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PAREIDOLIA : A Photographic Exploration of Multistable Perception

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PAREIDOLIA

A Photographic Exploration of Multistable Perception

KALLIE PFEIFFER

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of Art & Art History at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

April 19, 2013

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PAREIDOLIA
A Photographic Exploration of Multistable Perception

KALLIE PFEIFFER

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ABSTRACT

"The whole is other than the sum of the parts."

-Kurt Koffka¹

I have always been fascinated by the potential to explore visual perception uninhibited by traditional perspectives. I believe there are multiple ways to interpret and perceive a single object in a work of art. I was driven to create a series of images that embrace ambiguity by changing the normal perspective by which we usually perceive a scene. By flipping, mirroring, and reflecting my traditional landscape and nude photographs, I strive to produce an experience of transformational surrealism. This allows the imagination to see what it wants to see by offering a scene that requires its viewer to discern it piece by piece.

Influenced by the psychological theories of Rorschach and the ideas of gestaltism, I explore perception. I photographed the New Mexico, Arkansas, and Texas landscape juxtaposed with the female nude and applied the idea of multistable perception to my pieces, so that the viewer may have an ambiguous visual experience and derive multiple interpretations. In addition to questioning perception as a whole, I am also interested in examining the interdependent relationship between humans and nature. I strive to separate the photographs of the natural landscape and the female body from labels that are usually associated with these subjects. I want a rock to be more than just a rock, a cave to be more than just a cave, the curve of a body to be more than just the curve of a body. I want to create a work of art in which the "whole is other than the sum of the parts" (Koffka).¹

¹ Tuck, Michael. "Gestalt Principles Applied in Design." 15 Apr. 2013.

INSPIRATION

This thesis took root during a trip I took in the beginning of January, 2012. My friends and I spent 10 days primitive-camping at the base of the Organ Mountains in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The range is composed of 32-million year-old, 9,000 foot-high jagged and rugged mountains. They “hold evidence of their attraction for humans in secluded caves, Indian rock art, abandoned mines, and crumbling ruins.” The Organs originated from a series of “violent magmatic eruptions, lava flows, structural warping and fracturing, and relentless erosion.” The result is a collection of beautiful and complex facades that envelop the enormous organic sculpture.²

My friends, who are avid rock climbers, chose this location mainly for its extreme variety in routes for rock climbing. On our first day of climbing, I was overwhelmed with the never-ending beauty of the landscape and quickly began taking hundreds of pictures. As I crawled in and out of the caves, I noticed and fell in love with the way in which ceilings of the enclosures mimicked the outline of the mountain range in the distance. I then quickly framed the photograph to capture this visual relationship.

Later, around the campfire, we reviewed my photographs from the day. We talked about how interesting it would be to present the image in a way that represented how the cliff ceiling mimicked the mountain range. I figured that I could show this by hanging the image in its original orientation, and then hang a mirrored copy directly above it. I was excited to explore this concept of flipping, and quickly began working with the photographs in Photoshop. I experimented with what would happen not only if the mirrored landscape

² “New Mexico’s Organ Mountains.” *Desert USA: Explore the Deserts of the World*. Digital West Media, Inc. 12 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.desertusa.com/mago6/dec/organmntns.html>>.

image was flipped and repositioned, but also with what it would look like to rotate the images. This process of rotating the photographs abstracted the images to the point where my eyes focused on the shapes created by the line of symmetry (fig. 1). These shapes, due to their symmetry, exhibit different human and animal characteristics, thus creating an anthropomorphic effect. This result led me to explore the perceptual experience as a whole.



Fig. 1. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Father Time*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. 36" x 48". Las Cruces, NM.³

³ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Father Time*. 2012. Las Cruces, New Mexico.

RELATED THEORIES OF VISUAL PERCEPTION

Pareidolia

The term pareidolia is used to classify the psychological phenomenon of perceiving a vague stimulus as significant, such as seeing an elephant in a cloud (fig. 2). This phenomenon is explained by the human ability and survival instinct to identify a face while perceiving a scene. This reaction causes humans to be able to interpret certain patterns of light and shadow anthropomorphically. Anthropomorphism is the action of applying human characteristics to non-human subjects (fig. 3). Pareidolia is associated with multistable perception in that the phenomenon contains several different variations that can be depicted.⁴

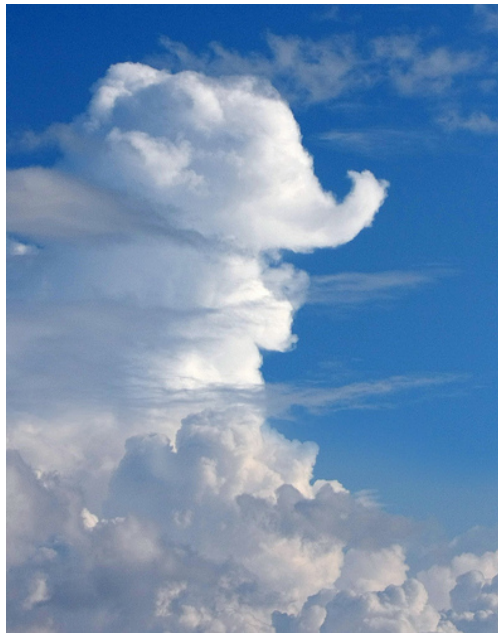


Fig. 2. Babyruthinmd. *Elephant cloud*. 2010.⁵

⁴ "Pareidolia." *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. 30 Apr. 2012. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pareidolia>>.

