

Washington University in St. Louis  
**Washington University Open Scholarship**

---

Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers

College of Art

---

Summer 5-19-2017

# Encounter: Alone in the Woods

Max Zagor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Zagor, Max, "Encounter: Alone in the Woods" (2017). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 33.  
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/33>

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

# Encounter: Alone in the Woods

Max Zagor

May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
BFA Photography  
Washington University in St. Louis

Abstract:

*Encounter* aims to take the viewer into the darkest parts of the mind through my own journey into the woods. With the images, my work attempts to capture a pure level of the fear that I felt as I ventured into the woods, alone, at night to experience the emotions I wanted to show.

Similarly, *Encounter* deals with why we see what we see; as in, why do we think we see Bigfoot in the shadows? Where does that idea come from? Through my research, I work to prove that our culture has implanted the imagery and thoughts of monsters into our minds, despite better judgment. So when one is alone and scared, logic falls by the wayside, and our nightmares become a reality.

Max Zagor  
Capstone II  
Lisa Bulawsky and Michael Byron  
5/5/17

*Encounter: Alone in the Woods*

Seeing something that we do not understand can be vastly confusing for the mind. We jump to conclusions quickly, and cannot help but bring in previous cultural references that might have come our way in the past. Our minds go to horror stories and myths that under normal circumstances would never enter our train of thought. But when we are alone with our thoughts in darkness, in an unfamiliar place, and see something we do not recognize, the worst thoughts crowd our heads until shadows of nothing turn into the presence of danger. With the photographs, *Encounter* deals with how we interpret things we do not understand when we see them, and how our mind creates visuals where there are none to be found; more specifically, the images deal with fear in a direct way. I am exploring this through the modern day culture that surrounds us that produces these underlying thoughts that rise to the top when we are afraid. And as well, through the way in which the human psyche naturally responds to these aforementioned scenarios.

What do we see out of the corner of our eyes at night? What do we think about when we're afraid? These are two of the questions that I asked myself when initially crafting this thesis project. However, the concept was based in an encounter I had when I was younger in the forest with an unknown creature. While traversing a dense forest covered in the darkness of silhouettes with my father looking for a fishing spot, we both saw, for just a moment, a creature, shrouded in black, standing over seven feet tall with hands to its knees and entirely covered in hair, cross the road before us. Both of us, at a loss for words, quickly attempted to get a closer look at the beast, but it was gone as fast as it had appeared. I still do not know what it was that we saw that day,

but looking at it retrospectively, I am able to see it in a larger sense than simply as the experience as it occurred. It represents how the mind reacts in an instant to the unknown under duress in the dark. As George Devereux, a well-known 20<sup>th</sup> Century psychoanalyst states, “man is a primarily diurnal animal, [so] it is self-evident that the necessity to perform various activities in the dark imposes a considerable strain upon man, especially since the primacy of vision over the other senses is particularly conspicuous in the human species” (Devereux 83). As a species, humans are highly reliant on their vision to understand the world around them. While our ears, sense of touch, smell, and taste can easily oscillate between truth and falsity (and we are quite willing to forgive those), our eyes are the sense that humans trust the most and give the most weight of importance to. Devereux similarly outlines that “the imputation of meaning to the social and cultural environment is... a basic expression of the tendency of the human mind to alleviate the panic engendered by the unresponsiveness of matter” (Boyer xviii). When we see something, we generally believe it, even if we know it to be quite in the contrary to our sense of reason. And we input some sense of meaning and stability into the unknown to better understand it.

In current culture, the idea of myths such as Bigfoot pervades into the minds even of those who think they know them not to be true. There are entire communities devoted to creatures that may or may exist. Christopher Bader describes in his book, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture*, that there are commonly understood descriptions of creatures like Bigfoot, when the likelihood of it existing is quite low (Bader 190). Whether or not one believes in Bigfoot, the idea of its potential existence is well known and well established. Bader interviewed a man named Datus Perry who specifically outlines the physical characteristics of a Bigfoot. He claims that it “[stands] at least seven feet tall and [is] in the shape of a large man, [with] a sharply triangular

head” (190). It is known with certainty even by the most skeptical that there are people in this world who genuinely believe that ghosts and UFOs and Bigfoots are out there and that people are encountering them every day. And it is with this, that under specific circumstances, there can be just enough doubt to give the mind a chance to fill in the blank.

