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The Thing You Are Looking For

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**Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art**

The Thing You Are Looking For

Jessie Shinn

**A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington
University in St. Louis, in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Fine Arts**

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Abstract

This thesis document explores the influences and content of visual artist Jessie Shinn's work, in particular the photography she has done as part of her Master of Fine Arts degree program at Washington University in St. Louis. Ideas discussed include phenomenology, phenomenophilia, affect, defamiliarization, the everyday, space, emptiness and boredom. Important artists and movements mentioned are Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner and Romanticism; Alfred Stieglitz and Modernism; and contemporary artists Hiroshi Sugimoto, Uta Barth and Wolfgang Tillmans. Writers and philosophers Samuel Coleridge, Rainer Maria Rilke, Rei Terada, Kathleen Stewart, David Markson, David Foster Wallace, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze are also discussed.

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Introduction (You see, I want a lot)ⁱ

Sometimes, categories and preconceptions break down, revealing the world as other. My work explores the emotive quality of these collapsed moments and the charge of things both hidden and revealed; my images exercise a kind of phenomenophilia, placing value on transient and ambiguous visual experiences that do not have fixed meaning.ⁱⁱ They investigate how light, darkness, reflection, color, line and shape create presence within the overlooked, ephemeral and ordinary.

The slipperiness of this subject matter requires me to be nimble in approach and process. While my most current body of work is photography, this practice has evolved from working with other visual media, especially painting. Using primarily wet media - watercolor, ink, liquid graphite and thin acrylics and oils - my painting emphasized transparency, ambiguity, and subtle value shifts. Often I alternated between additive and subtractive processes, creating layers by pouring paint and sanding it back off. Working with the camera provides me another way to lay down subtle color and shape. I am able to employ the same strategies of addition and subtraction by shooting through transparent material, like fabric or water, and by what I leave in and out of the frame. The resulting images border on abstraction and are often blurred by movement or low light. I approach photography from a painter's perspective, and in an intuitive and non-technical way. My camera is a basic digital point-and-shoot, and my processing is minimal.

Several interrelated themes come together in my work. Phenomenology is key, especially where it intersects the trajectories of Romanticism and Modernism. Related, is an emphasis on defamiliarization and the affect of the everyday. The transcendent ordinary is a rich area of investigation in philosophy and the arts, and has influenced the photographic impulse toward

abstraction, from Alfred Stieglitz to Wolfgang Tillmans. Also important to my practice are conceptions of space and emptiness as explored by 20th and 21st century artists such as Mark Rothko and Hiroshi Sugimoto, and by philosophers like Derrida and Deleuze. Finally, boredom is an important part of my creative process, and I believe plays a valuable role in creative thinking generally, as supported by thinkers like Theodor Adorno and David Foster Wallace.

Events or images that don't fit a conventional narrative frame may still have a resonance - not necessarily an *effect*, but an *affect*. They may touch, move, or infect; they may manifest a feeling, disposition or tendency. When the forms within images become ambiguous, they leave the safe world of named objects. This provides an opening, a passage into other ways of seeing and experiencing the world.



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Phenomenophilia and Romanticism (A stone, a star)^{iv}

My work is grounded in immediate, unmediated experience: phenomenology. Phenomenology, especially as defined by Merleau-Ponty, concerns the experience of humans as physical beings. Phenomenologists believe in an objective real world, but contend that our understanding of that world is always subjective, built on our biological structures of perception (our senses) and thought (neurology), and on our individual interactions with our surroundings.^v Phenomenology is a philosophy of continual beginnings, where the world emerges through each present moment.^{vi} It allows a way out of subject/object dualism, defining us as of the world, as well as in the world.^{vii}

One morning a friend and I were running along one of the dry washes that skirt the city of Tucson, Arizona. On the path ahead of us, we saw a flock of black birds on the ground feeding on scattered orange slices. The oranges were wet and juicy, glowing like jewels in the early morning light. My friend remarked on how odd it was that someone would throw out so much good fruit, and I agreed. As we got closer the birds flew, carrying the large orange slices in their beaks. A moment later we saw that there had never been any oranges. The faces of the yellow-headed blackbirds glistened a deep yellow-orange in the early morning light.

This perceived event was what Samuel Taylor Coleridge would have called spectra, an “idiosyncratic or illusory appearance” that was not only intriguing but moving. Visual confusion, tricks of light, mirage, the aura that can suddenly surround the ordinary: Coleridge detailed spectra, experiences like these, in his *Notebooks*. He was interested in light trails, afterimages of colors, double vision, double-take, reflections mistaken for objects, patterns that turn into images, and hallucinations.^{viii} In her book *Looking Away*, Rei Terada coins the term

“phenomenophile” for thinkers like Coleridge who linger on visual phenomena, choosing to suspend judgment about the realness of what they see.

“Phenomenophilia is looking away at the colored shadow on the wall, or keeping the head turned to the angle at which the sunspot stays in view... We can't believe ourselves entitled to this feeling about a perceptual object so ephemeral that we can't even imagine that someone else would see it as we do, or even see it at all... The phenomenophile's suspensions and imagined suspensions of fact perception imply critical insight, as though they were proto-assertions of something that could be coming to be and does not yet have the liabilities of anything that is.”^x

Terada ties the obsession of the phenomenophile to a feeling of guilty dissatisfaction with the real: the feeling that the world should be enough as given, and yet due to some shortcoming in oneself, isn't. The allure of the transient includes a pulling away from language, from the named. If something cannot be shared, either through language or through shared experience, then it resists cultural demands. Unlike the kind of credible aesthetic judgments espoused by Kant, spectral visions are not universally valid, but rather marginal and private. As a means of escape from the oppression of conventions, Terada's phenomenophilia is both pleasurable and delinquent. Besides Coleridge, Terada includes Kant, Nietzsche and Adorno among important modern guilty phenomenophiles.^x

My concept of phenomenophilia is somewhat different; I contend it does not necessarily have to follow from a guilt-ridden “looking away.” Being present, attentive and open, without either negative or positive judgment, can lead to rich perceptual experience of the world. While the moments themselves may be private, the experiences have universal resonance. The very indeterminacy of the event or appearance creates emotional depth, what philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to as “spectral density.”^{xi}

According to Derrida, “the spectre that is 'not nothing' saturates the interior of life.”^{xii} This both intimate and universal condensation of what is not nameable and yet not nothing, lies

at the crux of my work.^{xiii} One night after a rain, the asphalt of the parking lot glittered like a star field and the streetlight reflected in the puddles glowed with a golden light. Rather than trying to capture an exact reproduction of what I saw, I took photographs to recreate the sensation of the event and the quality of the moment. An image can slip past the associations carried even by poetic language, and provide a subtle translation.