⁵ Babyruthinmind. *Elephant cloud*. c. 2010. *Flickr*. 10 Apr. 2013.



Fig. 3. "Particles and Psychedelia." *Untitled*. 2012.⁶

Multistable Perception

Multistable perception is sparked by ambiguous visual patterns that the visual system in the human brain has difficulty recognizing under one specific interpretation.⁷ The process of the visual system switching between one perception and another is called a perceptual reversal. I am interested in creating images that provoke a wide range of perceptual reversals in observers of my photographs. Perceptual reversals range through a variance of stimuli in the image viewed. This variance of stimulation can be caused by a contrast in lines, colors, symmetry, or positive and negative space.

⁶ "Particles and Psychedelia." *Untitled*. c. 2012. *Tumblr*. 10 Apr. 2013
<<http://particlesandpsychedelia.tumblr.com/>>.

⁷ Eagleman, David M. "Visual Illusions and Neurobiology." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 2 (2001): 920-26. Web. 16 Apr. 2012.

A successful perceptual reversal that switches between two perceptions can be seen in W. E. Hill's *My Wife and Mother-In-Law* (fig. 4). A viewer can see both the wife and the mother-in-law by altering what lines they use to register the image. For example, if you see the wife first, but not the mother-in-law, reconfigure your perception by switching the wife's chin into the mother-in-law's nose.



Fig. 4. Hill, W. E. *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*. 1915.⁸

Through the mirroring and reflecting of my landscapes, the stimuli necessary for perceptual reversals is present as it creates symmetrical shapes. These symmetrical shapes allow the viewer to observe anthropomorphic subjects. With the presence of both positive and negative spaces, the eye is able to register alternative perspectives that serve as

⁸ Hill, W. E. *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*. c. 1915. *Wolfram MathWorld*. 15 Dec. 2012.

successful perceptual reversals.⁹ An example of activating positive and negative spaces in order to create a perceptual reversal can be seen in my piece *The Womb of the Polar Bear* (fig. 5). When I have exhibited this piece, viewers have told me that they can see frogs, polar bears, bob cats, and reproductive organs.

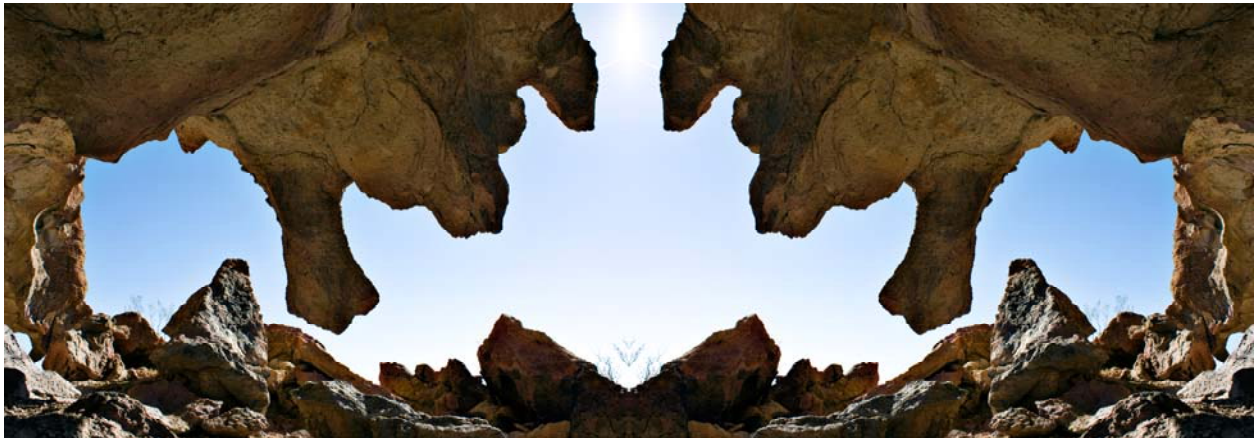


Fig. 5. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *The Womb of the Polar Bear*. 2012.¹⁰

Rorschach Inkblot Test

I am not only interested in creating images full of perceptual reversals, but also in creating images that challenge viewers to examine their own viewing experiences. What anthropomorphic subject do they register first? What does this say about how they perceive not only art, but everyday situations? In a way, I am conducting my own version of a Rorschach test.

The Rorschach inkblot test was designed to determine the personality characteristics and emotional functioning of an individual. The test was conducted by a tester presenting the subject with a series of bilateral-symmetrical ink blots on white cards. The tester would

⁹ "Perceptual Ambiguity." *Illusion Works*, L.L.C. 1997. Web. 21 Apr. 2012.

