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This thesis chronicles my journey as an observational landscape painter exploring how to contend with the constant change that fascinates me as an observer, but previously frustrated me as a painter. Investigating my subjects through series and repetition, my work becomes a record of my experience of sustained engagement with consistently fluctuating environments.

PROLONGED ENCOUNTERS

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Instead of realizing and experimenting with seemingly optical (but really perceptual) illusion, most adults automatically ignore what they appear to see - say the way fireflies appear to fly upward each time they flash. Instead they see nature and landscape as fixed, still. They miss ... the ubiquitous flux most evident in light and color, and they miss too the opportunities implicit in the 'act of recording a life, in healthy solitude and active connection to loved terrain.' – John Stilgoe¹

Through sequential landscape painting, my work creates a record of my experience of sustained engagement with consistently fluctuating environment.

¹ Stilgoe, John. *What is Landscape?* Pp. 48

CHAPTER II

FOUNDATIONS

Engrained with the belief of making the most of a day, sunrise and sunset became important markers of my experiences in the outdoors. Growing up in Rhode Island, in a boating family, we spent significant time out on the water. Finding secluded spots to anchor, time was frequently filled by quiet contemplation, and I became keenly aware of my surroundings. In college, my interest not only in the meditative and contemplative environment nature provides, but also in the opportunities to perceive subtleties and nuances, was further solidified by weekends spent camping, hiking or skiing. These interests continued as I moved to Colorado shortly after graduation.

Stilgoe also states that “Any newcomer, especially any transient, must work hard to notice and understand what locals understand....”² As a person who has moved and traveled frequently in the last ten years and explored new landscapes, I think about what it means to be a local. I consider a local to be someone who is of a particular place. I think about someone who knows the ins and outs of a space, like my parents understanding the coastline around my hometown town through decades of experience. They understand not just the surface appearance, but the cycle of tides,

² Stilgoe, John. *What is Landscape?* p.77

depths of water and the hidden dangers that these elements can reveal and conceal.

When taking us out on the boat my father would often point out these nuances he was aware of, as well as the consequence of being unfamiliar with nature: a boat run aground. Occasionally, I often wonder how many true locals even exist anymore. How long does it take to truly know a place? Is a local someone who doesn't plan on leaving? Is it someone who has established roots, a home, and committed to be fully present in a particular place? Is it someone looking from within a space instead of looking into a space?

The Impressionists were some of my earliest influences, Claude Monet in particular. Monet's interest in the variations of light and weather on the appearance of a singular subject always appealed to me, as well as the textured surface quality of his paint application. From the haystacks to the Rouen Cathedral, he pushed the idea that these were valuable subjects worthy of his attention. This led to my interest in painting from life and more specifically, painting landscapes. The connection I already had with nature could be further deepened and expanded upon. I would not just be acting within or responding literally to nature, but also perceptually to light, air and temperature.

CHAPTER III
EMBRACING CHANGE

Each inquirer creates a concatenation of space and structure peculiar to himself or herself simply by noticing.³ – Stilgoe

Arriving at graduate school, I was decisive in my dedication to the landscape, but also in a commitment to work solely from direct observation. I began looking at the work and writings of artists who also worked from only from direct observation including Ellen Altfest and Josephine Halvorson.

Altfest often paints from the natural landscape and believes strongly in extracting everything you can from life and from your subject. She has spent months and even a year on a single, modest-size painting.⁴

Halvorson speaks of how intriguing it is to her to find her subject. She speaks of getting to know your subject through paint and how she can make anything important by spending time with it. Immersion also fascinates her as she indicates that even legible words can become obsolete when the artist is fully immersed.⁵

³ Stilgoe, p. 17

⁴ "Ellen Altfest" White Cube

⁵ "Josephine Halvorson"

These artists have given me confirmation of the validity of continuing the tradition of painting from life as a contemporary art practice. While it was comforting to find commonality I was still hitting a roadblock. Changes in my environment that fascinated me as an observer, often still frustrated me as a painter.

In my past training for painting landscapes on-site, the focus seemed to be not only how to translate what you see as naturalistically or representationally as possible, but also what strategies could be used to combat the changes continuously occurring around you, i.e. how to work through these changes in nature to create a singular, cohesive image of a space. It was often implied that there was some kind of ideal time and light rooted in dramatic effect. On-site, an initial value sketch would serve as a reference as light and shadow shifted. With each change I had to decide to reference my sketch and work from memory or adjust to the new visual information, but memory always seemed unreliable. In the studio a combination of on-site sketches, smaller paintings and photos became my main tools to be able to create larger scale works still aiming to create a singular cohesive image. By deciding to work solely from direct observation, I had taken away some of my previous methods of constructing a scene.