One widely accepted example of myths making their way into every day life is through sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is described as being a “transient and generalized inability to move and speak that occurs during the transitional period between sleep and wakefulness” (Oyahon 1194). These episodes are commonly accompanied with vivid hallucinations of demons or monsters that hover over the individual while said individual cannot move or react, and must simply wait. Demons and monsters and witches are therefore so ingrained in the minds of people that humans see them in their moments of the most extreme terror. They go beyond cultural phenomenon, and are now fully implanted as a natural nightmare.

A lot of the feelings of fear and anxiety associated with sleep paralysis come from the conditions the individual is in. As reported in a study conducted in 1999 at the University of Toronto, “increased airflow resistance because of hypotonia of the upper airway muscles and constriction of the airways can result in feelings of choking and suffocation leading to panic and strenuous efforts to overcome the paralysis” (Cheyne 332). The onset of the aforementioned sleep paralysis conditions is strongly correlated to the hallucinations that follow it due to the individual’s inability to control their situation. Similarly, the hallucinations associated with sleep paralysis, as found in the same study, are part of an interaction in the brain where a sense of unfamiliarity arises, even in a familiar place, such as one’s room. In technical terms,

“The interactions between the amygdaloid complex and the anterior cingulate are responsible for the “feeling of knowing” and familiarity.... [The] implications of disruption of such feelings of knowing, when cognitions no longer give rise to “gut

feelings”... [are] consistent with arguments presented here regarding the role of a “sensed presence,” that positive hallucinations reflect just the opposite sort of problem and that disconnected feelings of knowing precede and stimulate percepts” (332-333).

When humans feel they are in a place or situation that they do not know, “gut feelings” kick in and take over once logical and reasonable thought – a lot of this is dictated by the fear involved in those scenarios. And when monsters of myth appear, it enforces the idea that the specific visions people see as a waking nightmare is a product of the culture society has produced over the entire existence of modern humans, to the point where demons and the like have supplanted themselves as our natural fear. We are scared of what we do not fully understand, and demons stand in for that.

Fear plays a sizeable part in how we interpret what we do not understand; it changes the way we see the way we interpret the world and our thoughts for a moment of intense terror. This has largely to do with a culturally ingrained fear of the dark, or nyctophobia (Devereux 83). In the same way that Freud states that dreams of fire create real fear, the darkness creates imaginary monsters but the fear is quite tangible (Boyer xiv). While making this project, I experienced genuine fear. My thesis aims to deal with the idea of fear head on; I took my camera out into the woods at night, alone, and photographed the things I felt and thought I saw along the way. The anxiety and distress was genuine – it was impossible for me not to be scared when I was alone in the woods, miles away from any other human or place of refuge.

The images are the result of multiple trips into different wooded areas around the surrounding St. Louis area. I would arrive at the location about an hour after sundown, and take a variety of images, both from my car and also outside while walking around between the trees. While taking the photographs, I was hyper-aware of small sounds and changes in lighting to a degree I would not have noticed on an average day. A leaf rustling in the breeze or a water drop

falling to the ground sounded like a gunshot to my mind. At one point while taking an image, I looked to my right to see two eyes staring back at me from fifteen feet away. My mind immediately jumped to something dangerous, like a wolf or a bear, but as it turns out, it was a



Figure 1: 12:42:09AM, MAR 7 2017, Max Zagor, digital print

the unknown (*fig. 1*). People fear what they do not understand, so underlining this ambiguity creates a sense of unease and an overall feeling of anxiety within the viewer. While staring at these images for long periods of time, searching in the shadows for the “subject” of the photograph, the mind will start to create *shapes and lines out of shapes and lines* that do not exist in the images in a technical sense. That, however, is the goal of these images. I want the darkness to guide the eye in a non-traditional compositional sense, where the aspects of a photograph that would normally equate to a more standard photograph are gone – the amount of darkness and lights in the photographs leave much of the frame covered in black. A standard photograph is sounder dynamically, whereas these do not attempt to fulfill that criteria. The images aim to leave a wide space for interpretation.

The editing and process of capturing of the images is precise and in contrast to technical photography in a traditional sense. The photos are shot at an ISO of over 10,000, which produces

raccoon cautiously watching me photograph the darkness.