¹⁰ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *The Womb of the Polar Bear*. 2012. Las Cruces, New Mexico.

show the subject one of the ink blots and ask for her first impression of what the ink blot represented (fig. 6). The purpose of the Rorschach test is to bring to the surface information about the subject's personal and interpersonal connections, personality, cognition, and motivations. I am driven to create images that create a personal affect within the viewer.¹¹

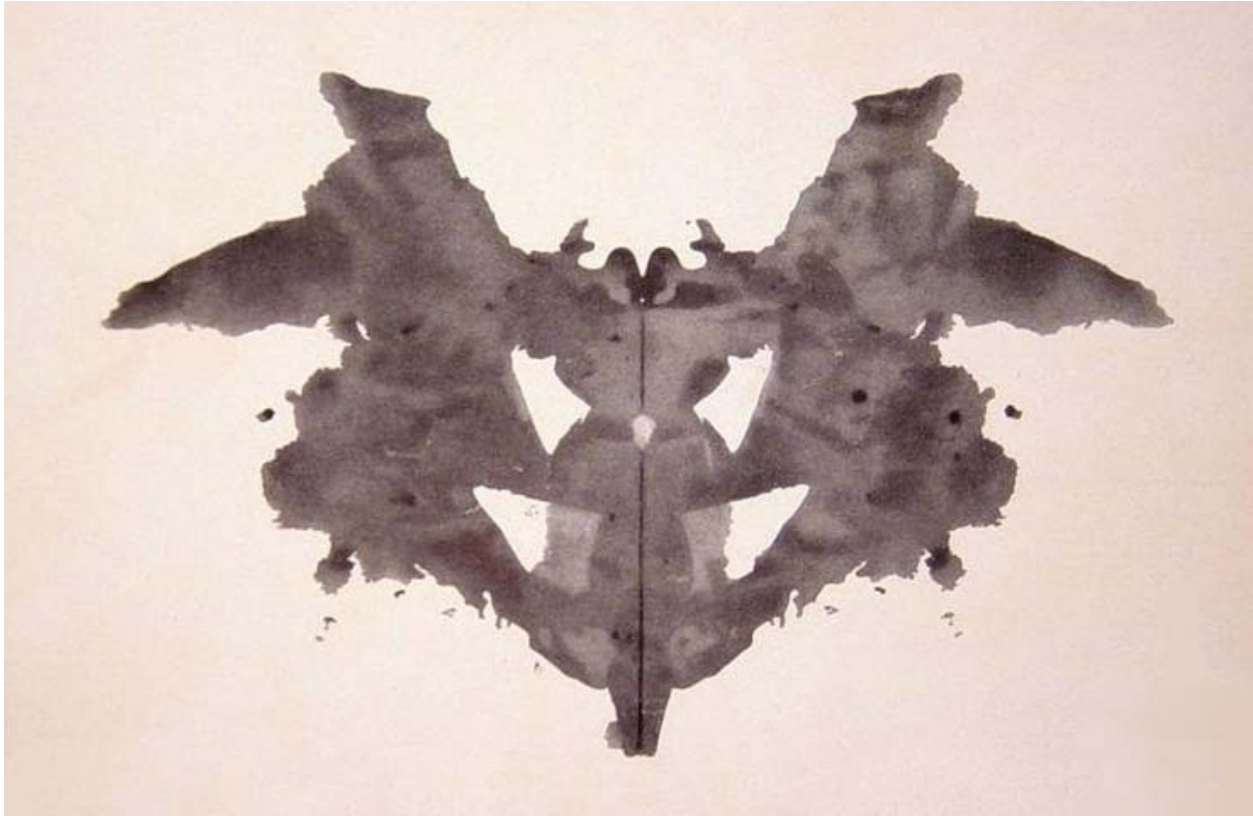


Fig. 6. Oink El Rellano. *The First 10 Cards In The Rorschach Inkblot Test.*¹²

Constance Lowe

Contemporary artist Constance Lowe investigates the Rorschach inkblot test through her drawings, paintings, and felt works. In an article by Jasmina Wellinghoff of *San Antonio*

¹¹ Weiner, Irving B. (2003). *Principles of Rorschach interpretation*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

¹² "The First 10 Cards In The Rorschach Inkblot Test." *Oink El Rellano*. 11 Apr. 2013. <http://oink.elrellano.com/desastre/rorschach_inkblot_test.html>.

Woman magazine Lowe’s artwork is described as “images (that) consist of a single, complex but symmetrical shape that is vaguely biomorphic and evocative of familiar natural elements without being anything that you can actually name (fig. 7). Amplifying the impression of both something natural and something decorated by the human hand are the tight and vibrant color patterns that fill the entire shape, itself positioned against a white or other monochromatic background.”¹³



Fig. 7. Lowe, Constance. *Blowing Incandescent*. 2010. Oil on Panel.¹⁴

Lowe explains how “the human brain is accustomed to try to identify what it sees,” but she doesn’t like the viewer to play the “guessing game.” In contrast to Lowe’s desire to keep ambiguity the focus in her pieces, I enjoy watching viewer’s play the “guessing game”

¹³ Wellinghoff, Jasmina. “Artist, Scholar, Curator.” *San Antonio Woman*. Apr. 2011. *San Antonio Woman Web*. 11 Apr. 2013.

¹⁴ Lowe, Constance. *Blowing Incandescent*. c. 2010. *Constance Lowe*. 15 Dec. 2012.

in my pieces. I am interested in viewers gathering visual conclusions based upon inspirations within their interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.¹³

Lowe also describes how her artwork can spark imagination. She says that “this imaginative space between abstraction and representation, the psyche and the external world, drawing and object, makes visible a condition in which clear identification or categorization is evaded, making room for something else entirely to occur and take on its own life.” Within my own work, I am interested in also applying this device of providing the viewer freedom to perceive unique interpretations.¹³

Bruce Conner

Bruce Conner is an American artist renowned for creating pieces in various media that evoke multiple meanings (fig. 8). In an article for online magazine *Art Practical*, Jarrett Earnest reviews Conner’s work:

There is something mechanical about Bruce Conner’s inkblot drawings. I believe it to be their fearful symmetry which, bolt upright or around the page, feels unnatural. What should be the most organic and fluid of all marks - the free flowing curve of ink on paper - becomes replicated across a fold, creating a precise crystalline spine... The creases forming the central column of each of these totems are barely visible but ever palpable, diverting the viewer from relating to the drawing as an image, but instead as the document of a process, the memory of an action, the irrefutable record that this now flat plane was once a dimensional object; in short, as remains of something transformed, in the manner a wrinkled face testifies to a life lived.