Change, however, is inevitable. To deny that fact became a fundamental contradiction to my experience of working from direct observation. Why do we want to negate change?

Eventually, I decided to embrace change through series. On January 29th, 2017, I began the Sunrise to Sunset project by creating multiple images of the same scene throughout prolonged painting sessions (Images 1-7.)

After having selected a site, I arrived at sunrise and stayed until sunset. Painting on an 11"x14" panel, each time there was a noticeable change in its appearance, I recorded the time on the back, put the painting aside and began a new panel. As the light moves more quickly in the mornings, I often only have five to ten minutes to paint before I feel like the change is too great to be able to continue. With more consistent light in the middle of the day, I have had as long as two hours to work on a painting. The resolution of the images becomes a direct indication of my response to the pace at which changes occur.

After only one day, this approach felt to be a more genuine representation of what it means to paint from observation in the landscape and I became interested in doing it over multiple months or even a year. With this in mind, I knew I needed to narrow in on a place that I felt would give me the most potential for a variety of changes throughout different seasons.

The first day I painted six paintings over the course of the day. Gradually the number per day increased and has reached up to nineteen due to more hours of sunlight, my increasing familiarity with the scene, and my choices to push the project further such as using a headlamp to paint with minimal natural light. While still ongoing, I currently I have 368 paintings over 33 days.

I have refused to let the weather conditions determine my ability to paint. The back of my jeep became an umbrella to shield my paintings from inclement weather such as rain and snow. I firmly believe that each day offers me a new experience therefore, resulting in distinctively different paintings. It seems as though the subject can never be exhausted.

Over time, possibilities open up to me as an artist. Initially, the information can be overwhelming. Steadfast attention allows me to find the most striking visual shifts that occur. What do I become the most interested in when I do not have time to capture everything? Sometimes it is where the most extreme transformation happens, while other times, it is the most subtle or the most unique. The more time I spend (days, weeks, months) translating the same scene with paint, I experience the type of immersion that Halvorson mentions. A field transcends dirt and grass. The nameable objects disappear and are replaced by fluctuating colors and abstract shapes vying for my attention before nestling back into obscurity.

Repetition and series allow me to capture immediate impressions, yet still arrive at a fuller understanding of the space through multiple images. The work becomes not just a record of the aesthetic qualities of a space itself, but more importantly, of my experience as an observer. How does my focus, or interests, change over time? Working through the middle of the day, ready to respond to the unexpected, broke me of the belief that there is an “ideal” time to paint the landscape.

Endurance leads to a rhythm quality in the physical act of painting. It becomes a flow, intuitive actions, that is indicative of my immersion in a fluctuating environment. As the project continues, evidence of this flow is shown not only through levels of resolution within a particular day, but also through increasingly decisive brushstrokes and awareness of conscious choices to simplify the rendering of objects in order to highlight the specific shift that I was noticing or to contend with shorter painting time frames.

As the project increased in size, I began to contend with the installation of the paintings to further represent my experience. The first installations of this project involved each vertical column representing a day and arranged so that the time of the paintings relate horizontally. The spacing between paintings in a singular day relate to the amount of time a painting took to make. The rigid format of a grid contrasting the irregularity of nature.

The sheer quantity and the grid-like system aims to make viewers take another look. To have them get lost in what could be considered a cliché pastoral landscape of rolling fields, trees or the mundane compared to the dramatic historical landscape images of the sublime.

At my individual thesis exhibition *Prolonged Encounters* at Greensboro Project Space, I was able to create a more immersive environment by dividing each day in half so that it continued on the opposite wall. Given the specifics of the space, paintings continued on the floor, as well as behind vents coming down from the ceiling. This also

emphasized the quantity of paintings through a sense of them overflowing the space (Images 4-7.)

At the Weatherspoon Museum I have included 11 consecutive days and installed them horizontally so each row indicates a day and the time of the paintings relates vertically. The work goes around an inside corner combining the more compact grid from the first installation and idea of immersion from *Prolonged Encounters*.

Sunrise to Sunset completely changed my definition of what it meant to be familiar with a scene. Prior to *Sunrise to Sunset*, I believed familiarity came from a few hours on-site, but after this project I realized that true familiarity came from longer lengths of time and engagement under varying circumstances. I will always remember a co-worker at a seasonal job telling me on the first day, that one of the greatest parts of living and working with the same 30 people for six months in an isolated environment, is that you will genuinely find commonality and appreciation for every single person. Just as you need to know a person for a long time to get to know someone, you also need time to get to know a space and understand its nuances.