Shinn 2013

It is no accident that a major Romantic poet like Coleridge is closely associated with phenomenophilia. The Romantic Movement emerged in response to a changing world, where personal meaning had been subordinated to science and Cartesian objectivity. Like the phenomenologist, the Romantic sought to close the separation between subject and object.^{xiv} Both Romanticism and phenomenophilia allow resistance to the dominant discourse of facts, cultivating mystery and transgression.

Caspar David Friedrich^{xv} and J.M.W.^{xvi} Turner, two of the most well-known Romantic painters, used compositional strategies and subject matter that emphasize ambiguity, transience and the unknown. Friedrich is known for employing multiple vantage points within a single



Wanderer Above Sea Fog Mist, Oil, 37" x 29" Friedrich 1818



Rain, Steam and Speed- The Great Western Railway, Oil, 36" x 48" Turner 1844

image to create a confusing sense of space.^{xvii} Both used atmosphere as an emotive device; mist, fog and the ocean are portrayed frequently in their paintings, and Turner also turned to steam and smog. His fascination with industrial scenes had as much to do with aesthetics as with social concerns; the paintings accentuate the opacity and translucence of steam, its range of colors, haze and indistinctness, and intense darks and lights.^{xviii}

Turner's 1844 *Rain, Steam and Speed* emphasized color, movement and the contrast

created by the dark body of the train. A passing train is an event. It fills its surroundings with noise and brings attention to the velocity of the present. In my “train” images I shift the moment of focus, moving away from the event's center to its edge. The nearly white image, with a headlight just coming through the fog, identifies the silence before the event. What is coming is still unknown, whether a car, a flashlight, a train, or the sun; it is a stranger entering the space.



Shinn 2013

The dark photograph of the curving rail also speaks to potential. The movement is in the empty lines rather than in the object or event, and the darkness creates a flattened perspective that

makes the location unclear. Here too the emphasis is on silence and before/after.

Phenomenophilia has roots in Romanticism, but it is a way of interacting with the world that carries through Modernism and Post-Modernism into contemporary thought. Written in the early 20th century, Rainer Maria Rilke's letters and poems reflect the transition to Modern ideas. Life was changing rapidly with continued industrialization and the advent of mass production, and artists and writers had to confront an even greater sense of alienation and discord. Rilke took moments of heightened perception and instability and drew out a sense of reverence.^{xix} “Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly believe,” he warned. “Most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered.” Rilke participated in Modern feelings of doubt and absurdity, but believed that these aspects of experience made life richer and deeper.^{xx}

Writing sixty five years later, in 1969, philosopher Gilles Deleuze echoed Rilke's understanding of events and experience. He also questioned language, talking about the nonsense of denotation and the absurdity of signification. Deleuze saw events as bound up with the unstoppable nature of time, emerging as substance created by the void. He wrote, “The event is the identity of form and void. It is not the object as denoted, but the object as expressed or expressible, never present, but always already in the past and yet to come.”^{xxi}

Affect and Defamiliarization (Standing on Fishes)^{xxii}

Taking something ordinary out of context -in this case literally removing the ground - opens the image up to new ways of looking. My photographs of the ungrounded sky are muted and melancholy, looking toward what can be evoked by boundless space. Kathleen Stewart's book *Ordinary Affects* “tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us.”^{xxiii} Like the “ordinary affects” described by Stewart, new points of view can “pick up density and texture,” becoming significant through “the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible.”^{xxiv}



Shinn 2013

In his poetry, Rilke draws on “the little things that hardly anyone sees, and that can so unexpectedly become big and beyond measuring.”^{xxv} Through thoughtful attention to everyday experience, Rilke and Stewart reveal the realm of hidden potential surrounding the seemingly ordinary. They suggest that the mysterious lies within our day-to-day lives and is relevant to

how we live them. In phenomenological terms, art and writing can reveal the essence of things by questioning, reframing and breaking down the structure of appearance.^{xxvi} For example, in my work, I spend time walking and looking at small changes in my surroundings. When something draws my attention I try to evaluate why, dividing the moment into visual forms that can be stopped and held by the camera. The speed and ease of taking pictures allows me to try many different points of views. Later, when these images are evaluated, there is a second opportunity to be surprised.

Photography has particular relevance to the study of the everyday. Its relationship to appearance is direct, so it can both reinforce and subvert what we thought we saw. Alfred Stieglitz was a major force in shaping photography in the United States, establishing it as art in its own right and creating a modernist photographic philosophy and aesthetic.^{xxvii} He saw the



Shadows on the Lake, gelatin silver print
Stieglitz 1916

camera as uniquely able to capture ordinary life and bring it into heightened significance. Stieglitz was committed to the qualities of the medium and promoted “straight photography” as opposed to attempts to mimic other art forms.

Photographers within the Modern circle influenced and supported by Stieglitz included Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Charles Sheeler, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham.