They are also, of course, sly plays on the Rorschach test, for which the movie psychoanalyst turns to face the audience and asks “tell me what you see,” hoping to reveal in the cloudy response to these non-objective smudges projected fears, fantasies, and neurosis... And like the ordered remembrances of those inkblot conservatories, the assemblages reminds us that our histories and experiences, like our lives and relationships, need to be tended and honored, that there is nothing more tender, fleeting, meaningful, or momentous.¹⁵



Fig. 8. Conner, Bruce. *Totem Time in Dream Land*. 1975.¹⁶

¹⁵ Earnest, Jarrett. “Bruce Conner: Discovered.” *Art Practical*. 14 Apr. 2013.
<http://www.artpractical.com/shotgun_review_past/bruce_conner_discovered/>.

¹⁶ Conner, Bruce. *Totem Time in Dream Land*. c. 1975. 50 Watts. 16 Dec. 2012.

Ed Ruscha

Ed Ruscha, a contemporary American Pop-art artist, creates pieces that also reference the Rorschach Inkblot test in the way that they are mirror reflections of both imagery and words. Ruscha has always been interested in words, and he chose to incorporate and celebrate the palindrome into his artwork because of how it “plays on words.” The ones he chooses are both “suggestive and thought-provoking,” such as *Sex at Noon Taxes*, *Solo Gigolos*, and *Tulsa Slut* (fig. 9). Within each of his titles and pieces, a level of irony exists between things that imply “pleasure” and things that imply “dread.” In contrast to Lowe’s art, which encourages ambiguity, Ruscha’s work contains a lot of “auto-suggestions” that direct the viewers in what they see.¹⁷



Fig. 9. Ruscha, Ed. *Sex at Noon Taxes*. 2002. Acrylic on Canvas.¹⁸

¹⁷ “Ed Ruscha, *Sex at Noon Taxes*, 2002: Lot 115.” *Live Auctioneers*. 14 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/8109422>>.

¹⁸ Ruscha, Ed. *Sex at Noon Taxes*. c. 2002. *Live Auctioneers*. 15 Dec. 2012.

Ruscha's imagery in this series is mostly composed of mountains, using them "more as an investigative backdrop for his words rather than a specific geographical reference." This process "allows our reading of his work to be open for interpretation although the words and image do hint in a certain direction." Similar to my own work, Ruscha's mirroring of mountains and words provides the viewer with "multiple possible meanings" to be interpreted. Ruscha states that "art has to be something that makes you scratch your head." Taking this advice, it is important that my subjects contain a level of mystery free from traditional labels. For example, in *Siddhartha* I aimed to frame my model's legs in a way that the eye cannot connect them to a human being (fig. 10).¹⁷



Fig. 10. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Siddhartha*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.¹⁹

¹⁹ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Siddhartha*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

PATTERNS AND REPETITION

Gerhard Richter

German artist Gerhard Richter is an expert in both patterns and repetition. Richter's innovative technique consists of taking one of his abstract paintings (fig. 11) and dividing it “vertically into strips: first 2, then 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1,024, 2,048, up to 4,096 strips. This process, involving twelve stages of division, results in 8,190 strips, each of which is reproduced here at the height of the original image. Each strip is then mirrored and repeated, producing an incredibly detailed patterning.”²⁰



Fig. 11. Richter, Gerhard. *Strip*, CR: 7244. 2012.²¹

I began to employ this concept of mirroring my images more than once in Fall of 2012. By mirroring my images only once, the area of focus centers on the middle, where the line of

²⁰ “Gerhard Richter: Patterns.” *Art Book*. 14 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.artbook.com/9781935202981.html>>.

²¹ Richter, Gerhard. *Strip*, CR: 7244. c. 2012. *Slow Muse*. 16 Dec. 2012.

symmetry exists. When I mirror and repeat my images multiple times, the focus becomes more abstracted due to the multiple lines of symmetry both vertically and horizontally, thus allowing the eye to peruse the piece (fig. 12). In addition to changing the area of focus on the piece, the multiple mirroring technique also draws attention to the shapes and colors of the repeated piece. This element makes the piece increasingly kaleidoscopic, which also allows viewers to decipher multiple and unique meanings.



Fig. 12. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Aspen*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.²²

²² Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Aspen*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCALE

Throughout this process of experimenting with repeating images multiple times, I also began to explore the possibility of juxtaposing a larger scale image with a smaller scale repeated image. This technique would allow me to combine what I enjoyed about the larger scale, single-mirrored piece along with what I enjoyed about the smaller scale, multiple-mirrored piece. During this investigation, I researched artists such as Takashi Murakami to gain inspiration on how to exercise this concept.

Takashi Murakami

Takashi Murakami is not only an artist, but also a “curator, entrepreneur, and a student of contemporary Japanese society.” His conceptual work comments on “a movement toward mass-produced entertainment and its effects on contemporary aesthetics.” His pieces also merge “popular contemporary Japanese cartoons and historic Japanese painting.”²³ These concepts create pieces that jump out at the viewer, like in Murakami’s *Flower ball* (fig. 13).