Any space can be passed by at one point and seem mundane, but particular circumstances can create an unexpected and striking effect. Even the seemingly dullest brown dirt can glow illuminating shades of orange.

CHAPTER IV
NEW INFLUENCES

It was over the summer when I began reading “Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees” by Lawrence Weschler. Weschler quotes Soren Kierkegaard “The more you limit yourself... the more fertile you become in invention.”⁶ When artists narrow in and push themselves to an extreme exploration with a particular subject, when one has stripped a subject of assumptions, and baggage, one can bring extensive new discoveries and interpretations. This resonated with what was happening with my Sunrise to Sunset Project. The painting moves past the pastoral empirical and even the sublime of historical landscape painting. They move past the particular expectations of what a landscape should be, should describe and should represent. It is what makes that particular space different or what each weather circumstance brings to the space.

It was also over the summer when I went to the Modern Museum of Art in Bologna where the setting of limitations or parameters on subject was amplified by Morandi. A painter from the early 20th century known for his still life paintings of bottles and jars that he kept in his studio and re-arranged over and over into new

⁶ Wechsler, Lawrence, and Robert Irwin. *Seeing is Forgetting*, 72-73

compositions.⁷ He was completely taken with the way light could move across subjects, as well as the relations between positive and negative spaces that were created. This seemingly simple and mundane subject captivated Morandi over the course of his life. It is, however, his later paintings, paintings completed after World War II and made after he had spent more than two decades painting these bottles, that have been widely recognized as his greatest work.⁸ The paintings became much more about physical and perceptual relationships shown through paint. When I saw them in person, the mood was a peaceful quietness unlike any other museum exhibition I have been to. It was as if any sudden movement or noise might disturb the balance and shifts Morandi so carefully observed and depicted.

My interest in changes was solidified during our summer trip to the Venice Biennale where a piece by Edith Dekyndt called *1,001 Nights* strongly resonated with me. A blanket of white dust lay on the floor illuminated by a light from a projector. Every hour on the hour, the section of floor illuminated by light would shift slightly and an attendant was responsible for the task of sweeping the dust into the newly illuminated area. The piece resonated with me for the idea of never-ending change, but also the meditative process of sweeping when one gets caught up with the rhythm of consistent change.

⁷ Abramowicz, Janet. "VISION & TECHNIQUE: THE ETCHINGS OF GIORGIO MORANDI, 1890-1964." *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 12, no. 4 (1981): 97-103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44130937>., 12

⁸ Gale, Matthew. "Giorgio Morandi. London and Madrid." *The Burlington Magazine* 141, no. 1158 (1999): 558-61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/888609>., 560

The title refers to a middle eastern folk tale in which a king betrayed by his unfaithful wife, decides all women are equal and that he will continue to marry and then kill his new wife the following morning before she too, has a chance to betray him. Eventually, the man in charge of finding new brides reluctantly agrees to allow his willing daughter to marry the king. On her wedding night she tells the king a story, but says she will not finish it until the next day resulting in the postponement of her seemingly inevitable fate. The following night she finishes the first story and starts another, once again saving her life. This continues for 1,001 nights at which point, the king realizes that over time he has fallen in love and decides to permanently spare her life.⁹

This tale references long-term engagement, when you think you are at a conclusion, you often are not. An end is at a beginning and a beginning is at an end. There are permanent states of transformation in the story much like in the landscape. Through these states of transformation even the most unexpected appreciation can grow.

Returning to the idea of limiting one's subject, I found commonality in Zoe Leonard's Niagara Falls piece, *You see I am here after all* (2008). When offered a space at Dia:Beacon, Leonard proposed a project that was at its beginning stage. She wanted to include a variety of waterfalls, but not specifically Niagara Falls because it was too

⁹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "The Thousand and One Nights."

cliché as a subject. Soon she realized that Niagara Falls was actually the perfect subject for her project due to its deep history. She started with 1,000 postcards before realizing she needed 2,000, which turned into 4,000.¹⁰ The cliché of the falls is broken by a grid-like installation and mass quantity.

The compilation of all the postcards provided a bigger picture of how the falls are viewed by photographers and which views people chose to send as a representation of their visit, but it also goes deeper than that. It represents the connotations throughout decades of society.

