

**MEMORY OF PLACE: RESTAGING LIVED EXPERIENCE THROUGH
PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES**

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ABSTRACT

My current thesis work consists of building and photographically documenting sets of SROs (single room occupancy housing) in order to understand the spaces used as housing for people that were formerly homeless, and who live with mental health and substance use issues. The work explores the idea of “late photography”, ie. photographs that are taken after an initial event, and the relation between documentary style truth telling and photographic recreation. Through the use of built sets, I recreate scenes based on memories I have of these spaces—the goal being to investigate whether these images of recreated spaces can stand in for the actual event. Within my research and investigation, I explore how these staged rooms photographs evoke ennui: feelings of absence/presences, boredom, and the uncanny. My thesis concludes by addressing the difficulty of separating these binary states true/false, absence/presence, and stimulation/boredom suggested by these photographs, and discovering through the recognition of their inherent overlap.

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INTRODUCTION

My MFA Thesis research involves my practice as a photographer, through which I explore themes of memory related to my experiences with the recent opioid crisis. This research is twofold: it challenges the traditional notions of truth as they pertain to photographic images, and stems from spending two years as a frontline mental health worker in Victoria, BC. During this time I worked with people who were previously homeless, and were living with mental health and substance misuse issues. The goal of my research is to photographically reconstruct some of my memories from that time, and attempt to make my experiences of serving this community tangible to the viewer.

This thesis will consist of a comprehensive artist statement where I outline my previous work and how it relates to my current thesis project. This will be followed by a discussion of the material aspects of the project, and how the sculptural and photographic elements will intersect with one another. The third component will draw connections between my work and historic discourses taken up by other photographic artists. Some of the key concepts I explore are in regards to photography as a document of truth, and the characteristic of absence/presence in photography. As such, the second half of the paper chronicles the construction of photographic images and some of the key components that make up an self reflexive breakdown of my reflection on the images and their intended outcome. Finally, I will summarize the key components of the project discussion and the outcome of the work, as well as the elements that shifted while working on the project.

In my project I utilize Vilém Flusser's (2002) theories of the Post-historical image while constructing photographs that are manifestations of memories I have seen and experienced in supportive housing where I worked with private rooms assigned to clients called SROs (single room occupancy). With this project I hope to unpack notions of memory and how our relation to memory functions in our lives. In my practice I am committed to the use of post-historical images, a term theorized to describe photographs that are based on the memory of an event instead of the actual event, as well as denoting a departure from a traditional photo-documentarian approach. I will be deploying the integration of this kind of imagery to depict scenarios I experienced in SROs. My experiences will be documented as actual happenings, however, all will be choreographed and staged within sections of scale 1:1 architectural sets. The aesthetic will be a reference to Jeff Wall's "near documentary" (Galassi 2007) approach. These images will serve to mimic both the act of reminiscing about memories, as well as the method of photographing these built environments. As we recall scenarios in our mind, we piece together certain images from these scenes. We are effectively rebuilding the scene in our minds while conjuring up details about specific tones of light, textures or surfaces of floors or walls, and the placement of objects and a minutia of details. In this way the images will be a construction of events through my perspective. Through carefully reconstructions the viewer will be led through a series of images depicting rooms I have experienced that function as a singular arresting moment. These stills will function like moments in my own life, these moments that seem to hang or suspend the progression of time.

Within Vilem Flusser's understanding of the post-historical image, is the idea that photographs operate as a disruption in the flow of history, suspending historical events within the lineage of time (Flusser 2002). It can further be postulated that the photograph does not function

as an absolute underpinning for truth, but rather requires external references to a given history. With this in mind, my research serves as the recontextualization of past scenarios that I have witnessed. As conceived by Ariella Azoulay, “the encounter with the photograph continues the event of photography which happened elsewhere,” (Azoulay 2011). By viewing the photographs, viewers are inadvertently recontextualizing the photograph for themselves. Though these occurrences will be positioned as documentary photography, they are in fact manufactured recreations.

This idea of the constructed image speaks both the medium of photography, but also the notion of memory. Memory appears to me as a fluid entity, requiring the reference to another source to substantiate it. Memory, from my personal observation, appears to break down into more rudimentary channels of binary, devolving into “positive experience” and “negative experience.” The minutia of these experiences are sifted and separated into the two categories, with the nuanced details being discarded. Photography relies on the perceived continuity that is established through the absence and presence in a photograph. The absence in a photograph operates when a photograph of a person or thing no longer stands in as an accurate depiction of this object (Van Alphen 1998). An old man holding a photograph of a younger self is a perfect example of this phenomena at work, as it illustrates this vast contrast of being, while still remaining the same object. Presence can be described as a photograph that acts as a portal to the site of this occurrence (Batchen 2000). The photograph teleports us to an object that could conceivably be depicted in this manner. In short, the object's being is congruent with what we perceive to be current or present. I will attempt to add continuity by providing titles as a form of contextual description to the images.

Rosalind Krauss speaks of the necessity for the photograph to be accompanied by text (Krauss 1977). She draws the conclusion that the photograph operates under the linguistic phenomena of the shifter, wherein the attributes of an object are in a state of perpetual flux. Walter Benjamin argues that with the adaptation of the printed photographic magazine, the editor has provided contextual “sign poles” (Benjamin 1935) to guide the viewer's interpretation. In my photo-based work memory is restaged yet remains open ended for the viewer. I will incorporate text-based descriptors to support my exploration of memory. The titles will serve to inform my images, while attempting to reintegrate these images back into the vernacular of history.

CHAPTER 1: Previous Work 2015-2019

Fundamental to all my photographic work is an interest in the authenticity of a photographed moment, the idea of instantaneity and the formal interplay of light and time within photography. A thematic thread that runs through my work is the undertaking of cultural and personal nostalgia or memory. My past work explores the uses of light, time, “the real” and instantaneity. Each successive project influences, informs and compounds the previous work. I believe that these threads of ideas can be seen throughout all the projects that I make. Many of these images focus more specifically on the spaces, or the reminiscence of humans as a way of speaking about the human experience. These spaces stand in for the person or people that inhabit these spaces, and in this way are acting indexically (Krauss 1977). An index is the negative space created by the surrounding context, through a sort of collage of items that gain meaning through their relation to one another.

Survey of time and Histories (2015)

Such traces of humanity can be seen in works like *Survey of Time and Histories* (2015) (fig.1). This body of work alludes to the human form through the focus of the built environment, which is further emphasised through its naturalistic depiction colour. The structures act as projected ruins that are predestined to fall and be replaced, while the rest of humanity moves around them. These realistic colours are in contrast with the human form. The body is subsequently ignored, made strange through the long exposure and multiply layers used to achieve the correct exposure. The body is rendered as a visual



Figure 1. *Bus Station*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2015.

pun, a chromatic aberration, making reference to both the colour shift associated with the fringe of camera lens, and the technicoloured spector effect created through the long exposure. The priority given to depicting the built environment comes from interest in the public spaces, and the perceived permanence of the built in environment. These aberrations imply a history of being, by this I mean that the spectral images reference the automobile or the human form as a visual past tense in the image. The long exposure shows an elongation of time before our very eye, through the physical movement of the object. In this movement objects within the frame imply a form of progression, a continuation, the idea that a series of events followed one another, or to put it more bluntly, history.

The prefix of the title “survey” implies an interest in the land and the presence of capitalism in resource extraction, agriculture, or settlement are abandoned. The survey implies the adaptation of repetitions, or that the survey will reoccur at a later time. This survey is interested in the sphere of temporality within public space. The built environment is more impermanent of a space than we consider. We do not perceive the changes of the environment around us in the same way we notice the changing of the seasons. The photographic medium itself resides within this state of flux, or change. The meaning of images change as the information that surrounds the images changes, illustrating the shortcomings of the photographs' lone historic power. The images become a visual metaphor for societal change that appears immovable, and photographs perceived unchangeability. Through the advent of the digital photograph, the once undisputed tool of truth is now under the scrutiny as a vessel for an indisputable notice of truth. I believe this is due to the perceived idea that post production is able to seamlessly merge multiple images, and creates a new understanding of instantaneity. However, long before the use of digital technology, photography was used to show an objective form of truth, rather than a sculpted sense of reality. *Survey of Time and Histories* (2015) attempted to question photographers' ability to have ever presented the photograph in a non biased way.

