darkly mysterious and ominous woods and murky water surround them. The dark river symbolizes a journey, perhaps into adulthood. The trees have limbs like arms that reach in a tangled mass toward the two. A clump of leaves menacingly extends from behind the frame's right edge.

The camera angle is low, giving the viewer the sensation of being in the water or from the perspective of something threatening on the surface. The fleeting moment depicts the boy as unsteady, off balance, and crouching, and the adult as standing tall. The "father" has a guarded expression and his unflinching stare looks back at us. The boy is defenseless and susceptible. His expression has led some to erroneously think he might be retarded. He is a rambunctious and mischievous young boy. This image is uncomfortably strange and intriguing. It is powerful and the "truth" of the event has nothing to do with the impact of the image.



Figure 6

Checking on the Boys

Checking on the Boys

This image turned out quite humorous. It is a good example of my being constantly on the alert and embracing the unexpected. I was wedged into a small bedroom with five active young

boys. They had just finished supper, cake, and soft drinks. They were hyper and fully absorbed in their own activities. I was prepared for the unexpected gesture to occur when one of the boys began to strangle himself with a toy snake. This was interesting enough but when I heard one of the mothers coming toward the closed door I knew that some interesting juxtaposition was about to unfold. What makes this image work is the mom's oblivious expression.

The act of photographing people spontaneously interacting with each other and their environment stimulates my curiosity about the unknowable aspects of life. Sometimes, in this moment when the juxtaposition of disparate objects come together before my camera there is an indescribable sensation of being witness to something fantastic, a surreal moment. At other times the excitement does not occur until the process of editing.

Mostly, I let life unfold before me with minimal collaboration with my subjects. In this aspect my working method is like Cartier-Bresson and Iturbide. My best photographs serve as evidence that life is an unsolvable mystery. It is a privilege to examine life with my camera through such close and intimate access to events within this community.



Figure 7
Riding Wildfire

Riding Wildfire

This photograph visually describes what most attracts me to the valleys and mountains of east Tennessee. It is beautiful yet wild and unkempt. This landscape is unpolished and crude. At first glance, the water, the foliage, and the young woman riding bareback are inviting like a garden paradise. On closer inspection we see the flora is composed of weeds. The horse is agitated, stirring up the water and creating waves, yet the girl remains poised and calm. One weed even stands taller than the horse's rump accentuating its flexed haunch. Things are not what they seem.

The scene is serene except for the powerful action of the horse's front leg pounding the water vigorously. The waves caused by this action and the tight cropping make the water unidentifiable as a creek or a pond. The waves move from the central figures out of the frame while at the same time a renegade wave is returning from the bank on the left side. This has a disorienting effect. The park entrance sign adds another layer of uncertainty. The sign shows advanced stages of age and deterioration. By all appearances this is not a park entrance. The sign serves an unknown purpose. Adjacent to the sign is a modern satellite dish. This juxtaposition creates a strong contrast between the background and this object of modern technology.

More is revealed when this image is printed large (30"x40") in the exhibition. At that size the raindrops become apparent against the darkness of the trees and satellite dish. This enhances the uninhibited disposition of horse and rider. The rain symbolizes a cleansing of earthly affairs.

The girl rides in a gentle relaxed pose, no saddle and no bit to exert control over this large dominant animal. There is a trusting bond between this beauty and her beast. The girl's long bent leg with flexed muddy foot mimics the horse's front leg. Her hair and the horse's mane appear identical. Because the rope is made up of both dark and light lines, it mirrors the seam line of the girl's jeans. The viewer who is knowledgeable of horses will also realize this is a mare and she is in foal. The girl and her equine counterpart exist in a symbiotic relationship. . Unrelated objects become analogous due to repetition and similarity of shapes and tonal values.

This picture describes the ties between animals and the rural community. The animals exist as companion, beast of labor, and potential metaphor for the human condition. Life is unruly and ultimately we are at its mercy to ride with calmness over the turbulence or become fearful. This young woman shows confidence, poise, and authentic beauty. The richness of spirit and power of nature that joined together in this instant moved me to release the shutter.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My photographs are about everyday life in a common place, simple dignity, and mysterious moments. These subjects provide the raw material that illustrates the nature of a beauty comprised of gritty, everyday occurrences. They allow me to access the dream state (or interior reality) and the conscious moment (or exterior reality) through the unexpected. Though documentary in appearance, the photographs raise universal questions.