Although their images were grounded in the real, these artists experimented with abstraction and shifts in viewpoint to defamiliarize, create surprise, or draw attention to details. Many of them carried American Romantic ideals into the Modern era, continuing to explore landscape, luminosity, mystery, shadow and especially the transcendent qualities of light.^{xxviii} Stieglitz could be considered a phenomenophile. In talking about the

process of taking two of his most famous photographs, “Winter, Fifth Avenue” and “The Terminal,” he said, “There was a great blizzard. I loved snow. I loved rain. I loved deserted streets. All these seemed attuned to my feeling.”^{xxxix}

Stieglitz is also well known for his “Equivalents,” pictures of clouds without any ground or horizon line.^{xxx} In 1990, art critic Andy Grundberg said of the Equivalents,

“They remain photography's most radical demonstration of faith in the existence of reality behind and beyond that offered by the world of appearances. They are intended to function evocatively, like music...Emotion resides solely in form, they assert.”^{xxxxi}



Equivalent. A3. gelatin silverprint
Stieglitz 1926

The forms of the world carry affect. Allowing things to be what they are, without symbolic or narrative overlay, does not diminish their emotive potential. My kinship with Stieglitz isn't limited to an interest in the sky or even to the medium of photography, but goes to an overall phenomenological aesthetic.

Stieglitz was deeply embedded in Modernism, but the ideas of affect and intensity carry through the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism. According to Fredric Jameson, one of the defining changes signaling the Post-Modern era is “a whole new type of emotional ground tone.. ‘intensities’ -- which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime.”^{xxxii} For Jameson, Postmodernism is characterized by a change in the relation of subject to object. Rather than the alienation felt by the Modern subject, the Post-Modern subject feels fragmented, schizophrenic. This is a result not only of a transformation in the subject, but of a “mutation in objects” accompanied by a “mysterious charge of affect.” The subject's interaction with the world is no longer one of Cartesian separation, but an engulfed experience of anxiety alternating

with intoxicated euphoria.^{xxxiii} The Post-Modern is a world of surface where “a term devoid of signification has nonetheless a sense.”^{xxxiv} This flattening of hierarchies makes meaning and value less clear. For a Post-Modern person seeking meaning and value, schizophrenia is an apt metaphor. My work does not offer a solution to this condition as much as an invitation to pause, to stop seeking temporarily and see what the confusion itself has to offer.

An extreme Post-Modern world is portrayed in David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, in which the story's protagonist, Kate, is the only living being left on earth. Her sole interaction is with objects. Without others to confirm what is real, Kate's world is contingent on her own perception, memory and imagination. *Ordinary Affects* talks about how contemporary individuals navigate the world by building “an idiosyncratic map of connections between a series of singularities.”^{xxxv} In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, a private mapping of singular moments is the only thing holding the fragments of Kate's life together.

Kate often experiences spectra, and she reconstructs these momentary perceptual mistakes again and again in order to examine the possibilities they offer. Events are compelling as long as they remain open-ended. Loose tape scratching at the window might have been a cat; a piece of floating trash, a seagull. A figure in a window may or may not have been her own reflection. Kate not only indulges in phenomenophilia, but participates actively in its creation, naming the cat that is really scratching tape;^{xxxvi} setting fire to the pages of a book so that the flying ash will simulate (or recreate the imagined vision of) a seagull; and setting fires along the beach so that she can imagine Greek watch-fires in their reflections. At the same time, she is aware it is only her imagination that brings her inanimate surroundings to life.

“...it has just now come to mind that the fire I am perhaps going to build at the garbage disposal area, in order to watch it glisten on the broken bottles, is something else that only exists in my head.

...Moreover, what is really in my head is not the fire either, but that painting by Van Gogh of the fire.

Which is to say the painting by Van Gogh that one can see if one squints just a little. With all of those swirls, as in *The Starry Night*.

...All I had started to say, I think, is that I am seeing a painting that Van Gogh did not paint...which to begin with is of a fire that I myself have not built.

Although what I have entirely left out is that the painting is not actually of the fire either, but of a reflection of the fire.^{»xxxvii}



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A photograph of a floating leaf, taken on one of my walks around the duck ponds at Forest Park, might remind someone of a seagull, or a page torn out of a book wafting on the air; it might appear somehow metaphysical, or it might *be* somehow metaphysical. “Do not underestimate objects!” Lyle warns Stice in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. “Do not leave objects out of account. The world, after all, which is radically old, is made up mostly of objects.”^{»xxxviii} Jesuit scholar Michel De Certeau writes that things are not waiting to receive a meaning.

“They say exactly what they do. They constitute an act which they intend to mean...When someone asked him about the meaning of a sonata, it is said, Beethoven merely played it over.”^{»xxxix}

With phenomenophilia, judgment and meaning are held in check by the object itself, the event itself. Stieglitz and his generation showed that it was possible for photography to fix the moment without fixing a meaning. Contemporary photographer Wolfgang Tillmans has



Sportflecken

Tillmans 2004

continued to explore this ground from the 90's to the present. His exhibition titles make his philosophy clear, including *If one thing matters, everything matters*, and *Freedom from the Known*.

Tillmans first gained notoriety for his photographs of people from London's underground. As he began creating abstract and non-representational images, critics questioned the lack of content in the new work. Tillmans' response was that the bodies of work were not separate. All are meant to disrupt hierarchies and expectations by changing the way we look at the familiar. To reinforce this aim, Tillmans exhibits representational and non-representational work side by side.^{x1} He is creating a flattened system, where the periphery matters as much as the center, where Terada's "looking away" may be as important seeing dead on. Stieglitz presaged this idea when he titled his cloud images "Equivalents."

Terada describes three ways to achieve the disrupting effect of phenomenophilia. First, a person may have an actual aberrant perceptual experience (an hallucination), or simply be confused about what they saw. Second, a person can intervene in perception through point of view, framing, or focus, bringing attention to the act of perceiving. Finally, one can focus on a transient event or unstable object.^{xli} I work from all of these angles to capture the ephemeral and evoke affect, an emotional disorientation, a falling away of cause and effect. When cause and effect disappear the connections of the world become arbitrary and the unexpected could occur at

any second. A clown could walk past a field of daisies. A sun spot could engulf the eye. What was small could become overwhelming and the rest of the world could shrink into the background.