Present (2016)

In my body of work titled *Present* (2016) (fig.2), I investigate the notions of absence and presence within photography. My understanding of the term presence was articulated by Ernest Van Alphen (1998) and suggests that a photograph operates in the present if the photograph

depicts an image of a person that we know to be contemporary. However, photography also operates through absence if the image brings to light a difference, or that an irreversible shift has occurred, such as aging. The images within *Present* are taken in a similar manner as that of the *Survey of Time and Histories* (2015), relying on multiple images to create the full colour spectrum. The images in *Survey of Time and Histories* (2015) were taken in rapid succession of one another, however, in *Present* (2016) the images are taken a week apart from each other, and are then compiled in post production to create one single image. The series attempts to dissect the notions of photography's long history of being associated as an instant based medium.



Figure 2. *Ben*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2016.

The images become a hybridization of three separate instances that are brought together to create a single image. These constructed moments reside within the canonical structure of photographic instant, as they are three separate moments in which a photograph was taken. However, this instantaneity is negated due to the suspension of time, as weeks would pass between one layer of the images to another.

In addition, another aspect of this interplay between absence/presence involves the layering of the images. The images use the technique of digichromitography¹, a technique that

¹ Digichromitography is based on a modern version of Gum Bichromate. The image is achieved by utilizing black and white films panchromatic property, a property that allows black and white film to register colour as different tonal values, not solely as an exposure value. The images are created by taking three seemingly identical photographs, but also using different coloured filters for each image. By using a red, green, and blue filter in equal proportions, you can scan, and apply the corresponding colour with its matching filter. By digitally over laying

layers three separate colours to create the full colour spectrum. Gum Bichromate is the forerunner of contemporary cellulose film that contains all three layers of colour. Present recreates this process by using panchromatic black and white film. I am able to apply a variety of coloured filters to achieve a variance in tonality and contrast on the film stock. When I use modern RGB(red, green, blue) filters in equal parts I am able to illuminate the full colour spectrum through these multiple layers. Combining three separate images shot one week apart creates a misalignment between portraits. The end result is a portrait estranged from itself. As the photographs were taken, subtle shifts in the appearances of the individuals occurred, this caused misalignments within the final picture of the person. Their likeness has become estranged from itself in the sense that these are in fact images of people. Using digichromitography references the foundations of the photographic process including frame, exposure, focus, light, colour and time. Entangling 2 distinct binaries creates a visual tension as the viewer attempts to decipher the subject's portrait. I am interested in the tension within this duality as it pertains to instantaneity in photography. The principle of absence and presence in photography serves as a fundamental underpinning to the medium as it creates the illusion of the actual object, when in fact, it is a mere representation of the object (Sontag 1977). Absence/presence also contributes to our perception of memory, as the absence immediately situates the image in a time that is not contemporary, instilling the images with the mnemonic or nostalgic quality. The fascination with nostalgia would be a theme that carried through to my next body of work.

the three layers and changing the blending modes in the software of your choice you can create the full colour spectrum.

Memento (2017)

In *Memento* (2017) (fig.3) I explore nostalgia from the perspective of a collective history, utilising iconography of Hollywood movies and other printed media to situate the viewer in the position of remembering. The images make reference to traditional “coming of age” stories perpetuated by Hollywood or play on more direct symbolism of childhood. The images are once

again devoid of the human form, with the only reference to humanity being the framing of the built environment. This absence is a recurring theme within my work, but serves a very integral part within this specific project. The frame is blank, in an attempt to disrupt the figure ground relationship traditionally associated with figure painting. This void disrupts the



Figure 3. *Demo*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2017

viewers ability to construct a narrative that reconciles this relation of space as subject. The viewer is forced to interject their own history or narrative within the scene and in this sense they are participating with this act of nostalgia. The images in the series act as a catalyst to the act of remembering.

The photographs in this series reference the notion of the memento mori, made popular as a thematic element in photography by Roland Barthes(1981). In Barthes’s book *Camera Lucida*, he discusses the idea that a photograph can only show us the passing of time through the

image, highlighting the morbidity of time. Barthes also discusses how the photograph can also prevent us from fully remembering, by preventing us from going further into the photograph. The viewer is positioned, through this understanding, to see photographs as reminders of the untouchable past. Photography's ability to capture a moment in time inextricably links it with the past, as photos can only show us what was, and can only take a speculative approach at projection of the present and future. Because these images are of the past, and are not currently happening, they require a level of context to resonate with the viewer, and as a result necessitate a need for exterior sources to inform the current image (Flusser 2002). Without this information the photograph cannot act in a historical manner, as the image can not be self-referential to generate a given history, much in the way the definition of a word can not contain the word it is defining. Photographs can reside outside of time and history, but in doing so are not operating historically. Both nostalgia and photography require a level of context to situate them into a specific discourse, and without this information the myth of historicism in photographs vanishes. Nostalgia and photography are two sides of the same coin, where the viewing of photography continues the event of photography (Azoulay 2011), the reminiscing of nostalgia confabulates the past with the present, muddling our understanding of both the present moment, the memory we wish to relive. These two states are used to remove us from the current space into another.

These varying states of photography, instantaneity, absence/presence, nostalgia, and truth of photography have caused me to question whether photography can perform these fundamental operations in an impactful manner. With the right context, can photography be a source of truth? I feel that this hybridization of my personal memory acting as a form of truth or in a historical way, consolidates or resonates with a lot of the themes I have pursued in other projects. This project appears to me as a natural progression of my previous thinking, and is perhaps just these

ideas fully rendered to their terminus. The work integrates many of these ideas I have taken up in different ways throughout the years. The whole process of this current project is an act of remembering, and considering the importance of these memories. The photographs are completely fabricated, yet are based on real spaces and actual experiences. These memories stand in as the contextual underpinning of the work, while also blurring the lines between the dichotomy of fact and fiction. The images are staged, but the sets lean towards the side of realism and are constructed from memory. The fabrication of these sets are critical to the concept of the work.

CHAPTER 2: Materials and Process

In this section I will be discussing the relationship between the materials and the process of my thesis work. Working with sets challenged my practice. It required a new attention to scale, detail and planning. The sets are constructed from standard building materials, (wood, screws, drywall, filling compounds, etc.) and are not built to code, but rather the standards you might find on a television show or movie set. The idea of movie sets plays a key role in the project, relying on cinematography's connection to the viewer's suspension of disbelief. Constructing every aspect of the photograph adds a performative aspect to the creation of this work. This performativity parallels the act of remembering, where the act of doing or reenacting becomes a way of remembering. While these sets could also function as an installation within the gallery, I feel that this would change the context of the art work. The photograph situates the work in conversation with remembering and of memory.

In this project I built sets reconstructing SRO rooms. If I were to allow the viewer to explore the installation, the space would become a memory of the viewer's time in the space, rather than the construction of a memory of these spaces. The single image establishes a point of view. This rigid point of view places the viewer in the shoes of the photographer. The installation has this “potential of being”, what I mean by this is that the rooms could be rebuilt to have working plumbing, electrical, and ventilation and could serve as the actual space. There is an inherent kinesis within a physical space that is lacking in a photograph. Once the image of the space is created, the space becomes relegated to the realm of the past. No longer is this space accessible to the viewer, to be investigated or examined, it becomes a truncated representation of the space. What is held back from the sculpture to the photograph is similar to the way we experience our memory. The memory of a specific event can not be accessed on a whim, it is not as simple as physically revisiting a location. When thinking of a specific event there is a tether that has been severed, a point of connection that cannot be reconnected. I see the photograph as being related to this broken linkage, that the photograph hinders our ability to strive for further detail in a similar manner to a memory. The photograph contributes to a flattening of the subject, in a similar way our memories become one dimensional representations of events and spaces. The work hinges on the fact that these spaces are real but are inaccessible, creating a tension through the physicality of the structures that is rendered moot. The choice of material becomes critical to the overall facade of realness. Without an accurate representation to the structure the notion of possible truth becomes further removed.