In this piece, Murakami places the same image of cartoon flowers side by side on the wall, only at two different scales. In addition to shifting the scale, Murakami also skews the perspective of the flowers. By doing this, he creates an optical illusion that makes the larger scale image appear to be three-dimensional, while in fact it is only two-dimensional. In this way, the scale of my work, in addition to the number of their repetitions, is an important factor I considered while creating my pieces (fig. 14).

²³ “Takashi Murakami.” *Hypocrite Design*. 14 Apr. 2013.
<<http://www.hypocritedesign.com/project/takashi-murakami/>>.



Fig. 13. Murakami, Takashi. *Flower ball (3D)*. 2002. Acrylic on canvas mounted on board.²⁴



Fig. 14. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Untitled 1*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.²⁵

²⁴ Murakami, Takashi. *Flower ball (3D)*. 2002. Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris and Miami. *Private Collection*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

SURREALISM

My work explores pareidolia and multistable perception through manipulation of the New Mexico, Arkansas, and Texas landscapes. I accomplish this by flipping, mirroring, and reflecting my traditional landscape photographs to create an experience of transformational Surrealism. The Surrealist movement “originated in France in the 1920s and, as its main theorist André Breton explained, its aim was to ‘resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality.’”²⁶ In this way, I have worked to also include the role of dreamscapes into my imagery. This is important because dreams liberate the dreamer, allowing complete freedom of perception and the avoidance of labels.

Jerry Uelsmann

I am very inspired and influenced by Jerry Uelsmann, a photographer whose work embodies the world of dreams. His photographs usually include humans combined with nature (fig. 15). His photograph, titled *Sleeping Woman Under Tree*, features a woman asleep in the grass, with a perfectly symmetrical tree behind her. Symmetry seems to be the focus in this artist’s piece, as even the shadows draped across the woman’s face appear exactly symmetrical. The viewpoint is intimate, creating a very personal and close connection with the subject. The expression of the subject also suggests that she is dreaming of the tree.

²⁵ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Untitled 1*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

²⁶ “Surrealism Explained.” *Phaidon Club*. 15 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.phaidon.com/the-art-book/picture-galleries/2012/september/24/surrealism-explained/?idx=5>>.



Fig. 15. Uelsmann, Jerry. *Sleeping Woman Under Tree*. 1965. Gelatin Silver Print.²⁷

Uelsmann writes, “The camera is essentially a license to explore.” Uelsmann is famous for his unique process of “seamlessly fabricating photographs from unrelated negatives to create imaginary scenes.”²⁸ I am influenced by his tendency to create these dreamlike scenes free from realism. Uelsmann’s work encouraged me to explore post-camera artistry to push my photographs to the next level.

He says, “I’m a huge believer in post-visualization which is about the willingness of the photographer to re-visualize the final image at any point in the photographic process.”²⁹ I am aiming, like Uelsmann, to be more like a painter than a photographer. I want to create art that gives viewers the ability to see something new each time they look at it.

²⁷ Uelsmann, Jerry. “Biography.” *Jerry Uelsmann*. 12 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.uelsmann.net/about.php>>.

²⁸ “The Mind’s Eye: 50 Years of Photography by Jerry Uelsmann.” *Peabody Essex Museum*. 12 Oct. 2012. <http://www.pem.org/exhibitions/140-the_minds_eye_50_years_of_photography_by_jerry_uelsmann>.

²⁹ “Between Worlds: Jerry Uelsmann.” *Faded and Blurred*. 12 Oct. 2012. <<http://fadedandblurred.com/spotlight/jerry-uelsmann/>>.

ABSTRACT LANDSCAPES

I have always had a strong affinity with nature and the landscape. During the summer between my junior and senior year in high school, my family and I vacationed in scenic Buena Vista, Colorado. Feeling adventurous, my Dad and I decided to attempt one of their collegiate peaks, Mount Yale, which reigns at an impressive 14,196 feet. In the early morning, we started the steep, seven-mile ascent to the peak with my camera in tow. Once we passed the tree line, where the oxygen was too thin for trees to properly grow, the journey morphed from an enjoyable hike to a treacherous climb. Our steps became more difficult as the elevation increased, causing us to take breaks between ten-step intervals. At every break, I pulled out my camera to capture not only the breathtaking scenery we were surrounded by, but also the rugged path, the serrated edges of terrain, and the palpable odyssey we were experiencing.

Once we completed the hike to the false summit, we proceeded on hands and feet, traversing over large boulders to finally reach the peak of the mountain. The transcendent feeling of standing in the breath of the captivating earth drew me to tears.

It's incomparable, feeling so small in the presence of something that is so large, yet equally seeming so large because of the perspective created by elevation. I remember specifically how interesting it was to see the tops of clouds instead of their bottoms, and how massive their shadows were. This gave me an appreciation for experiencing new perspectives. I am drawn to abstract the landscape in order to challenge the way I see them and to focus on aspects of the landscape that I am shielded from by traditional viewing.

Georgia O’Keeffe

The 20th-century American abstract painter Georgia O’Keeffe struggled to find a direction for her art until she abandoned realism and embraced the “elements of color and line” and her own “inclinations rather than emulating nature.”³⁰ This freedom of expression allowed O’Keeffe to produce large abstractions of flowers, landscapes, and bones. By zooming in and cropping her subjects, O’Keeffe gives the viewer a unique visual experience. This process also allows the viewer to see the subject separate from the labels normally associated with the object. Instead of associating the petals of flowers with petals, the brain can associate the petals of flowers with ripples of water. Basically, determining the subject is not the focus while observing her pieces. Rather, the focus is directed towards observing the shapes and smooth gradation of colors.