I will continue to expand this project, as the valley is a touchstone to my past. However, the resulting photographs transcend personal considerations and become tributes to everyday mysteries in a rural setting. The imagery appears authentic due to my close relationship to the subjects and the nature of photography. Still, the nature of this evidence is no more than my fleeting impression of the mystery manifest in everyday life. Through photography we study an image that both preserves and alters the past. The photograph transforms time into an object to enjoy and ponder.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, Brian. (2000). Precedence: Emmet Gowin and His Students. Show Catalogue. Fosdick-Nelson Gallery. School of Art and Design, New York.
- Berger, John. Henri Cartier-Bresson. *Aperture*, 138, 12-23.
- Breton, Andre. (1978). What is Surrealism? Selected Writings. (Franklin Rosemont, Trans.). New York: Monad Press. (Original Work published 1930's-1940's)
- Davis, Keith. (1999). An American Century of Photography From Dry-Plate to Digital. Kansas City, Missouri: Hallmark Cards, Inc.
- Frank, Martine. (1998). One Day To The Next. New York: Aperture.
- Galassi, Peter. (1987). Henri Cartier-Bresson: the early work. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Gowin, Emmet. (1990). Emmet Gowin Photographs. Boston, Toronto, London: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bulfinch Press.
- Green, Jonathan. (1974) The Snapshot. New York: Aperture, Inc.
- Hambourg, Maria Morris and Christopher Phillip. (1989). The New Vision: Photography Between The World Wars. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Harris, Melissa. (1995). Sally Mann Correspondence with Melissa Harris. *Aperture*, 138, 24-35.
- Iturbide, Graciela. (1996). Graciela Iturbide Images of the Spirit. New York: Aperture / Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- Kaufman, Frederick. (1995). Graciela Iturbide. *Aperture*, 138, 37-47.
- Mann, Sally. (1988). At Twelve. New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc.
- Mann, Sally. (1992). Immediate Family. New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc.
- Mann, Sally. (1983). Second Sight The Photographs of Sally Mann. Boston: David R. Godine Publisher.
- Meyerowitz, Joel. (1990). Creating a Sense of Place. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Modica, Andrea , Amy Pastan and Constance Sullivan (Eds.). (1993). Minor League Photographs by Andrea Modica. Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Modica, Andrea and E. Annie Proulx. (1996). Treadwell. San Francisco, Canada: Chronicle Books, Raincoast Books.

Montier, Jean-Pierre. (1996). Henri Cartier-Bresson And The Artless Art. France: Bulfinch Press.

Museum of Fine Arts and Emmet Gowin. (1974). Private Realities: Recent American Photography. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.

VITA

JAYNE SELSER

- EDUCATION:** East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. Master of Fine Arts
Major concentration: Photography, Secondary: Computer Graphics, 2001
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN. Bachelor of Fine Arts
Studio Art / Photography, 1977
- Apprenticeship Program with Neil Slavin, Photographer Parsons, N.Y.C., 1976
- ACADEMIC
EXPERIENCE:** Graduate Teaching Assistant, East Tennessee State University. 1999 - 2001
Photography Professor, Everett Community College, Everett, WA. 1996 - 1997
Photography Instructor, Art Institute of Seattle, Seattle, WA. 1995 - 1997
- SOLO
EXHIBITIONS:** Mystery in a Common Place, Center for Contemporary Photography, Abilene, Texas.
Scheduled for July, 2002. Gallery Director: Bill Wright
- Mystery in a Common Place, Johnson City Arts Council, Johnson City, Tennessee.
Scheduled for August – September, 2001. Gallery Director: Sara Johnson
- Mystery in a Common Place, Thesis Exhibition, Slocumb Art Gallery,
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee. April 2-7
- GROUP
EXHIBITIONS:** Transparent Things Through Which the Past Shines, Kaleidoscope Group Exhibition,
Customs House Museum & Cultural Center, Clarksville, Tennessee. April 29 – 31, 2001
- Graduate Student Exhibition, Carroll Reece Museum, East Tennessee State University,
Johnson City, Tennessee. April, 2001
- Faculty Exhibition, Department of Art & Design, Slocumb Gallery,
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee. 2000
- Graduate Student Exhibition, Carroll Reece Museum, East Tennessee State University,
Johnson City, Tennessee. April, 2000
- JURIED
EXHIBITIONS:** Second Photography and Digital Image Biennial Exhibition
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC. Juror: Evon Streetman. February, 2001
- 22nd Annual 1st Tennessee Bank Art Competition & Exhibition, April, 2000
Second Place Award. Carroll Reece Museum, East Tennessee State University,
Johnson City, Tennessee. Juror: Douglas Ross
- University of Tennessee Annual Juried Student Show, Second Place Award.
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN. 2000
- 21st Annual First Tennessee Bank Art Competition & Exhibition, April 1999
Second Place Award. Carroll Reece Museum, East Tennessee State University,

Johnson City, Tennessee. Juror: Xenia Zed.

The Open Show, Oak Ridge Arts Center Juried Exhibition, Oak Ridge, TN. 1999

AWARDS and
SCHOLARSHIPS:

Canon Emerging Photographer Scholarship 2000, Santa Fe Workshops
Awarded to attend Katrin Eismann Master Photoshop Workshop.

Society of Photographic Educators Scholarship
Awarded to attend the Cincinnati: 2000 National Conference.