During the early stages of the project I began sketching out informal blueprints of the spaces. These drawings were designed from the memory of these spaces, as staff members would spend time renovating old rooms for new residents. The drawings were used to aid in an

understanding of scale and proportions of these lived spaces. I then created a 1:12 scale model based solely on my interpretation of the blueprint drawings I drew up. The tactility of the model illuminated the scale of these spaces, giving me a greater understanding of how I would go about constructing these life-sized rooms. Furthermore, the cardboard models provided the opportunity to dissect the approach I would have to employ while going up in scale. I began photographing these models, which helped me understand how I would approach these spaces when working with the full sized set and became the underpinning for the larger builds. I looked for a space that I would be able to retrofit these rooms within, and settled on an old studio space in the Hasting-Sunrise neighbourhood of Vancouver, British Columbia. These models became paramount to building, as they were the initial design for the footprint of the build. Building the spaces, woodworking, assembling, and plastering, was a new experience in relation to these memories, however, the act of painting, patching, and sanding became a performative act of remembering. The repetition of cleaning out rooms and preparing them for painting is an action ingrained in my psyche, as staff members would perform these actions regularly with other aspects of maintaining the building. Working on painting the sets conjured up late night conversations staff members would have while prepping and painting the rooms.

When I had sourced my studio location, I took masking tape and roughed out general spaces of where walls would be erected. This essentially recreated the scale drawing I had conceived of, rendering them at a 1:1 scale. The tape helped to realize spaces before committing to the more permanent structure of walls and fittings. I began the process of wall construction by first breaking my life sized “drawing” into four foot increments, and calculating the material required to achieve my length and width. Walls in the actual SRO I worked in were always needing repair for a variety of reasons, from average (for the building) wear and tear, to more

extreme cases of whole walls being removed. The drywall for my sets would crumble, scratch, and break, giving these infantile walls a sense of age or history. I began assembling walls creating essentially prefabricated walls that could be placed as needed. I used these prefabricated walls to temporarily set rooms, to see if the rooms had the same feeling in their full scale dimension as they did on paper and other subsequent models. The models served as the catalyst for the design of the spaces, but I ultimately decided what the final dimensions for each room would be based on how it felt to be in the space. The bathroom used two existing walls in the studio, leaving me with the task of constructing two more walls and the ceiling. Once the walls were secured to the floor and structural walls, and the ceiling was hoisted and facined to the walls, the gaps were filled with a joint compound and were then sanded. I wanted the physical structure to appear plausible in the construction as a form of visual immersion. I wanted the viewer to believe that what they saw in front of them was a fully actualized space that was lived in, and not merely a haphazard attempt at a built environment. The floors in the SRO were linoleum strips that imitated a hardwood, however, these floor panels were frequently known to peel and separate from the concrete floor. When the linoleum would peel we would paint the floors a neutral grey tone. To mask the hardwood floors beneath, I cut door skin panels to cover the floor and would fill the finer gaps on and between the panels. After the painting of the walls I installed non functional fixtures, like a toilet and sink in the case of the bathroom. I also converted a corded fluorescent tube to be powered by a light switch in the studio.

Then came the setting of the scene. The objects were chosen based on actual spaces I had bared witness to. Some of the items were specific to that room and others were chosen to elicit the feeling of the room. The set dressing alludes to the images as found occurrences, but the certain signals indicate that the images may not be as they appear. The set dressing helps to

complicate this issue, making the two indistinguishable from one another. There is a sense of authenticity that is bolstered by the photograph, but other elements that pull it back into the realm of fiction. I believe these images become situated within the discourse of a near documentary aesthetic. The image references the process of creation, as a form of filtration through a memory, and becomes further distortion of the memory.

CHAPTER 3: Historical Locating

I am interested in the borders of photography, where a photograph is attempting to act historically as a document of truth, and when those strict binary divisions are blurred. I am fascinated with the slippage that occurs between truth and fiction, and how the staged photograph can generate a picture based on empiricism rather than documented reportage. During my research stage I looked at the work of Vancouver artist Jeff Wall and German artist Thomas Demand. Wall's near-documentary aesthetic based pictures use and situate the staged tableau as an article of truth. Demand creates new articles of truth by undertaking the laborious task of reconstructing whole scenes out of paper. These paper sculptures become the central artifice of documentation, referencing collective cultural memory. Both Demand and Wall pay attention to the details within their staged tableaux. They include indexical references that guide the viewers interpretation. Demand often includes specific textual hints through his use of newspaper photographs. Wall often references historical images, utilizing traditional painting approaches. Both artists have guided my approach to near documentary and the fluid nature of the photograph.

In the 1980's Wall began to realize his photographic pictures under the title of cinematography. Wall suggests that cinematography has little to do with the structure of filmmaking, but rather relies on the underpinning of photography(Pauker 2012). Wall selected his subject matter through experiences that he has witnessed on the streets, making reference to early photographic principles of straight photography (Michaels 2010). This work emphasizes the importance of the source of the lived experience that Wall has bared witness too. In this reference to the street photograph, however, Wall supersedes the importance of witnessing the event, rather taking up the event of photography after the fact (Azoulay 2011) through his recreation of the same event at a later time. Through recreating the scene, Wall underscores the interest in the event, without over emphasising the importance of the photograph. Wall refers to this method as near-documentary, as the images are based on real occurrences and real spaces, but are situated within a staged framework.

Jeff Wall's images are consistently situated in occurrences that become socially familiar, such as *Boxing* (2011) or *Mimic* (1982) (fig.4). The perspective of Wall's work situates the viewer in a manner that resides outside of the scope of feasible possibility for the picture to have been taken. In *Mimic* (1982) the photographer, Wall, is positioned approximately 10 feet in front of the subject. This physical distance in the photograph is made visible through the cropping of the actors in the scene. This closer proximity to the action generates a palatable tension created as the viewer is



Figure 4. *Mimic*. Photograph by Jeff Wall,1982.
Tate Modern.

made to feel implicit in the action taking place. This is all to say that Wall would have to have been seen by the people within the picture, and would have become the focus of both parties, disenchanting the nature of the undisrupted photograph. Here, Wall falls back on the pre-modern painting device of absorption and theatricality. The understanding of absorption within painting involves an omnipotent position that the viewer of the painting has over the scene. The figure in the painting is uninterrupted from this intrusion of the viewer on the scene, as the figure is absorbed with their task at hand (Fried 1980). It is through this device from painting that Wall implies an impossibility in this act of photographing, alluding to the fact that the photography must be staged.

Wall's pictures are never scandalous or dramatic, but rather contain a more incidental quality that happens to have characteristics of being epic, and does not rely on the dramatic within the image (Martin 2007). This is even true within *Mimic* (1982), a photograph that addresses racism within a white dominated society. It is this very incidental nature that makes the photograph feel as though it is not bolstering its own importance, but rather lets us in on a moment that is unfortunately not unique. The ubiquity of these insidious gestures of racism that occur on Canadian streets subverts the drama of the scene.

Wall's attention to specific moments that tell a larger story is something I am exploring in my thesis work. The images I have created attempt to not sensationalize the moments within the frame. One of the strategies I adopted was to create images from memories that do not include people in the scene. Photographing only the physical space reinforces the notion of stillness and without the potential movement in the scene the images are relegated outside any specific time, again focusing on the stillness within the image. These images could easily shift into sensationalism with the depiction of people in the scene, as the focus of the image would shift to

narratives about the person who is living in this space. Instead I underscore the banality and stillness of the scene devoid of drama. This banality also helps to establish the sense of stillness, as this banality references a repetition of the situation, and not a singular dramatic scene.