Like O’Keeffe, I strive to emphasize these visual elements rather than the recognizable landscape in my work. I am also intrigued by O’Keeffe’s use of color. She often uses a Southwestern color palette that entices the eyes with bold oranges and unforgettable blues. Besides the aesthetic value of using these colors, I enjoy the emotions that are conjured by her manipulation of them. This subconscious production of feelings is also something I wish to incorporate into my work. Ultimately, ambiguity removes all of the visual context from a photograph so that only admiration for the texture, lines, colors, and pattern remains.

In O’Keeffe’s painting, titled *Series I, No. 8*, bright pinks and vivid turquoises contrast with each other to form a unique composition filled with lines and shapes that allude to

³⁰ Parker, Charlie. “Georgia O’Keeffe.” *Lines and Colors*. Ed. Charlie Parker. 27 Aug. 2009. 12 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.linesandcolors.com/2009/08/27/georgia-okeeffe/>>.

hearts, shells, caverns, nautical plants, and more (fig. 16). I am drawn to emulate this quality in my own work. I want to create art that references the origin of its subject, but also allows itself to become something separate and different from its source.



Fig. 16. O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Series I, No. 8*. 1919. Oil on Canvas.³¹

³¹ O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Series I, No. 8*. c. 1919. *Art Tattler International*. 16 Dec. 2012.

NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIP

The human-nature relationship is a theme I wish to celebrate in my photographs. By observing nature, one may learn about life and growth, death and destruction, change and metamorphosis. I believe that humans and nature are not separate, but that we are a part of nature.

Photographing nudes became a passion of mine my freshman year of college. In a collaborative project with fellow artist Taylor Dolan, we created work that portrayed the physical reactions of emotional fear. Using our friends as models, we photographed approximately 25 men and women. Our technique was to first sit down with each model to discuss their greatest fear and the source of that fear. We would then decide upon an image that would accurately represent that fear. Next, Dolan and I chose a place on the model's body that would successfully respond to the fear, both conceptually and aesthetically. After instructing the model to take the desired pose, we would divide a roll of black and white film between us.

This experience demanded that the models confront their fears while posing nude, exposing their vulnerability and thus creating a cathartic affect. In turn, both Dolan and I photographed each other, as we promised the models that we would not have them do anything that we would not do ourselves. This allowed us to be able to connect more to the models during the shoot and to our concept as a whole.

My sophomore year, I began to play with the idea of photographing nudes in nature. I believed that it was the most natural way to shoot the essence of a person juxtaposed with the essence of nature. I decided to focus upon the masculine aspects of humans and nature

in contrast to the feminine aspects of human and nature. Through this gender emphasis, I associated masculinity with the strong and rough parts of nature and femininity with the graceful and gentle parts of nature. Shooting a couple of my best friends in the backyard of my parent's home in Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas, I was able to marry the vulnerability of the nude with the fragility of nature.

Arno Rafael Minkkinen

I am also interested in the work of Arno Rafael Minkkinen because of his focus on integrating humans with nature. For Minkkinen, “nudity is akin to spirituality.” Most of his photographs are self-portraits; he contorts his body into different poses that morph his body into being part of the landscape. “There is no age,” he says, “to the picture when it is just the landscape and the body.” There is something so unnatural about clothing when posing a model in nature. By subtracting the clothing from the equation, the nude is integrated with nature.³²

Minkkinen's work influenced me to focus on the contrasts between positive and negative space, lines, and textures. The extreme foreshortening of his unique poses makes his body appear manipulated, fake, or inhuman. He takes his body and makes it part of nature. I wish to celebrate the interdependent relationship between humans and nature. Humans are not separate from or superior to nature, rather we are a beneficiary of it.³²

In one of Minkkinen's recent pieces, *Maroon Bells Rise*, he blends himself into the Colorado landscape by turning his embracing arms into the mountains (fig. 17). In the

³² Adams, William Lee. “The Body Beautiful: Arno Rafael Minkkinen's Self-Portraits.” *Follow LightBox*. 5 Dec. 2011. 13 Oct. 2012. <<http://lightbox.time.com/2011/12/05/the-body-beautiful-arno-rafael-minkkinens-self-portraits/#1>>.

foreground, he hides his face behind a large rock, planted within a body of water. His arms are pulled back, hands shaped as if he is supporting himself against the mountains in the background. This sense of support along with integrating himself into nature, highlights themes that I am interested in exploring.



Fig. 17. Minkkinen, Arno Rafael. *Maroon Bells Rise, Colorado*. 2012. Silver Gelatin Print.³³

Ana Mendieta

Photographer Ana Mendieta also focuses upon the human-nature relationship. Mendieta was “born in Cuba in 1948,” but was “exiled to the United States as a child” for her outspoken politics. She died tragically after a fight with her lover, artist Carl Andre, where she “fell to her death form the thirty-fourth floor window” in 1985. Like Minkkinen, she used her “own body as an instrumental part of her artistic practice.” She concentrates

³³ Minkkinen, Arno Rafael. *Maroon Bells Sunrise, Colorado*. c. 2012. *The Athens House of Photography*. 16 Dec. 2012.

on several different themes that I am also interested in: “femininity, fertility, death, and rebirth.” The pieces that most intrigue me are her *Siluetas* that incorporate “her body into the landscape by covering herself with mud or flowers and grass, making a raised impression against a tree or in a field... the effect is an overwhelming sense of intimacy: with the land, with the viewer, with her own body” (fig. 18). This use of painting the land on the body is a technique I have recently explored. I have discovered that this eliminates the textural contrast between skin and earth and blends them both together.³⁴



Fig. 18. Mendieta, Ana. *Tree of Life*. 1976.³⁵

³⁴ Heuer, Megan. “Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance.” *The Brooklyn Rail*. 15 Dec. 2012.