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Space and Emptiness (The rest between two notes)^{xlii}

I am fascinated by the concept of nothingness. In my painting and drawing practice I am an obsessive eraser, sanding away marks until only a texture or trace of “something” is left. I speed time’s processes, mimicking erosion by water, wind and friction; bleaching out by the sun; burial and decomposition; burning. When the picture plane is nearly empty, what little content remains takes on terrible significance. When I photograph, I am attracted to places where erosion has occurred, where something has been forcefully erased or covered over, making it hard to tell what was. I can further “erase” through the picture taking process, by what I leave in or out of the frame, by burning the image out with light, by obscuring it with darkness, by coming too close, or by getting too far away.



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Jacques Derrida touched on the implications of nothingness with his term *différance*, a nebulous conflation of difference and deference. He proposed that this quality makes presence possible, while at the same time making it differ from itself. *Différance* is the “becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space.”^{xliii} Deleuze also addressed nothing's relationship to

becoming; at the moment an event occurs it is both non-existent and infinitely divisible, in the slot between the past and the present.^{xliv} He invokes “the circulation of the empty square in the structural series (the place of the dummy, the place of the king, the blind spot, the floating signifier, the value degree zero, the off stage or absent cause, etc.)”^{xlv}

Nothingness remains elusive. Nothing requires something to exist. This paradox manifests in photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's long exposures of movie theater screens, which are “empty by accumulation.” Sugimoto’s intent was that “the movie projected might burn out into an overexpose, gleaming white screen... you know, like a religious experience, like Mother Mary making an appearance.”^{xlvi} Mark Rothko's color field paintings contain a similar emptiness and aura of accumulation, and interestingly, have been described as resembling a cinema screen or theatrical proscenium,

“when seen, or more accurately remembered (given the prevailing haziness) at the instant just before or after an event has taken place within them. This is because there is a vacancy and effacement rather than manifestation and form... That drift from assurance to bafflement holds us in thrall, wondering.”^{xlvii}

The silence and space within these images hold their resonance.



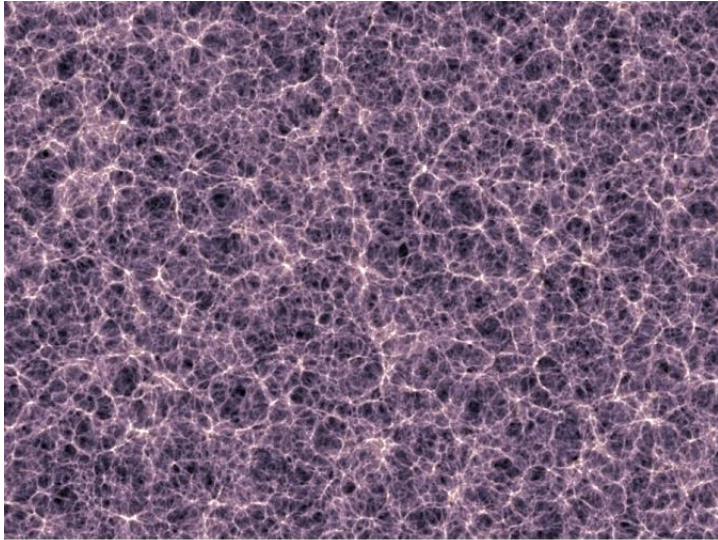
Tri City Drive-in, gelatin silverprint

Sugimoto 1993



No. 8 Yellow and Orange, oil, 68" x 81" Rothko 1952

The idea of nothingness is haunting. There was nothing before we were born and will be nothing when we die. And, or, yet – unfathomably - everything will continue to exist in its immensity and we will be nothing. In the face of deep time and space we are already nothing.



The Cosmic Web

The expansion of our knowledge of the universe and our ability to assimilate that knowledge correlates with the Post-Modern flattening of our immediate surroundings. Abstruse knowledge has become mainstream. A reincarnation of *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* premiered this spring on network television. CGI effects carried the viewer past the solar system, out into the Milky-Way, through the observable universe and into the multiverse. Like Stieglitz’s “Equivalents,” these are our new ungrounded images of the sky. They are what we now measure ourselves against. Along the *Cosmos* journey was a view of the universe I had not seen before, the cosmic web. Based on observations in an area of the universe illuminated by a giant quasar, this image depicts filaments of dark matter and multiple galaxies forming a giant web or sponge like structure. It’s the form of space, dark matter, nothing, illuminated. It is the nothingness of the everyday, beyond a window pane.



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Uta Barth is another contemporary photographer who engages ideas of nothingness. Her *Ground, ...and of time*, and *nowhere near* series don't center on a traditional subject or event. Rather than using the camera as “a pointing device” to make a picture of something, Barth uses the camera to bring attention to the act of looking itself.^{xlviii} Where the object of focus would normally be seen the frame is empty or blurred. The picture occurs at its own peripheries.^{xlix}



Untitled, ...and of time series, 35" x 90" overall

Barth 2000

Nothingness has qualities of potential, mystery and the infinite. It is the ultimate unknown, being almost impossible to conceive. Nothing occurs before, after and outside of the known universe, outside of time and space; it also occurs between particles, between the infinite divisions we make to understand the substance of the world.

Space – a pause, a rest - is used in poetry and music. I often show my photographs in vertical pairs, with a small space in-between. This arrangement may evoke windowpanes or a horizon line, as in a Rothko painting or a Sugimoto seascape. It allows two moments to collide



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and draw out each other's formal, aesthetic qualities. It allows me to create two stanzas with a gap, room to take a breath, between them.

My relationship with space has been shaped by living in the West. Here the human experience of space is visceral. The long mountain ranges, wide valleys, the open vistas and big sky, create an impression of boundlessness. The cities reflect this, sprawling in all directions, eating up space with new subdivisions. Environmental groups fight to conserve wildlife habitat, water and open range, but it is difficult when the land looks unlimited. Its emptiness depends on what you are looking for. In the city, the night sky is empty. Light pollution blocks any view. Like Sugimoto's movie screens, the city sky is rendered blank by an accumulation of light. In the desert, the night sky is full. By virtue of a lack, something comes to be.