My work champions the importance of the lived experience of an individual, in this case myself, as a form of autobiographical reliving of events. This resonates with the treatment Wall gives his images, as his images are based on previous experiences. These events are not directly witnessed through the camera, but rather are performed for the camera, suggesting the context of a given event. These images set the preverbal stage for a given context, utilizing the materiality of the build sets to suggest the context for the viewer to proceed with while encountering the work. Douglas Crimp (1979) suggests that photographs lack the pure autonomy of signification, but rather require the manner of presentation to suggest a given context. This notion that Crimp theorizes ties into Vilem Flusser's (2002) idea of photography as post-historic, wherein the photograph operates as a disruption in the flow of history, suspending historical events within the lineage of time. This context is created in my work through a more faithful representation of naturalism. An area where Wall's work and my departure is in the way the viewer is addressed.

The photographs that I have constructed employ built set design, heavily influenced by the building of sets for movies and television. These images are a mix of more straight forward reportage style photography, and others create a phantasmal feeling as they subtly break the fourth wall through the apparitional perspective of peering through invisible walls to the stillness of empty rooms. The line of site within the photographs positions the viewer to feel within the space. The image utilizes the reportage images to create an illusion of realism, making reference to the street photograph through the use of the documentary style photograph. I am using the documentary style as a signifier that the images are taken as a single image, as another layer of

that suggests the images are functioning as truth. My photographs suggest a feeling of instantaneity, however, the images are all long exposures and many are also composite images. These long exposures emphasize the stillness within the images, mirroring and reinforcing the lack of action within the scene. David Campany suggests that photography obtained the capacity to capture a moment's stillness with the advent of cinema. The moving picture suggests an ever present continuum of time through the action that the cinema camera captures, whereas photography was unable to compete with this rendering of temporality (Campany 2003). Cinema captures each individual frame, in the act of movie making, in an instant, and in this sense freezes time. The photograph can not keep up with this continual stopping of time. The photographic image disrupts the flow, suggesting that the photograph struggles to depict anything other than stillness.

Thomas Demand is a student of the German school of Düsseldorf. Demand began his practice as a sculptor, creating life sized objects out of paper and displaying only the paper sculptures as the final piece of art (Ferguson 2018). The images that Demand creates subvert the traditional style of reportage photography, as these images are photographic documentation of sculptures constructed out of paper. The artwork only resides as documentation of the sculpture, as in most cases the paper sculptures are destroyed after the photograph is made. This use of the sculpture of an event creates a separation from the original event, drifting into the realm of the "late photograph" as the photographs Demand makes are photographs based on photographs of a cultural memory or historical event (Campany 2003). The reference of the photographs suggest that the images are about recreating a certain event, rather than depicting the actual event itself, (Ure-Smith 2009) creating a separation from traditional reportage photography, and the intrinsic connection to the index. This removes the photographer from the subject of the photograph,

positioning the work to be about the memory of the event rather than the actual event, or perhaps more specifically, about the recreation of the event. Donna West Brett (2016) suggests that Demand's work can be viewed as "undoings", as they do not directly reference the original image in an indexical way, but rather allude or suggest the original event.

The sculptures in Demand's work stand in for the fully realized event. The sculptures are then truncated by the camera from a three dimensional space into a two dimensional space. This allows Demand to orchestrate how the structures in the images are viewed, which manifest as a fixed vantage point. Through this fixed angle Demand is disrupting the indexical nature of photography (Krauss 1977) by delegating what the objects are, rather than relying on the preexisting signers in the image. Demand's work tells us what the image is about rather than showing us (Brett 2016), through his selection of photographic elements. Demand generates an importance in the scene from his selection of balanced elements from the original and recreation, further shaping how we view the images. The pictures are strongly interior (Trodd 2009) as much of his work is focussed on interior spaces and rooms from domestic and public buildings. These spaces do not reference the "outside" of this universe that Demand has created, again this reinforces his delegation of what the images and space are for the viewer. Demand also uses the act of removing the human figure from the picture frame. The human form is automatically recognizable, shifting the focus of Demand's fabricated reality back to the figure, comparing and contrasting the difference between the two rather than engaging with the constructed nature of the image. As a result of the void of human form, the images resonate back to Campány's understanding of stillness. The image, on closer inspection, simultaneously references the objects they intend to depict, while also performing within the sphere of the uncanny, as we grow to learn that the objects are not indeed what they depict. Within this understanding of the subject in

the photographs as artifice, there is an erosion that occurs. These paper stand-ins become enough of a visual clue to take the place of the objects they represent, while also hindering a greater contemporary context of the objects due to the shallow representation of the physical objects. With our inability to pinpoint a more exacting time frame for the subject, the objects negate anachronistic reads of the specificity of objects, thereby elevating the content into a realm that is outside of a given time. There is a timeless quality to these images that strengthens their reading as enacting stillness. Without the detailed reference to a particular object in the frame they cannot continue within a given understanding of contextual history, thus furthering the arrestment of time.

Demand's images enact a type of performativity through the construction and then later destruction of the sculpture (Brett 2016). Demand's performativity can be exemplified in his work titled *Raum/Room* (1994). Demand is reconstructing a famous image titled *Inspection of the Destroyed Room* (1944) by Heinrich Hoffmann. In his image, *Raum/Room* (1994) (fig.5), Demand distills the sense of the destroyed room through carefully selected elements from the original and thereby, reperforming this destructive act of the event. My work is also referencing the act of reconstruction, however this reconstruction works to distance the event from its original context, while also acting as a form of memory aid. This distancing refers to the act of remembering, acknowledging that this remembering also changes the original



Figure 5. *Raum/Room*. Photograph by Thomas Demand, 1994.

memory. The actions performed in creating the work (painting, patching, cleaning) are reminiscent of actual tasks that a person in my position would perform while working as a frontline worker. Brett (2016) suggested that Demand's work in the reconstruction of a photograph or event operates on two levels. The first is that the work attempted to distance the original from the recreation, however, while doing this Demand is simultaneously bridging the two events into one moment as the photography is still referring back to the original. Brett concludes that Demand's work is not attempting to recreate the event or the actual photograph itself, but rather depict what the memory of the photograph might look like. I believe that is a critical connection between Demands work and mine, that these photographs are used as a way of digesting memory and its importance within the construction of history. My images are in the pursuit of thinking of the photograph as a way of visualizing what a person has seen in the form of memory, but also the shortcomings of these memories.

The images in my series of photographs build off of this notion of the late photograph that Demand takes up in his work. Demand delegates the paper as the artifact to stand in for the actual event of his subject matter. The paper adds a layer of removal from the subject, postulating the potential for the event to be misremembered. Brett (2016) takes this point up arguing that the "unreality" that Demand is constructing suggests a slipperiness that is present in both Demand's work and memory itself. My images are constructed scenes, utilizing standard construction conventions to recreate rooms, and scenes from memory. In a way I am attempting to do the opposite of Demand, where Demand proposes that the sculptures reference the constructed nature of the photographs, my images start with the intangible, memory, and work to develop more validity to the images. Though these images are established in a similar way to Demand's work, working with a social memory or an event, my work is predicated on the perspective of a

front line mental health worker during the overdose crisis. My work is operating on memory, more so than direct source material like media images. Without this source material the work is frail, relying on memory, a source that has been known scientifically to be unreliable. The rigid structure of the physically built rooms add the optics of being real, providing a much more rigid underpinning to the more fluid context of the work.

I focused specifically on the spaces that are pictured, and not on the human counterpart. The emptiness within an interior space operates in a similar way to Demand's work, insulating the picture from being of a specific time, an idea that Jeff Wall addresses in an interview with Magnolia Pauker (2012). I believe there is a transcendental element in these images that is reflective of stillness, as they project a possibility and an impossible. There is a possibility that the rooms pictured resemble the current state of these spaces, but is also a reminder that the space no longer exists in this manner, or within this plane of existence. This duality strengthens the notion of stillness in the image as these two readings of the spaces are amalgamated. However, the photographs also lack the ability to show us a moment that is occurring within the present, and fail as a speculation of what is to come. There is a tension created in flickering from one state to the next, leaving the images within the liminal space of stillness. This stillness is predicated on the empty spaces, much like my project *Memento* (2017), the focus of the images would become about the person occupying the space, rather than the space itself. This stillness becomes a point of meditation for the viewer to reflect on the space, and their relation to the rooms.