Niagara Falls began with this image of the power of the sublime and of God. Through time it moved into adventure before moving to the temperament of a woman, and to romance and tourism. The postcards and photographs form an archive of the physicality of the site, as well as societal views and associations.¹¹

Within the installation you cannot see the entire piece at once, much like the falls and much like one image often does not tell an entire story. You must view it in parts and then put the parts together. Through mass quantity and narrowing in on one particular waterfall, she was able to bring new meaning to a recognizable site that is a house-hold name.¹²

¹⁰ Copeland, Huey, "Photography, the Archive, and the Question of Feminist Form: A Conversation with Zoe Leonard," *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 2 (2013): 177-189., 179-180

¹¹ Copeland, "Photography", 177-189

¹² Copeland, "Photography", 177-189

Byron Kim is another artist who works with elevating the cliché. Kim too has used intensive repetition as a tool to elevate a common subject. He is working on a series of square paintings of just the sky¹³ that he has done every Sunday since January 7, 2001. After painting in acrylic and gouache, he writes a comment about his day on the painting. He does not want to overthink it, but instead put down something that is seemingly mundane or basic about his life. He wants to bring attention to those kinds of things. It is interesting that he has tried to keep a traditional journal, but that he has failed.¹⁴ The paintings, however, have become a type of journal and documentation of his life.

Titled *Sunday Paintings*, the name and the process itself references the cliché of a Sunday painter who tends to be more of a hobbyist by painting once a week on Sunday. While that title can sometimes be used as a negative description of a hobbyist, he is paying his respect to artists who paint just for the love of painting.¹⁵

The execution of the paintings and the juxtaposition between the writing on the image and the window-like composition looking into deep space, makes one visually jump back and forth between the plans. His comments written on the painting begin to elevate the idea of this series being a journal or an archive of his Sunday experiences, as

¹³ Tsai, Eugenie, Byron Kim, and Constance M. Lewallen. *Byron Kim - Threshold: 1990 - 2004*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2004.

¹⁴ "Byron Kim by Adam Simon." Interview by Adam Simon. Bomb. February 21, 2014. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/byron-kim/>.

¹⁵ "Byron Kim by Adam Simon." Interview by Adam Simon. Bomb. February 21, 2014. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/byron-kim/>.

well as the visual appearances of the sky.¹⁶ Subtle shifts in color and hue are apparent between each one. Some days are clear, some cloudy, some bright and some dull.

Kim sees this project as a something that will continue for the rest of his life. Even, he jokes, if he has to verbally give someone instructions on his death bed to help him complete the painting. He says he must be able to actually see the sky in order to do the paintings.

By compositionally narrowing down these images to just a sky one is directed to something more minimal, but no less interesting. Byron explains most people could see every day, but that few can actually take time to engage with.¹⁷ How often does one look up? How often does one really see what is there and understand it? What is one missing? What are we engaged with if it is not our everyday surroundings?¹⁸

Placed next to each other, the paintings feel like they could be stills from a cinematic film that indicate there is more that came before and more that comes after; much like the process itself that Kim is engaged with.

His college roommate once called him the “master of the obvious” which seems to be something that has stuck with him through the years.¹⁹ He enjoys taking these obvious subject matters where it seems there cannot possibly be any new meaning to discover and then find new meaning in relation to our current world. The obvious is

¹⁶ "Byron Kim's Night: Sealing Off the Wonder of the Sublime." Idiom. December 21, 2011. Accessed November 01, 2017. <http://idiommag.com/2011/12/byron-kims-night-sealing-off-the-wonder-of-the-sublime/>.

¹⁷ "Byron Kim by Adam Simon" Interview

¹⁸ "Byron Kim by Adam Simon" Interview

¹⁹ "Byron Kim by Adam Simon" Interview

sometimes not so obvious. We forget or become immune to certain images, ideas and concepts. They are things that everyone else takes for granted. Art can bring attention back to these images and re-contextualize them in relation to particular artists, or times.

CHAPTER V

ISOLATING CHANGES

While continuing Sunrise to Sunset, I am also using the project, as well as new influences as a starting point for isolating and investigating more specific types of change. Whether it is the color of a tree as the sun rises, the rhythm of sunlight through a forest, a puddle evaporating, or the veil of rain over the landscape, sustained engagement through painting allows me to be open and ready to respond to the unexpected. With time and steadfast attention, even the seemingly most banal subjects can reveal captivating characteristics.