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Boredom (The silent, sometimes hardly moving times¹)

Tied up with the dimension of space is the dimension of time. The boundaries of the visible universe are as much set by distance in time as distance in space. We can't see the farthest stars and galaxies because their light hasn't yet had time to reach us. Time is deep. It extends backward farther than we can conceive without a radical scaling down –the cosmic calendar or time line in which all of human history is the last 10 seconds, or half an inch. Our understanding of time is relative to our own lifespans, and based on our personal, phenomenological experience: our heartbeat, our cycles of hunger and sleep, our capacity for attention, distraction and boredom.



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Sustained attention does not come to us naturally. We need breaks and intermissions.

However, parallel to our propensity for boredom is the potential to become so engrossed in a task

or experience that we lose track of time -time flies. Sometimes the line between these two states is very thin. As David Foster Wallace writes, “It turns out that bliss -a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious -lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom.”^{li}

Long-distance running is on this cusp. I have been a distance runner since middle school^{lii}, although over the years what “distance” means to me has grown from one mile, to five, to thirteen (point one, the length of a half marathon), and in recent years to over twenty.^{liii} I am slow on these long runs, so twenty miles can mean spending nearly four hours just following one footfall with another. It can be painfully boring, and for me, impossible to do if I let my mind wander forward to coffee, breakfast and a warm bath, or to all of the responsibilities I'm not taking care of because I've taken half the day to go running. The only way I can sustain the run is to keep telling my mind and body, this is what we're doing right now; right now there is only this. Often enough to keep me trying again, I get to that place where it's true - where the present fully exists and I'm no longer waiting for time to pass. As author and life-long runner Haruki



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Murakami says, “I just run. I run in a void. Or maybe I should put it the other way: I run in order to *acquire* a void.”^{liv}

It's about the void, an emptying and opening of both time and space, leaving room for something unexpected to enter, or for nothing to enter. As Kathleen Stewart writes, “A still is a state of calm, a lull in the action. But it is also a machine hidden in the woods that distills spirits into potency through a process of slow condensation.”^{lv} Uta Barth also addresses the role of boredom in her work:

“I wouldn't think about those ideas in terms of boredom -boredom has a certain kind of pejorative quality -but in terms of an interest... in this total investment, emersion, in experiencing the non-event, 'boredom' sounds like something you have to escape. I think that the work invests in ideas about time, stillness, inactivity and non-event, not as something threatening or numbing, but as something actually to be embraced. There is a certain desire to embrace that which is completely incidental, peripheral, atmospheric and totally unhinged.”^{lvi}

Boredom does have a certain pejorative quality. “Only boring people get bored.”^{lvii} At the same time boredom seems key to something about the Post-Modern experience. Contemporary boredom is thought of as a feeling of emptiness “accompanied by mad pursuit of and /or passive waiting for trivial insubstantial stimulations and distractions that are ultimately unfulfilling.”^{lviii} But who decides what is trivial or unfulfilling? The passivity of boredom can be equated to Terada's phenomenophilia. The phenomenophile resists hegemonic discourse by looking away, turning to the peripheral. Similarly, in a culture that values constant productivity, through turning away from action, boredom can represent a method of transgression or resistance.

Modernity has created a strange paradox. Industrialism and technology have freed us from many of the chores of daily living that used to consume human time. Capitalism and the division of labor have separated free time from work time. These conditions create room for play

and idleness in our lives, but they also devalue them. Time that is truly open does not contribute anything to the system; it is not productive or consumptive. Capitalist culture pushes us to fill our free time with organized consumptive activities. In his essay “Free Time,” Theodor Adorno talks about how modern time has been reduced to filling in a schedule: “The rigorous bifurcation of life enjoins the same reification, which has almost completely subjugated free time... Organized freedom is compulsory... Boredom is a function of life which is lived under the compulsion to work.”^{lix}

Boredom can serve as resistance in another way as well. It can act as a shield by driving away the uninitiated. David Foster Wallace's unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, deals with boredom on a number of levels. Centered on the operations of the Internal Revenue Service, the book posits that boredom is intentional and useful. Tax code has been made “dull, arcane, mind-numbingly complex” to insulate the IRS from bad PR, public protest and political opposition. The service can operate however it wants because no one is paying attention. Wallace hypothesizes:

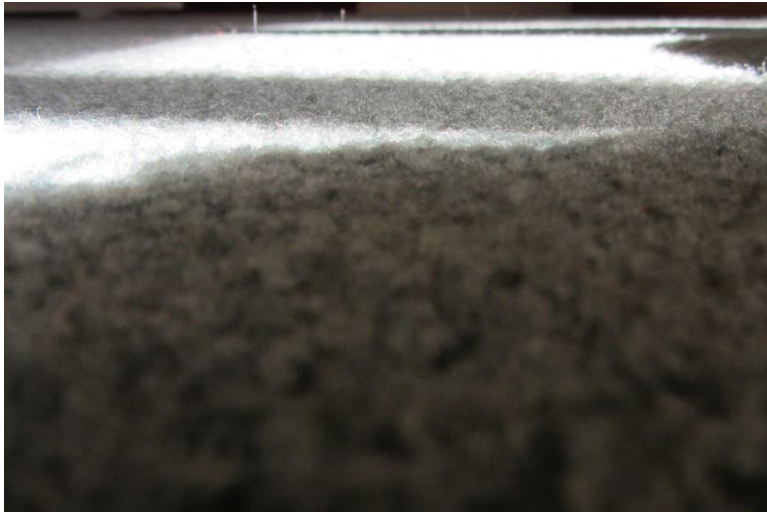
...the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' or 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us¹ spend nearly all of our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention... I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows² it's about something else, way down.