My images utilize aspects of both Jeff Wall's work and Thomas Demand, as their work is based both on personal experiences or collective histories, but is then reperformed for the camera. My sets incorporate the impossible angles of Wall's work, wherein the photographer

becomes a form of specter, able to dematerialise through walls and achieve impossible angles. I find Demand's work removes the subject from the original context, and recontextualizes it into another realm entirely pushing the subject to be viewed as an image of a memory, rather than the actual event. Demand accomplishes this through his selection of key elements within the original source material. None of my images are nearly as stylized in this manner, but the notion of the photograph representing the memory instead of the actual event becomes a form of psychic late photography. The project is predicated on images that appear as truthful depictions of a scene, but are subverted by their constructed nature. Just like Demand's work, my images are based on a memory of the event that are "documented" after the event. The images look to represent an interior state or the affect of these experiences, rather than a strictly indexical document of a space at a given time. The materiality of the photograph manifests these spaces as a form of unapproachable realms, spaces that can only exist in this flattened two dimensional space. This flatness appears similar to the way our memories of the past are stagnant looped recurrences of the same scenario with perhaps some slight variations. The memory reaches its terminus, and then resets. This reset is physically performed through the resetting of the sets, and with the photograph of the scene.

CHAPTER 4: Portfolio of Studio Work

In previous projects I dive into the themes of history embedded within the built environment, and the ways in which we situate ourselves within these spaces. In my current work I am interested in memory, and how the memory of these spaces project a form of object permanence, which harkens back to a previous time. The memory, like the photograph,

transforms the object into an arrested moment in time, unable to change or adapt to the continual stream of time. I venture into the notion of absence and presence within the photograph based on the human form, traditionally operated in the photographic image. However, I also believe that presence is a quality that can transmute the boundaries of the human form into the spaces that a person lives within.

The spaces are staged and yet exude a sense of realism through the arrangement of the personalized materials in the rooms. The rooms, without any further context, appear as though they are a document of the actual SRO rooms. The objects in these rooms imply a certain occupancy or presence, even though the photos are without human form. I am interested in this tension between these states of change being flattened into a singular moment. The nature of the sets reinforces the feeling of being temporary, as the sets themselves are impermanent. The staged sets morph and change to my desire as a way of depicting a certain feeling or affect within the work. The images are shot in such a way as to not immediately disclose that the rooms are in fact fake, capitalizing on the projection of an objective truth read in photography. The sets embellish this truth, by making small gestures to things that give context in the room.

I found the beginning steps of the project difficult. I started by photographing harm reduction materials and attempted to discover what I was getting after in the project (fig.6). This quickly fell apart as a topic of interest, as my only relation to harm reduction was through my work as a mental health worker. After this I took photographs of the Moss Park area in Toronto's Downtown Eastside, photographing the debris

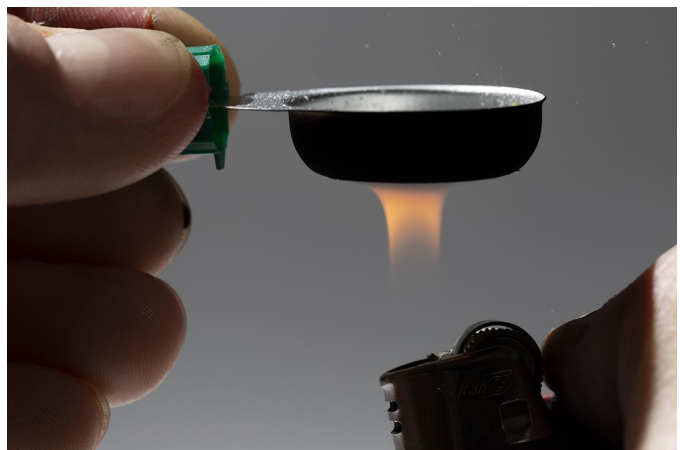


Figure 6. *The Cooker*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2019.

associated with living on the street (fig.7). However, the question was posed to me, was this project about the current state of mental health and addiction in Toronto or was it predicated on my experiences as a mental health worker on the West Coast? The project was formed based on my experience of working in a supportive housing building. With this in mind, I began slowly making my way back to what I had always wanted to do from the beginning, which was to build large scale sets that I could photograph.



Figure 7. *Street Scene*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich 2019.

The first test structure was a rudimentary scale model of one of the rooms within the building I had worked in (fig.8). I began photographing the model I had constructed as a way to recreate some of the imagery that I had barred witness to while working in supportive housing. In concert with these models I tried to construct this room within my studio at York University (fig.9). I went about this by taking different images of door frames to create assets that I would in turn stitch together to create a full image. The first test was a very rough proof of concept, and I feel that the image was scattered and sensational. I feel the original set image operated similar to my initial documentation of harm reduction supplies, where they were simply using the sensational nature



Figure 8. *Untitled*. Photograph By Mikhail Yerkovich, 2020.

of the subject to grab the viewer's attention. The space was reduced to a stereotype of the rooms, or a projection of what one would expect of the room, using traditional photo documentary techniques to sculpt a narrative you want the viewer to see. The development of this image was ultimately halted due to the onslaught SARS-CoV-2 that began to take hold of Canada. It would be another five months before the next staged iteration of the project would take place.

Once I had decided where I would be for the 2020/2021 school year, I set out to find a studio that would facilitate the needs I had for set building. One of the many things I learned while working at York, is that I would need a space that could encompass these rooms. While working on the original set I found it difficult to work within the set, when the set was also the studio. The studio would have to be large enough to accommodate both the room and space outside of the room. Without this extra space outside of the room The photographs would share the visual language of a more photojournalistic style of documentation, as opposed to a

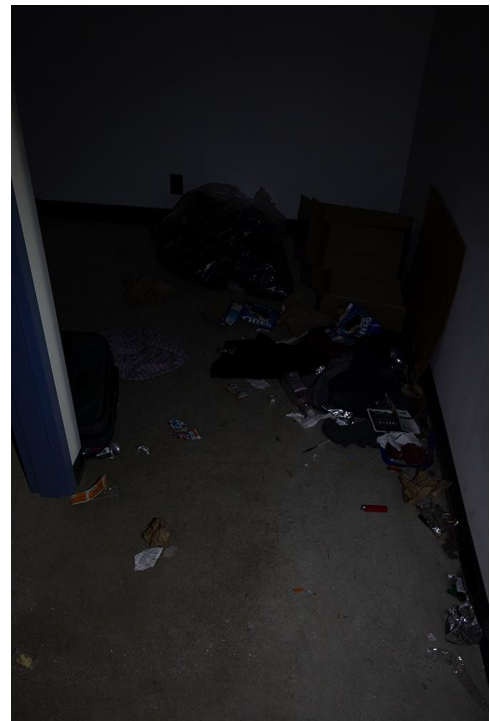


Figure 9. *SRO (test)*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2020.

more refined tableau. Another lesson learned was the necessity for absolute freedom within the studio. While at York I was concerned with my ability to destroy walls, vandalize and paint the walls anyway that I saw fit. I was not interested in having to jump through any bureaucratic hoops to accommodate this desire, so with my own free standing walls within a space I felt I had the capacity to do that.