For each new project, I do sketches to gain familiarity to see what types of changes are happening, and to uncover what I am most interested in. Finding a format best suited for each site, I embrace that I am not a machine and I do not register changes the same way that a machine would. I cannot and do not want to capture every detail in a painting. I paint what first captures my attention, allowing various levels of resolution and coverage within a painting, to capture a particular specificity, therefore directing the viewer to my individual reactions

I worked with the idea of a series on a single painting by dividing the panel into horizontal stripes and moving down to a new stripe every time a noticeable had occurred. With this approach, one image is composed of multiple times of the day. Narrowing in on one tree in an open field there is more direct comparison of the shift in color with a particular subject than in individual panels. Each color touches the color prior and/or the one after (Image 8.)

Then I began to think about the rhythm of light hitting tree trunks in the forest, e.g. how the light can make certain trees pop in and out of perception. To emphasize this rhythm, I went out and selected a spot where I could take a cross section of the trees and not show where any begin or end. Then I set up and painted as certain trees fell in and out of my perception. My focus was on the trees that the light hit. The earliest paintings only include a few of the trees, while during the middle of the day the changes slow and the more trees I can include and the negative space between the trees begins to be treated the same as the positive space of the trunks themselves. At this point, the paintings are installed one above the other with only about half an inch in between to create a singular image that references tall individual trees while keeping the focus on the shifts in light. The close proximity of the panels allows for more direct comparison of color and a greater sense of rhythm. In this series I typically painted about twelve per day (Image 9.)

At the location where I parked my car for the various *Rhythm* series, I began to notice a natural vignette in the distance formed by two trees in shadow. The shape was unique with rigid edges to the right and left and more irregular edges on the top and bottom. Varying in height, five distinct planes of color stretch across the image. The natural framing taking place allowed me to focus on this one particular area further away and almost ignore the rest of the information around it. I decided this would be a place to study subtle or quicker changes outside, in particular, during a rainstorm as the rain becomes heavier and lighter, forming a veil over the landscape. After working on a variety of sizes ranging from 8"x10" to 8"x6" and experimenting with how much recognizable imagery to include, I decided on 8"x6" panels and to only paint that framed section. I then spent about four hours during a rainstorm painting the same section over and over again. By selecting a smaller size and making the conscious editing choice from the beginning, I was able to complete each painting to the same level and focus on mixing specific colors and getting the shift between the color planes in relation to the passage of time. Keeping track of the order in which I completed them, I then presented 40 of them chronologically in a grid that had ten paintings in each row (Image 11.)

As rain was a prominent part of spring weather, I also considered other types of changes to study. One day I painted a puddle as it evaporated, showing that even the most mundane or overlooked subjects can still have changes that can be explored when

the proper time and investment is given (Image 10.) These types of subjects are right in front of me waiting to be discovered and appreciated.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

As I work, I do not compare the current painting to the previous one. I am fully absorbed in the present. I have faith that the process will result in a genuine record of my experience; however subtle or dramatic the visual shifts. Each moment a piece in a greater puzzle.

Specificity in the individual is crucial to create the whole. Day after day my experience is never exactly the same.

In each series I am to make myself a local of a particular site. To understand and notice what only comes with engagement, investment, and dedication and something that I would have never noticed had I not been engaged in the act of painting.

As I continue on from graduate school, I do not know where I will go or where I will live, but my work will continue to explore how my experience within a singular day, as well as over multiple days, weeks, months, seasons or years unravels my understanding and experience of a space.

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CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Image 1. *Sunrise to Sunset* (Detail 1) oil on 11x14 panels, 2017-present



Image 2. *Sunrise to Sunset* (GPS Install Detail 1) oil on 11"x14" panels, 2017-present



Image 3. *Sunrise to Sunset (Lobby Install 1)*, oil on 11"x14" panels, 2017-present



Image 4. *Sunrise to Sunset (GPS Install 1)*, oil on 11"x14" panels, 2017-present



Image 5. *Sunrise to Sunset (GPS Install 2)*, oil on 11"x14" panels, 2017-present



Image 6. *Sunrise to Sunset (GPS Install 3)*, oil on 11"x14" panels, 2017-present



Image 7. *Sunrise to Sunset (GPS Install 4)*, oil on 11x14 panels, 2017-present



Image 8. *January Morning*, oil on canvas, 25"x40" 2018



Image 9. *Rhythm 2*, oil on 5"x23" panels, 2018



Image 10. *Puddle*, oil on 10"x 5 1/2", panels, 2018



Image 11. *Rain Veil*, oil on 8"x6" panels, 2018