¹ (whether or not we're consciously aware of it)

² (again, whether consciously or not)^{lx}

There are different kinds of boredom. There is the boredom of frantic and fruitless

channel surfing, but there is also the boredom of the blank screen. Being bored can signify a lack of engagement or concern, or simply a neutral waiting and suspension of judgment. Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs invoke waiting. They are described not so much as an attempt to define the world, "but rather to reveal it slowly through patient observation and intense perception."^{lxi} Deleuze also writes about the act of waiting. In his cryptic and poetic language he invokes pure events, *event-phantasms*, that "inspire in us an unbearable waiting -the waiting of that which is going to come about as a result, and also of that which is already in the process of coming about and never stops coming about."^{lxii}

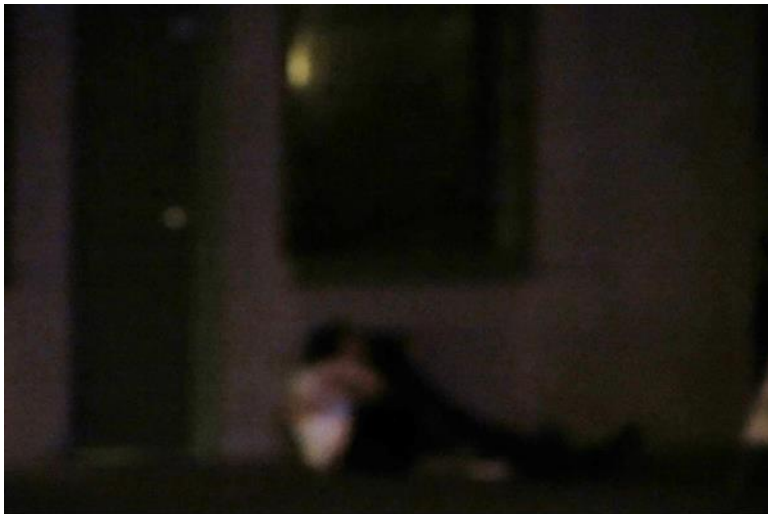


Shinn 2014

Sometimes, while running, the top of my head seems to float off and my legs turn over with the momentum of wheels, like in a Roadrunner cartoon. I see everything, the power poles looming and receding, the patterns of dirt left on the sidewalk by the rain, the gleaming asphalt, the nodding pigeons, the jumping up of leaves. And I move past and through, neutral, watching. Other times the experience is different. One hot day, when I didn't carry water, my face went numb. I couldn't move my mouth and my hands began to stiffen into claws. Then the exercise in endurance and patience took on a narrow and frightening intensity - surreal, hyper-real, unreal.

The intensity of experience is what I want to share, not necessarily the intensity of a specific or particular kind of experience, but the intensity of any and all experience, the intensity of the experiencing itself, when it's least expected. Running can invoke it, so can deep stillness. A melancholy day with the blinds drawn reveals delicate slivers of light. Surprising shapes emerge among objects that have been stared at for too long, or else flash at the corner of the eye. Spectra seem to hover at the extremes of concentration and distraction, tedium and inactivity, mania and melancholy.

The thing you are looking for is here. It's also here, and here,^{lxiii} in spectra and in the real, in the familiar and in the strange, in the empty and in the full, in the boring and in the compelling. The line between these sets of opposites is as precarious as the thin, third side of a coin; but it's much more concrete than it sounds, so grounded in moments and objects that it can be caught with a camera.



Shinn 2013

Conclusion (I still don't know)^{lxiv}

“The future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared... is heralded by species of monsters. A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous arrivant.”^{lxv}

“And I like how the guru on the towel dispenser doesn't laugh at them, or even shake his head sagely on its big brown neck. He just smiles, hiding his tongue. He's like a baby. Everything he sees hits him and sinks without bubbles. He just sits there. I want to be like that. Able to sit all quiet and pull life toward me, one forehead at a time. His name is supposedly Lyle.”^{lxvi}

“There remains only the delicious wound of this deep blue.”^{lxvii}



Shinn 2013

Night driving, the wheel makes a shadow on my lap, like a small blanket. Everything folds in on itself, in layers of sound and light that can be piled on or peeled away. Things coalesce: Pink Floyd, Hoover Dam, lightning, moon and a snake of headlights.



Shim 2014

lxviii

Deep in the bathtub I hear my heart, like wingbeats, like feet on a stair.

The kitchen light at dusk, reflected in the window, hangs in the tree outside.

A strand of your hair diffracts the sun like a prism.^{lxix}

Also spider webs.

Eyelashes.

The flashing of static in a sleeping bag.

A dark upstairs window.^{lxx}

The way trees sieve water, prolonging the rain.

Endnotes

i Rainer Maria Rilke

You see, I want a lot.
Perhaps I want everything:
the darkness that comes with every infinite fall
and the shivering blaze of every step up.

So many live on and want nothing,
and are raised to the rank of prince
by the slippery ease of their light judgments.

But what you love to see are faces
that do work and feel thirst.

You love most of all those who need you
as they need a crowbar or a hoe.

You have not grown old, and it is not too late
to dive into your increasing depths
where life calmly gives out its own secret.

Bly, Robert. *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Harper and Row, Publishers. New York: 1981. p. 27

ii The idea of “phenomenophilia” comes from Rei Terada
Terada, Rei. *Looking Away*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge: 2009

iii All included artwork by Jessie Shinn is digital photography, printed with pigment on 24” x 36” archival paper.

iv Rilke, Sunset

Slowly the west reaches for clothes of new colors
which it passes to a row of ancient trees.
You look, and soon these two worlds both leave you,
one part climbs toward heaven, one sinks to earth,

leaving you, not really belonging to either,
not so hopelessly dark as that house that is silent,
not so unswervingly given to the eternal as that thing
that turns to a star each night and climbs-

leaving you (it is impossible to untangle the threads)
your own life, timid and standing high and growing,
so that, sometimes blocked in, sometimes reaching out,
one moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a star.