The Bittersweet Bathroom (2020)

The first room erected was *The Bittersweet Bathroom* (2020) (fig.10), consisting of a small private bathroom found within the supportive housing units I worked at. The set is constructed of two walls and ceiling to encapsulate the entirety of the built environment. The walls of the bathroom are inserted into a pre-existing room allowing me the flexibility to build the bathroom to the dimensions I had settled on when designing my initial cardboard models. The toilet and sink were placed within the set to appear functional, but do not function, as a way of having the room read as a bathroom. The fluorescent tube was adapted to connect to the original light sockets in the room, allowing timely access to the turning lights on and off. The colour palette was chosen solely based on the memory of the space, the orange was used to mimic the Pionite laminate that was typical of the 70's. The rest of the contents of the image are elements meant to elicit

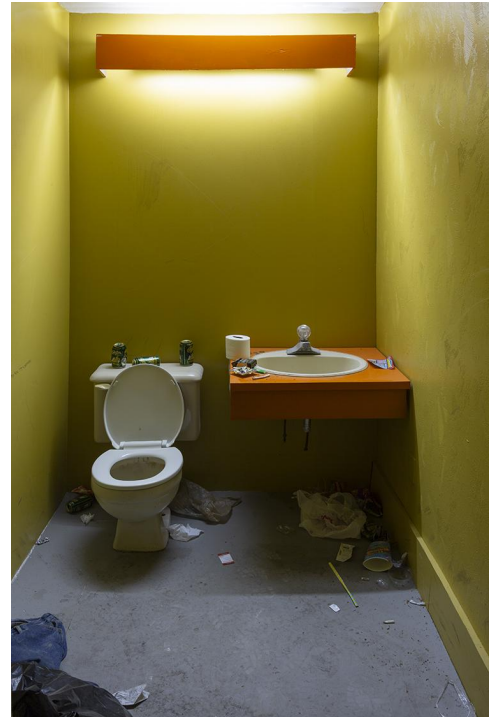


Figure 10. *The Bittersweet Bathroom*.
Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2020

the feeling of the memory. The photograph depicts a small and narrow yellow disorganized bathroom. The lighting in the room is from a singular fluorescent tube, which imitates a sickly yellowish green hue, subverting the bright golden tone, into a drab distortion, giving the space a sickly institutional feeling. The stark light streams down across the scuffed, stained and battered walls giving the room patina or feeling of being a lived in. These details intensify the sense of realism within the recreation of this space. The room is filled with cheap empty beer cans, an

ashtray, cigarettes, black bags, clothes and other garbage strewn around the room. Underneath the assortment of 7/11 slurpee cups, black plastic garbage bags, and other objects reminiscent of other corner store conveniences, lay sticky stains of spilled drinks and the tenacious accumulation of dirt within these sugary deposits. These details in the photograph set in motion a shallow narrative, however, this narrative does not extend further than the image itself, forcing the viewer to focus on the space in front of them.

In the photograph the image is centralized around the perspective of an onlooker from the threshold of the doorway. This perspective positions the viewer to encounter the room in a way similar to how I first witnessed the space. At first inspection it would appear that the viewer is confronting the space, in perhaps a voyeuristic way, however this implication is subverted the longer the viewer spends with the picture. The image is predicated on a “critical incident” where a person was found to be deceased. The image in a way depicts a duality of life/death through a form of absence and presence. The image is filled with the remnant of the person who occupied the space, but at the same time is lacking the presence of that person. There is a subversion of the power struggle, what is encroaching upon what? Is the viewer participating in the surveillance of the space? Or is this space confronting the viewer at a critical moment? I believe the latter is true, the space encroaches upon the viewer through the state of the room and the knowledge of the discovery of the body. The idea of the deceased body reverses the passive voyeuristic nature of looking and transforms the room into a place that demands your attention. The confrontation is escalated in the room, as the room is a dead end, there is no other way around or through the space. The event of responding to this critical incident is effectively replicated in the viewer’s response in choosing to engage with the image or to simply walk away.

The title *The Bittersweet Bathroom* is a reference to the specific colour, *Bittersweet*, of the replicated orange laminate panelling. My initial attraction to the phrase bittersweet is in reference to idiomatic use of the word, and its association to oxymorons. The phrase to my understanding is associated with something that at one point was sensationally good, but will no longer continue. With this consideration, I envision the phrase to have an overarching tone of sorrow, that there is severance from one state of experience to another. This idiom sets up a comparison to the duality and cyclical nature of opioid consumption. The substance user consumes the opioid typically to experience a temporary euphoric sensation, as opioids are known to reduce pain and other anguishes. Once the euphoric experience has subsided, the person is left with their original discomfort previous to the consumption of the opioid. This discomfort is then compounded with the burden of withdrawal symptoms. Through its cyclical nature the use of opioids can be closely associated with a bittersweetness, as the user navigates this duality, repeating the highest highs and the lowest lows.

My second interest in the phrase stems from the oxymoronic nature of the phrase, as I feel it exemplifies some of the concepts I am attempting to address in my own work. Bitter and sweet are two opposing flavour profiles that sit directly across for one another, and yet are conjoined together to speak about both states of being. This dichotomy of the two flavour profiles made me think about the dichotomy of absence and presence in the photograph. Though the dual concepts of absence and presence run parallel to one another, I am attempting to conflate the two, to hollow out a liminal space in which to bridge these two concepts. These images interrupt this relation in a more literal sense, subscribing to the idea that though the person who resides in this room is absent, the space in which they once lived stands in as an accumulation of

that person's presence. The images create a form of object permanence, where we are still able to draw connections to the person and their space.

An Early Morning (2020)

The second room I assembled is *An Early Morning (2020)* (fig.11), this room depicts the main living space of an SRO. This room was constructed with the footprint of the cardboard model I assembled during the summer.

The dimensions of the room are approximately 9 feet by 9 feet, with a ceiling height of 8 feet. The recreated room is constructed in the same manner as the bathroom, utilizing wall panels that I put together and then assembled into one cohesive room. The walls are joined and



Figure 11. *An Early Morning*. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2020.

filled with a joint compound and “mudding” tape to attempt to make the joints seamless, bringing an overall cohesion to the room. The floor is also covered with door skin, the seams are then filled with a joint compound, and painted grey to mimic a concrete floor. This room has a window that is constructed out of 2” x 2” dimensional lumber and is lined with a sheet of diffusion material. This diffusion aids in a softer light entering the room, and also prevents the viewer from looking out into the studio. The diffusion resembles the film that a person might use for privacy in a room, so I felt that the diffusion works on two fronts. The room is illuminated by a warm tone work light modified to fit on a light stand. The warmer tone is reminiscent of early

summer morning or late evening light pouring directly into the room. The yellow colour is the same as the bathroom colour and embellishes this effect, reflecting even more golden light. The light pours in through the window's opening brightly illuminating the diffusion film, radiating a wonderful warm glow, and casting shadows on the floor, walls and other adjacent surfaces. The darkness of the wall on the background accentuates the brighter tonal value of the bed and provides a subtle separation between these two planes. The interior walls are relatively clean, with only minor scuffs and scraps in the painted surface. The room is filled quite sparsely, lacking personal effects, depicting only the basics of a room. In the corner is an anachronistic collection of electronics haphazardly stacked in a disheveled manner. The bed is unmade and sits on the floor, with the fitted sheet hastily applied to the boxspring-less mattress. A bare and simplified drawer is converted into a night stand, complete with faux wood paneling. Atop the nightstand are three items, a television remote control, mauvie-grey lighter, and meth pipe.

The image is made from a low angle, approximately eye level with a person if they were sitting on the bed and looking directly at the camera. The low angle brings attention to the bareness of the space, reiterating the sense of absence. This absence is functioning in a dual sense, referring to both the inhabitants, and the lack of the inhabitant's personal touch within their surroundings. This lack of a personal touch suggests that the room is more transitory or a place of transition in nature. The absence suggests a kinetic nature to the room, it has the potential for occupancy, but is currently not occupied. Without the human form there is a stillness that persists, as the room lacks its intended purpose of sheltering. Without the figure in the image, the image does not have any suggestion of movement. The room in turn, defaults to a repeating moment of stillness. This stillness is echoed in the banality of the scene, implying that this cycle is likely to reoccur, causing this moment to continue. As suggested by Eugénie Shinkle

(2004) photographs of the banel do not operate as a depiction of the extraordinary, but rather as an index of the recurring and of an invariant state. The space becomes removed from the past, present, and future, creating a hybrid moment in which all three of these states can be seen as transpiring. The viewer is placed in the circumstance of omniscience, wherein the viewer is effectively looking at the future, present, and past simultaneously.