³⁵ Mendieta, Ana. *Tree of Life*. c. 1976. *Fern and Moss*. 16 Dec. 2012.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this body of work, I have explored perception and the relationship between humans and nature through photographic imagery. My work aims to transform traditional subjects of the nude and landscape through the use of mirroring and repetition while challenging the viewer's experience of perceiving. Examining how people interpret my art and other pieces of art is important because the act of viewing is so prevalent in our daily activities. Evaluating what aspects of an image the viewer first recognizes can help determine a lot about the viewer's past experiences. This process leads to an inward reflection by the viewer as well as a better connection between viewers. Ultimately, this series works to gain a better understanding of ourselves and others, as well as understanding our relationship with nature as being a part of nature.

RECENT WORK



Fig. 19. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Concha*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Las Cruces, New Mexico.³⁶



Fig. 20. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Screech Owl*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Las Cruces, New Mexico.³⁷

³⁶ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Concha*. 2012. Las Cruces, New Mexico.



Fig. 21. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Totem*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Las Cruces, New Mexico.³⁸

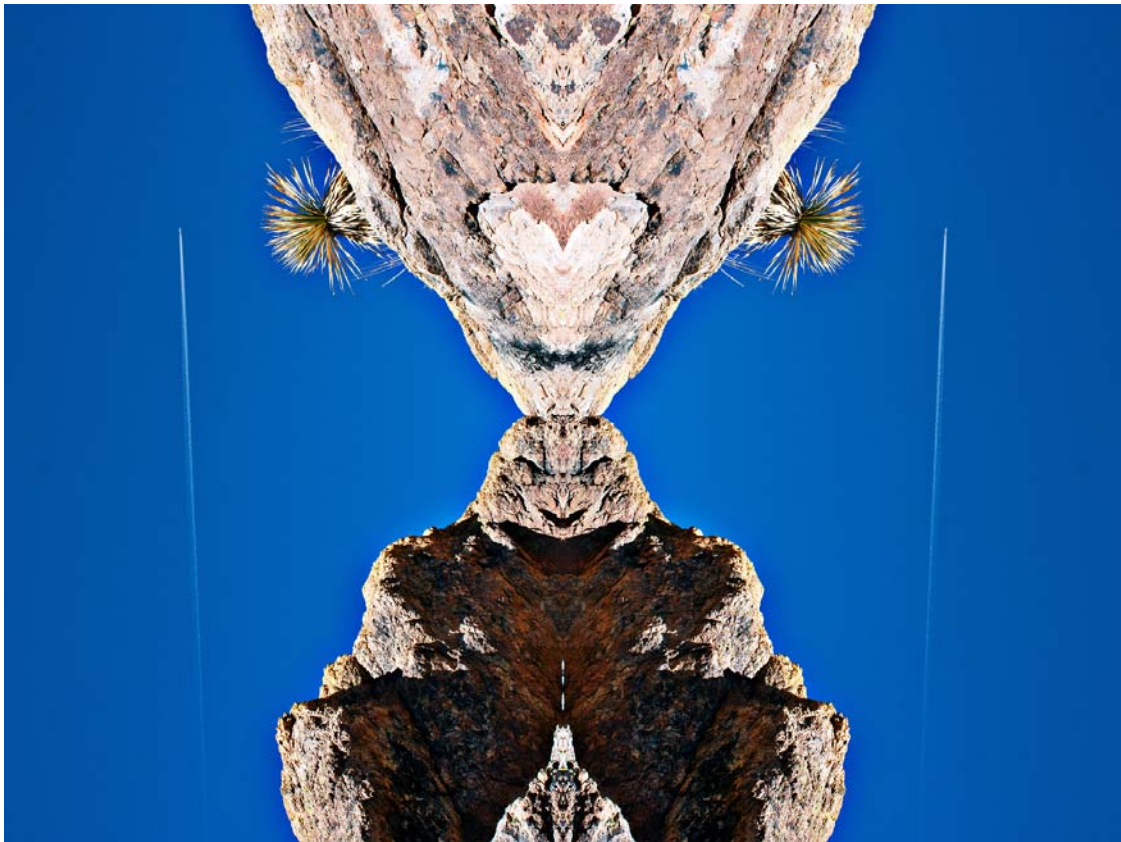


Fig. 22. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Buddha*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Las Cruces, New Mexico.³⁹

³⁷ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Screech Owl*. 2012. Las Cruces, New Mexico.

³⁸ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Totem*. 2012. Las Cruces, New Mexico.



Fig. 23. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Pumba*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Jasper, Arkansas.⁴⁰



Fig. 24. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Wing Tree*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Buffalo National River, Arkansas.⁴¹

³⁹ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Buddha*. 2012. Las Cruces, New Mexico.

⁴⁰ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Pumba*. 2012. Jasper, Arkansas.