Bly, 85

v Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London: 1962

vi Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. *The Ecstatic Quotidian, Phenomenological Sightings in Art and Literature*. The Pennsylvania State University Press. University Park: 2007. p. 41

vii Attempting to capture the transient and private nature of human experience has been a perennially difficult if not impossible task for artists. It was possibly best achieved by filmmaker James O. Incandenza in his *Found Drama* series in spite of the films being conceptually unfilmable. For these works Incandenza tore a page at random from the white pages of the phonebook, thumbtacked it to the wall, and threw a dart at it. The name hit by the dart became the found drama. Whatever happened to the protagonist whose name had been hit was the drama for approximately the next hour and a half. Nobody besides the protagonist knew what was happening during the drama and the protagonist did not know he was participating in a drama. Incandenza “especially liked the idea that the star of the show might have already moved away or recently died and there was no way to know.”^a

a. Steeply, Helen. “Interview with Phoenix Cardinal Professional Punter Orin .J. Incandenza,” *Moment*. 3 November Y.D.A.U¹

1. Helen Steeply, Orin Incandenza and James Incandenza are fictional characters in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. Infra note xxxvii

viii Terada, 35-36

ix Ibid., 4-5, 23, 33

x Ibid., 22-23, 98

xi Ibid., 30

xii Ibid.

xiii Terada claims that “without looking away, there is no art; and by the same logic, looking away cannot be art.” (187) The permanence of art works against the phenomenophile's requirement of transience. Photography in particular “can't be looking away, only influenced by it, since the photograph lasts indefinitely, to be revisited and imagined to be shared.” (201)

xiv Schmied, Wieland. *Caspar David Friedrich*. Translated from the German by Russell Stockman. Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers. New York: 1995. p. 24

xv Samuel Beckett cites Friedrich's *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* as the source for *Waiting for Godot*



Sipra Mukherjee, *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett. Course 202 401. p. 28-29 academia.edu

xvi Joseph Mallord William

xvii Schmied, 35-36

xvii Rodner, William S. *J.M.W. Turner, Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution*. University of California Press. Berkeley: 1997. p. 59, 133, 140-141

xix Gosetti-Ferencei, 19

xx Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to A Young Poet*. Trans. M. D. Herter Norton. W. W. Norton and Company. New York: 1934. p. 74

xxi Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. Columbia University Press. New York: 1990 (1969). p. 136

xxii Rilke, Moving Forward

The deep parts of my life pour onward,
as if the river shores were opening out.
It seems that things are more like me now,
that I can see farther into paintings.
I feel closer to what language can't reach.
With my senses, as with birds, I climb
into the windy heaven, out of the oak,
and in the ponds broken off from the sky
my feeling sinks, as if standing on fishes.

Bly, 101

xxiii Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press. Durham: 2007. p. 4

xxiv Ibid., 3

xxv Rilke, 34

xxvi Gosetti-Ferencei 9,15

xxvii Hoffman, Katherine. *Alfred Stieglitz, A Legacy of Light*. Yale University Press. New Haven: 2011. p. 33

xxviii Stange, Maren. *Paul Strand Essays on His Life and Work*. Aperture. New York: 1990. p. 1-3, 181

xxix Hoffman 29

xxx Less relevant to my own work but equally famous of course are his pictures of Georgia O'Keeffe and other lovers, like Dorothy Norman. In 1933, when Stieglitz was deeply involved with both women, O'Keeffe was 45, Norman was 28 and Stieglitz was 69. O'Keeffe had a breakdown that year, which often is attributed to the pressures of a large commission -but one can speculate. True to his Romantic side (with a capital R although clearly he also had a romantic small r side), Stieglitz was described by one biographer as "Like the Ancient Mariner, with his glittery eye and skinny hand... he had his will with everyone, for who could choose but to listen when he talked, like a spell-bound three year old?" (275)

xxxi Grundberg, Andy. "Alfred Stieglitz and the Contradictions of Modernism." *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography*. New York: Aperture. 1990. p. 20

xxxii Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. University Press. Durham: 1991. p. 5

xxxiii Jameson, 10-26

xxxiv Deleuze 7

xxxv Stewart, 4-5

xxxvi First, Vincent, after Van Gogh, then later Magritte, "Magritte having more of a connection with a cat that is not really a cat than Van Gogh does, being all." (220)

xxxvii Markson, David. *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Dalkey Archive Press. Champaign: 1988. p. 152-153

xxxviii Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. Back Bay Books. New York: 1996. p. 394-5

xxxix De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press. Berkeley: 1984. p. 80

This anecdote is told in a different version by Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*:

"Once, somebody asked Robert to explain the meaning of a certain piece of music he had just played on the piano.

What Robert Schumann did was sit back down at the piano and play the piece of music again."

xl Eichler, von Dominic. *Wolfgang Tillmans, Abstract Pictures*. Hatje Cantz. Germany: 2001. p. 1-25

xli Terada, 98

My life is not this steeply sloping hour,
in which you see me hurrying.
Much stands behind me; I stand before it like a tree;
I am only one of my many mouths,
and at that, the one that will be still the soonest.

I am the rest between two notes,
which are somehow always in discord
because Death's note wants to climb over-
but in the dark interval, reconciled,
they stay there trembling.

And the song goes on, beautiful.

Bly 31

xliii Nicholas Royle. *Jacques Derrida*. London: Routledge. 2003 pp 71-74

xliv Deleuze, 8

xlv Ibid., 71-73

xlvi *Sugimoto*. Madrid: Fundacion "la Caixa," 1998. p. 16

xlvii Anfan, David. *Mark Rothko, The Works on Canvas*. Yale University Press. London: 1998. p. 11

xlviii Lee, Pamela; Higgs, Matthew; and Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy. *Uta Barth*. Phaidon Press. New York: 2004. p. 11, 20

xlix The theme of the peripheral warrants a thorough and separate investigation of its own, including a discussion of Derrida's "supplement," the use of annotation by David Foster Wallace, and contemporary society's fascination with trivia and marginalia, as supported by the ease of Google.