The space where a wall should be is removed, revealing the minimal contents of the room. The spectral like presence of the photographer/viewer reiterates the sense of being omnipresent within the space. We are looking through the wall of the room onto the scene of emptiness. The image is made banal through the lack of sensational or satiating events. This banality suggesting boredom reinforces the notion of the never ending cycle. Patrice Petro (1994) describes the feeling of being bored as “[. . . A] time without event, when nothing happens, a seemingly endless flux without beginning or end.” The picture of the room is a non event, and without further contextual explanation, becomes a portal to an indistinguishable time.

The Sheet Fort (2021)

The third image called *The Sheet Fort (2021)* (fig.12), makes reference to the main room of the suite. This set utilizes the same room as *An Early Morning (2020)*, however, I’ve added a fourth wall. The inclusion of the construction of this wall is to close the space off, giving the room a sense of familiarity, while also returning to a more straightforward approach to documentary photography. This fourth wall includes a closet space from which the photograph is taken. The viewer cannot escape this room, and becomes consumed by it. The space is transformed by the sheer volume of stuff within the room, creating an overwhelming sensation.

Walls are covered by graffiti and sheets, and strewn about the bed and floors are clothing, plastic bags, and other assorted debris. Hanging sheets accentuate the verticality of the space, while also closing it off, generating a claustrophobic tension. The sheets transect the space dividing it up into different quadrants within the frame. The light from the window becomes a strong focal point as the light filters through the cascading folds of the mauve sheet, casting a strong unifying colour shift across the entirety of the room. The exception to this flood of purple hue is the bottom left corner where sunlight intrudes the dimly lit dwelling. The daylight breaks up the drab affecting quality of the magenta toned room, while also highlighting the connection to supportive housing through the depiction of more harm reduction gear. The sharps disposal box appears phosphorescent in its diffusion of light, drawing attention back to the context of the space. The accumulation of belongings suggests a well lived in bedroom.



Figure 12. *The Sheet Fort*.
Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich,
2021.

The suite is filled with many different things, which make the room appear more personal. These rooms seemingly invert an early interpretation of the uncanny, where the uncanny was once considered to be attached to the homely, and the homely as familiar. This homeliness is made strange by a subtle affective transmutation of the space, relegating it from a space that we might understand as a bedroom or something familiar, into something that is made strange, or estranged from the original context (Vidler 1998). *The Sheet Fort* (2021) challenges

our understanding of this notion of the homely, as we contribute our own understanding of what a comfortable space “should be”. Instead, the room operates under the guise of a hyper assertion of the homely, as the room is filled with the personal effects deemed important to the keeper of the space. We are attempting to contextualize the room under our own condition, however, it is operating under its own expectation of comfort and coziness. The sheets have a whimsical quality to them, nodding to an early childhood form of play. When children build temporary forts there is a form of comfort generated out of these tent-like buildings. The space is made to fit them, dwarfing the surrounding space that is made to accommodate an adult. We can see that the current space within *The Sheet Fort (2021)* is operating on this level of comfort and security. There are no social constraints to adhere to, and the room is available to be made as homely as the occupant chooses. The sheets make reference to a makeshift tarp or tent shelter, creating a doubling effect of this need for comfort and protection. This reference to the sheet fort outlines a form of the uncanny for the viewer. The image is a return to a child-like state that we have known, and that which was once familiar (Freud 2003), but a behavior we have typically grown out of. However, this familiarity is made strange through its recontextualization for one context into another situation. The viewer is subsequently extracted from the tender intimacy of a potential childhood moment, and is relocated to the occupants' need for comfort.

There is a twist to *The Sheet Fort (2021)*, as the photograph has been digitally flipped. The graffiti that lines the walls was written backwards in preparation for the digital mirroring. The mirrored image was a reference to the mirroring that took place in the blueprint of the suites, where the rooms fit together in a repeating pattern. Within this mirroring is a subtle hint to the doppelganger, another example Freud uses while speaking about the uncanny. A doppelganger refers to a person who looks identical to a figure we know. The notion of the doppelganger

creates a mirroring effect that can be applied to the recreation of the flipped rooms. There is an eerie connection amongst every SRO room in the building I worked in, as each room two doors down from the last would be configured in the same orientation. This repetition in the building layout led to a familiarity or sameness throughout the rooms. The feeling of the sameness was only broken by the personal effects of the room, which helped to differentiate one room from the next. The layout of the building led to a binary of only two possible orientation to the rooms. Having only two different versions of a room reinforces the uncanny nature of the space, as they create the feeling of a familiarity through repetition. This repetition is brought to the staged images as a way of eliciting the feeling of the uncanny in the viewer. The mirroring in *The Sheet Fort (2021)* attempts to visualize the phenomena of the uncanny by implementing a mirroring of the sets. One set is utilized to support all of the other versions of the rooms. The actual SRO spaces have the feeling of being the same because they are a repeating and mirrored pattern. My sets accomplish a similar effect because they are all derived from the same set, and rely on a digital mirroring, through Photoshop, to change our perception of the space. This digital mirror is attempting to make the same space feel different, while the actual SRO's are different but feel the same.

A Painted Room (2021)

In the image *A Painted Room (2021)* (fig.13) the photograph details the same previously depicted spaces of the living quarters of the support housing suite, but in a transitional configuration. This room utilizes the same set from both *The Yellow Room (2020)* and *The Sheet Fort (2021)*, but also features the reference to the bathroom adjustment to the main living area. I

used leftover drywall and cut down baseboard material to construct a doorway façade, suggesting another room beyond the darkened threshold. From the dark suggestion of a bathroom to the false window, the image is lit quiet dimly. The window is darkened giving the impression that the room is being painted at night. Light radiates from a singular fluorescent tube mounted high on the left hand side of the frame, and is



Figure 13. A Painted Room. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2021

scattered by a reflective shade that surrounds the fixture. The cold artificial light sluices across the patch work of different surface textures and colour, unifying what the paint has yet to, through its austere glow. This glow suggests a reference to a hospital or other institutional setting, but is interrupted by the unfinished nature of the soon to be domicile. The room has undergone a rejuvenation, with the replacement of drywall panels and the filling of small pock marks that line the walls, illuminating excessive wear and tear. The room is sparsely filled with only painting supplies, and the beginnings of the painting process. Joint filler still covers the floors as the room comes to completion.

This photograph builds on the uncanny nature of the previous images in the series, as this room is the framework around which all the other rooms are structured. This is the room empty before it becomes transformed into a highly personalized space. When looking at this room we have the potential to imagine what the space will be. The room is left up to the person to fill the space as they see fit. We can view this blank space, like a blank page, where the room is effectively in a superposition. This superposition reinforced the potential of the room as the room

can be seen as being every iteration of the space. This room is the base for these moments to occur in, and this rudimentary fact about the space lends itself to be susceptible to the uncanny. The simple layout of the space becomes the specter that penetrates the mind, repeating, reappearing and remaining within every instance of us encountering the space. The state that the room is in is one I am most familiar with. We spent many hours of the late nights and early mornings painting these rooms and preparing them for their new occupant. The bareness of the rooms haunted the newly transformed room. It was as though something remained as this little inkling that lingered from the new room to the lived in room. Part of my interest in using the same set is for this very effect, that the rooms have a resonance from one room to the next, and that the rooms feel uncomfortably similar. As Thomas Demand suggested in an interview with Russel Ferguson (2018), the artist's job is to take the intangible of a personalized memory and to transpose that into a form that has meaning for the viewer. I am attempting to artificially inject the phenomenological response of the uncanny into the series. The repetition of the set infuses the series with the feeling of the uncanny, reinforcing my understanding of the space to the viewer.

This photograph is very different in relation to the other images in the series as it is depicting a room without an occupant. The image is both a memory of painting this room late at night, as well as literal documentation of the project. The image captures the performativity of this project, and this performance through recreating becomes a form of remembering. The two become entangled in an inextricable manner. The recreation both influences and misleads the memory. Painting the room becomes a form of nostalgia, however, one which is not sequestered solely to the mind, but extends outwardly in a form of speculative remembering. This image confuses the established boundary of the images as recreation, by interjecting with a moment that

is both a recreation and an indexical document. This image straddles these two conflicting positions, but rather than forcing the viewer to decide, simply proposes both as options.