The images themselves are dark, ambiguous, and easily are misinterpreted. It is within this ambiguity where I believe the form and composition of the images ties

most directly to the idea of fearing



an extreme amount of visual noise, nearly 20x more than an average daytime. The editing is equally as specific. Instead of attempting to create dynamic, well-balanced images in terms of highlights and shadows, the images as a whole are extremely dark and heavy on pure blacks (*fig. 2*). The shadows ride the line



Figure 2: 2:31:54AM, FEB 19 2017, Max Zagor, digital print

between showing detail and withholding it, which strongly plays into the concept behind the composition of the photographs. The ambiguity behind what one might see in the forest at night relies on those shadows in a compositional sense. If the images were too clear and too obvious in subject matter, they would fall out alignment with the feeling of the actual lived experience that is captured in the photographs. As a whole, the body of work is an invitation to the viewer to indulge in a deep and intense inspection of each part of the individual images, but aims to leave them with a diminished sense of space as they are engulfed in the expansive darkness that dominates the picture plane (*fig. 3*).

While working on this project, I was strongly influenced by a variety of different types of art coming from multiple and unique sources. In a more conventional photographic sense, I was looking at and taking note of the photographs of Joe Deal and Joel Sternfeld, specifically Deal's *West and West: Reimagining the Great Plains* and Sternfeld's *American Prospects*. Deal's images mainly work with the idea of how the landscape can be changed by human beings, and some of his images can be quite conceptually dark in that regard (*fig. 4*). Sternfeld's images are unique in that they take a generally absurd scene (for example an escaped elephant on a country

road), but they refocus the images to minor details in the scene, like the dirt or a leaf, which creates an overall eerie mood in the pictures (*fig. 5*). Additionally, the photos of Paul Caponigro, who shot black and white images of country landscapes, were work I incorporated into the aesthetic behind my images. His photographs highlight the occasionally fantastical nature of the forest and lean on the melancholic side (*fig. 6*).

I was also influenced by documentary style horror movies, including amateur horror



Figure 3: 1:08:56AM, MAR 30 2017, Max Zagor, digital print

movies. Films like *The Blair Witch Project* and video games like *Until Dawn* showcase a grainy documentary-style that I wanted my images to contain. That style of imagery is very much about what the audience does not get to see – it is all built up in anticipation of seeing

the monster. My images work with a similar concept, and work to make the viewer scared of what they cannot see, rather than overt horror. Similarly, I was looking at a lot of online “creepy” art, from sub forums on Reddit, mainly /r/creepy, which holds a large assortment of different styles of multi-media art made by people from across the globe. A lot of the work posted there was not overtly scary, but just creepy enough to put one on edge whilst looking at them (*fig. 7*).

After having worked on this project for a couple months, I have learned a great deal about how my own mind works in response to fear and darkness. It was impossible to know what kind of images I was going to initially capture for this project, because I had no idea what to

expect in regards to my emotions and heightened sense of anxiety and paranoia. For me, it all returns to the initial idea that sparked the project: my experience in the woods with my father over a decade ago. It was never about the reality of the experience, it was about what the experience provoked inside me. It was about how I felt, and the kind of places my mind found itself in. Regardless of what I saw, the feelings I experienced were real. When eyes deceive you, your mind has no choice but to follow suit. Through my images, I have aimed to investigate that idea and show that there can be much hidden inside the darkness of the forest.

*Figure 4: Joe Deal, untitled, n.d.*



*Figure 5: Joel Sternfeld, "Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, 1979, photographic print*



*Figure 6:* Paul Caponigro, untitled, n.d., photographic print



*Figure 7:* Bjarke Pedersen, “The Old God of the Northern Mountains, 2015, digital



## Bibliography

- BADER, CHRISTOPHER D. *PARANORMAL AMERICA: Ghost Encounters, Ufo Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities ... in Religion and Culture*. Place of Publication Not Identified: NEW YORK UP, 2017. Print.
- Cheyne, J.Allan, Steve D. Rueffer, and Ian R. Newby-Clark. "Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic Hallucinations during Sleep Paralysis: Neurological and Cultural Construction of the Night-Mare." *Consciousness and Cognition* 8.3 (1999): 319-37. Web.
- Devereux, George. "A Note on Nyctophobia and Peripheral Vision." *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 13.3 (1949): n. pag. Print.
- Grolnick, Simon A., ed. "George Devereux: In Memoriam." *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society*. Ed. L. Bryce Boyer. Vol. 12. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Analytic, 1988. Xi-Xxxix. Print.
- Ohayon, M. M., J. Zulley, C. Guilleminault, and S. Smirne. "Prevalence and Pathologic Associations of Sleep Paralysis in the General Population." *Neurology* 52.6 (1999): 1194. Web.