1 Rilke

I am too alone in the world, and not alone enough
to make every minute holy.
I am too tiny in this world, and not tiny enough
just to lie before you like a thing,
shrewd and secretive.
I want my own will, and I want simply to be with my will,
as it goes toward action,
and in the silent, sometimes hardly moving times
when something is coming near,
I want to be with those who know secret things
or else alone.
I want to be a mirror for your whole body,
and I never want to be blind, or to be too old
to hold up your heavy and swaying picture.
I want to unfold.
I don't want to stay folded anywhere,
because where I am folded, there I am a lie.
And I want my grasp of things
true before you. I want to describe myself
like a painting that I looked at
closely for a long time,
like a saying that I finally understood,
like the pitcher I use every day,
like the face of my mother,
like a ship

that took me safely
through the wildest storm of all.
Bly 25

- li Wallace, David Foster. *The Pale King*. Little, Brown and Company. New York: 201. p. 546
- lii At Powell Jr. High in Mesa, Arizona I ran the one and two mile races. I also threw the discus until one day in practice I spun around too far, let go at the wrong moment and hit a teammate in the face with the 2 1/2 pound frisbee. After that I was strongly encouraged to stick to running.
- liii I deeply admire and envy ultramarathoners , who run in races 50 to 100 miles long or in events that last over several days. Caballo Blanco (Micah True) who ran with the Tarahumara people in Mexico, helped organize the Copper Canyon Ultramarathon and was featured in the book *Born to Run*, is practically a religious figure in my eyes. His mysterious death last year in New Mexico's Gila Wilderness (a place where I have spent a lot of time) hit close to home.
- liv Murakami, Haruki. *What I Talk About When I talk About Running*. Vintage Books. New York: 2009 p. 17
- lv Stewart 18
- lvi Lee, Pamela; Higgs, Matthew; and Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy. *Uta Barth*. Phaidon Press. New York: 2004 p. 22
- lvii Carol Shinn^a
- ^aMom
- lviii Leslie, Isis, "From Idleness to Boredom: On the Historical Development of Modern Boredom." *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*. Edited by Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani. Editions Rodopi B. V. New York: 2009. p. 35
- lix Adorno, Theodor. "Free Time," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Routledge. New York: 1991. p. 190-192

lxWallace, *TPK* 85

Although I am quoting at length from *The Pale King*, I think it's important to note, out of fairness to and respect for Wallace, that this manuscript was unfinished at the time of his death in 2008, and was compiled and published from "hard drives, file folders, three-ring binders, spiral bound notebooks, sheaves of handwritten pages, notes and more" collected by editor Michael Pietsch in "a green duffel bag and two Trader Joe's sacks heavy with manuscripts."^a There is no reason to think Wallace would have considered any of it ready to be published or read, let alone referenced. It's possible he would be mortified.

^aWallace, *THK*, Editor's Note, p. vi

- lxi *Sugimoto* 15
- lxii Deleuze 210-211
- lxiii Said by John Sarra during a visit to my studio.

lxiv Rainer Maria Rilke

I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or a great song.

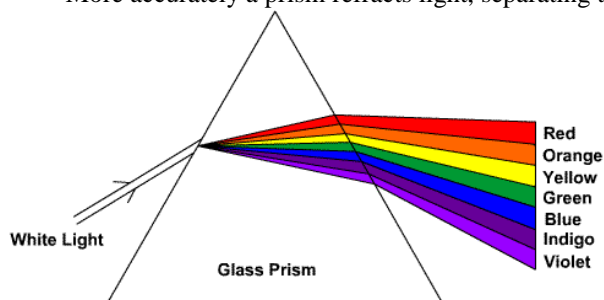
Bly 13

- lxv Royle, 110
- lxvi Wallace, *IJ*, 128

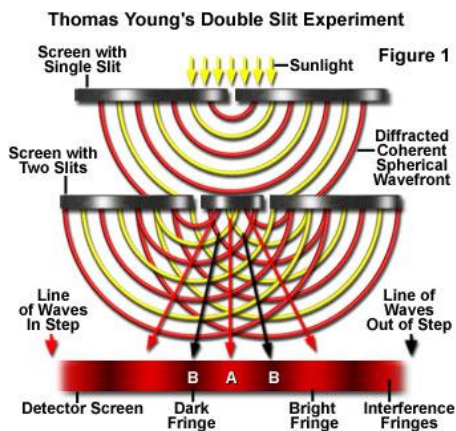
lxvii DeCerteau 88

“What the event inscribes, no matter how fleeting and rapid it may be, is reversed, reverts back to it in the form of a word or an act: a flash repartee... what else could memory provide? It is composed of bits and fragments... Each memory shines like a metonymy in relation to this whole. From a picture, there remains only the delicious wound of this deep blue. From a body, the luminosity of its eyes or the texture of a bit of white glimpsed through a gap in a hairdo. These particulars have the force of demonstratives.”

lxviii More accurately a prism refracts light, separating the wavelengths, or colors.



Whereas diffraction occurs when wavelengths encounter an obstacle or a slit (as in eyelashes). Since physical objects have wave-like properties (at the atomic level), diffraction also occurs with matter and can be studied according to the principles of quantum mechanics, e.g. Thomas Young's infamous double-slit experiment.



lxix Knowing the origin of this abstract image is not necessary for viewing, it is about quiet and stillness. It comes from a moment of relaxation in the bathtub. The form matters more than the subject; this image clearly has a different affect than other self-portraits of artists in the bath might. e.g.



lxx The house I grew up in had a very compelling dark upstairs window, made more so by that fact that as far as I knew our house had no upstairs.

Typical conversation between my parents and me about this window:

Jessie: Where does that window go?

Parent: That's just the attic.

Jessie: We have an attic!?!?

Parent: It's not really an attic.

Jessie: Can I go up there?

Parent: Absolutely not.

Jessie: How do you get up there?

Parent: You don't, so stop thinking about it and stop asking about it.

My interpretation of this conversation:

The attic contains a unthinkable family secret, or the attic is/is a portal to another dimension/world/time as in the wardrobe in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or the police call box in *Doctor Who*, or a mysterious, crazy and possibly dangerous person lives up there, either a relative or someone who was there before we moved in (explaining the shadow I sometimes thought I saw up there and the spooky feeling I got when I looked up, that someone was looking back at me.)



Shinn 2014

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