CONCLUSION

My project consists of creating large scale sets and photographing staged recreations of past events in these built environments. However, there were a few outcomes of the project that I did not expect. My expectations were to build on similar themes I had undertaken in my previous work, such as the authenticity of the photographic medium, and absence/presence in the photograph. In addition, I discovered an interesting relationship to banality and the uncanny within this mode of photographic exploration. The final point that I discovered as I began sifting through the project was how these seemingly disparate concepts had a fascinating crossover, where the two ideas were almost inseparable.

The first few iterations of the project attempted to undo this desire for sets, because I was not sure I would be able to accomplish this in my original studio space. Working in a private studio allowed me to build on my creativity for the project. My project was not confined to the short four month semester of the MFA program. Within this new space, I was able to leave the sets while having the ability to add or change the sets. This gave me the opportunity to revisit and reshoot different elements in the scene that need to be refined. The rooms were built for view of the camera, but also make reference to the documentary style of the scenes as a reference to Jeff Wall's notion of near documentary.

My original interest was in the relationship between the viewer and the photograph, and how the images could or could not operate as a form of objective truth. I utilized Vilem Flusser's

concept of the post-historic image as the underpinning for the photographs. By using this concept I was attempting to use the recreations of the photograph to imply a certain thread of history. This was done without having the event actually unfold in the view of the photograph, manipulating photographs' strong assertion for the indexicality of an object. The images inadvertently operate in a similar manner to an oral history, or recounting of the images, as the specific details may change but the overall feeling comes across. I was not interested in having people within the space, because I felt the photograph would become about the people pictured in the images and not about the memory of these spaces. With that in mind, I discovered the images held a certain impression of the person even though the person was not there, and I found this to be a beautiful metaphor for the act of photography. A discovery within this process was the phenomena of late photography as a way of looking at the space after the fact of an event. The photographs depicted the stillness of the space, this immovable quality of the images. The photographs became about the banality of the sets, and how this banality led to a palpable boredom, which in turn led to the scene of stillness in the images. The images were no longer situated within a specific time, but rather simply existed, and they perpetuate the sense that these moments may still be occurring elsewhere.

In reality, the rooms in supportive housing apartments elicited a strange familiarity to them. The rooms are made up of only a few variations, repeating the mirrored layout and butting up against one another. This familiarity gave the feeling as though you had been in the room before, or that you could see projections of what was to come with the room. I was aware that this psychic projection had some uncanny characteristics, but what made the phenomena of the uncanny more visceral for me was the connection to building the spaces. I had rebuilt these spaces in my mind many times, I had repeated the same experiences over and over again, to the

point where I could lead you through them in description. But, something about physically constructing the space changed the relationship for me. The act of painting and patching the recreated space mirrored some of the work I had done in the rooms while working in SRO's. At the beginning of this project I would not have considered these lingering elements to become an important part of the project. However, it redefined how I saw the project. The stillness within these images cemented the uncanny nature of these spaces and the research into the banal image reinforced themes I had unwittingly undertaken.

Banality is an interesting intersection for one to find oneself, as it is usually associated with a negative quality. However, I found this association with banality and boredom to be enthralling. I found that boredom paired nicely with this notion of a repetitive state, and that the rooms themselves mirrored stillness as an extended moment, while also alluding to the notion of a never ending cycle. A state of boredom can be defined as a moment that seemingly has no beginning or end, and in this way generates a looping of the moment indefinitely. This cycle established the uncanny in a way I had not considered previously, as the extended moment that repeats, and in this repetition a familiarity is manifested. The longer the viewer looks at the work, the longer this moment is suspended, and the longer this moment is repeated.

I had not anticipated the concept of absence/presence, a phenomena I perceived to be diametrically opposed, had a crossover where the images actually enacting both polar opposites concurrently. I was aware that this would occur with the post historical image, my intent was indeed to blur the lines between how truth actually operated. However, the absence/presence in the photograph functioned in a way I had never considered possible. Absence/presence is typically attributed to the differences that are made apparent through the progression of time, and more specifically, in regards to the human form. The images exude a presence in the space even

though the space is no longer the same, and thus should operate in the absence. I believe this is due to the phenomena of stillness within photography, generating a timeless quality in the images, created through the late photographic image. The photograph has a quality to it where the person who lives there could come back at any moment, or could never return. This potential for both outcomes in the space charges the dual nature of the absence/presence because we are not certain when one state of this phenomena is taking place, and when when the other has resided. I believe we can view the spaces as operating in both states, a form of superposition, where both outcomes can be thought of as happening at the same time. The notion of absence/presence was conflated for me through this project, two things that I thought were on opposite ends of a spectrum inched closer and closer as I undertook the research, built the sets and made the photographs.

This project highlighted, how seeming disparate ideas surrounding truth, context, and familiarity can be closer in proximity with one another than we realize. These divisions within concepts are not nearly as neatly divided as we may think, or in some cases, hope they are, but rather meet somewhere in the middle between true and false, absent and present, familiar and unfamiliar. There is a liminal space, an inbetween, we just never have to stop searching for it.

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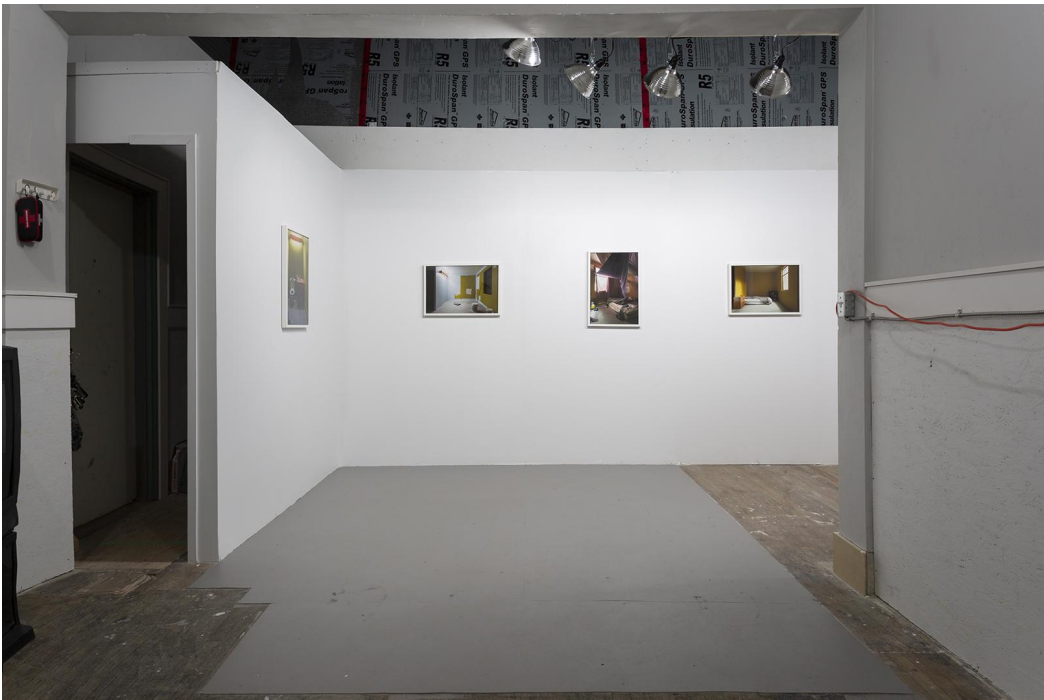
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Appendix A : Supplimetry Images



Behind the scene image during the photographing of *The Sheet Fort* (2021).
Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2021.



An Image of my studio after it was converted into a gallery space for my thesis defence. The grey floor indicates the footprint of the main room I photographed. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2021.



A secondary angle of the gallery for the thesis defence. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2021.



The exterior facade of my studio on East Hastings and Clark. Photograph by Mikhail Yerkovich, 2021.