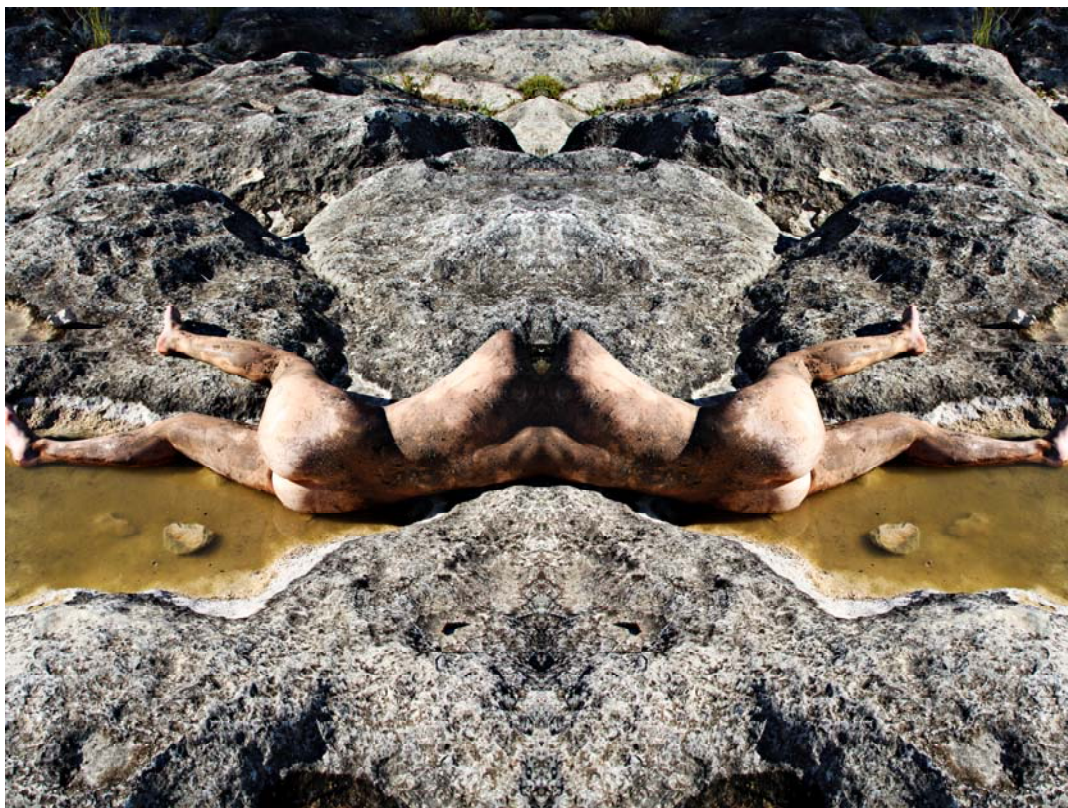


Fig. 25. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Aragog*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.⁴²



Fig. 26. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Frog Princess*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Kingsbury, Texas.⁴³

⁴¹ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Wing Tree*. 2012. Buffalo National River, Arkansas.

⁴² Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Aragog*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

⁴³ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Frog Princess*. 2012. Kingsbury, Texas.



Fig. 27. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Chiroptera*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.⁴⁴

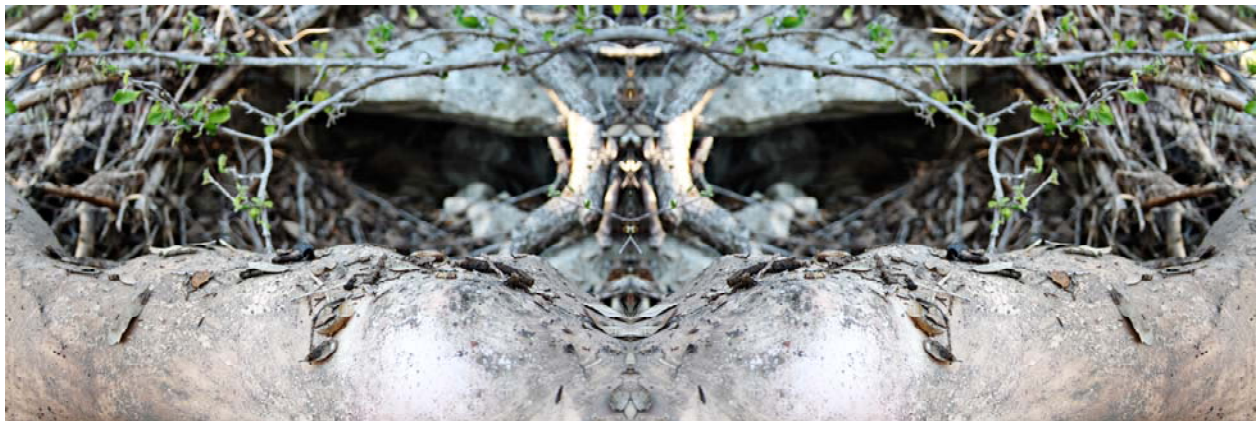


Fig. 28. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Troll*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Chiroptera*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

⁴⁵ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Troll*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.



Fig. 29. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Dragonfly*. 2013. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.⁴⁶



Fig. 30. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Sphinx*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Dragonfly*. 2013. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

⁴⁷ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Sphinx*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.



Fig. 31. Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Chevron Bodies*. 2012. Digital Photograph, Archival Pigment Print. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Pfeiffer, Kallie. *Chevron Bodies*. 2012. Fair Oaks Ranch, Texas.

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