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School of the Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Travis Fullerton entitled Combined Alterations has been approved by his committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.




Prof. Dale Quarterman, Thesis Committee Director, School of the Arts



Prof. James T. Long, Thesis Committee Member, School of the Arts



Tom Adair, Thesis Committee Member, School of the Arts



Prof. James T. Long, Chair, Department of Photography and Film



Dean of The School of the Arts



Dr. F. Douglas Boudinot, Dean of Graduate Studies

May 13, 2005

Date

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Combined Alterations

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Travis James Fullerton
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 1999
Virginia Commonwealth University

Director: Dale Quarterman
Professor, Department of Photography and Film

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2005

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Abstract

COMBINED ALTERATIONS

By Travis James Fullerton, Master of Fine Arts

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Thesis Director: Dale Quarterman
Professor, Department of Photography and Film

The world around us is in constant flux. The photographs we make of the world, no matter how true or untrue, have a direct influence on how we perceive the environment around us. Photography serves to categorize our perceptions of the world. The value of an image is not in what it represents, but in what it recalls. Photographs are fragmented and clear, imperfect and idealized all at the same time.

Questioning The Photographic Ideal

“The camera is not merely a reflecting pool and the photographs are not exactly the mirror, mirror on the wall that speaks with a twisted tongue... The mind-finger presses the release on the silly machine and it stops time and holds what its jaws can encompass and what the light will stain....”

From *Self Portrait*, by Lee Friedlander, 1970

Photographs are both reality and fiction. The realness stems from the nature of the thing. A consistent truth of the medium is that photography, as a form, is a great ensemble of images which were all created by the action of light on a sensitized surface.¹ It has been suggested of photography, because of this truth of the nature of the medium, that it is limited in its ability to express an idea because of the physical connection to the world.² Many early photographers, including Louis Daguerre, believed photography to be a process in which nature reproduces itself or, as one early observer put it, a “perfect transcript of the thing itself.”³

That a photograph is a depiction of *something* is a fact, though the medium is steeped in fiction. The first and probably clearest fiction of photography lies literally in the hand of the photographer. That there is a person involved, the photographer, as editor of what he sees and of what he chooses to represent, is the most obvious argument

¹ Michael Frizot, “Introduction” to *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michael Frizot, trans. Colin Harding (Milan, Italy: Konemann, 1998), 11.

² Joel Eisenger, *Trace and Transformation* (Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 6.

³ Eisenger, *Trace and Transformation*, 13.

against any illusion of photographic truth. The camera allows the image-maker to interpret the world the way he sees it, or the way he wishes it were. The condition of idealizing something through a photograph is another fiction of photography that evolved from the photographer himself. The act of making or representing something in order to bring new insight to the thing being depicted is a method used throughout the history of art. The issue is complicated further with photography because the thing being depicted is present in the making. The photograph is an echo of the original thing or moment. Many photographers have purposefully used the medium as a tool to manipulate and create a vision of the world that does not, and may never have, existed.

Since the inception of photography, the natural world, the landscape, and the photographer's environment have been subjects that image-makers continually return to. Initially, this was out of necessity. Photographic exposure took too long for any object that was not static to be recorded. This fact resulted in still-life images and, more commonly, landscapes. Also, photography came about at a time when the relationship between man and his surroundings was changing quickly and drastically. The middle of the 19th century saw the birth of photographic image-making, a new way to depict the world outside of drawing and painting, and the birth of industrialization, with its new ways to manufacture a "better" and more efficient world. Factories, railroads, bridges, and dams sprang up everywhere, and there was a new way to relate to this change through documentation. For these reasons, photographs that depict the physical world around us have been engraved into the soul and history of the medium.

Ansel Adams, one the best-known photographers of natural landscape, is one who believed photography could represent more of nature than nature could itself. His heroic black and white images used photographic characteristics of detail and infinite sharpness to depict a perfect and untouched nature he believed should exist. Adams often would go to great lengths to undermine realities of the industrialized world, such as roads, power lines, or any human presence at all, in order to support his ideal of nature. Adams endeavored to eliminate the presence of man from his images, though he accessed the natural world from the side of a road, an access gained by the hand of man. He had a platform constructed on the roof of his station wagon from which he made the majority of his most iconic images.⁴ The truth of this method is always omitted from the final images.

Another example of Adams' pursuit of a perfect and untouched nature is a photograph he made of the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Lone Pine, California. Adams made this image, again from his car-platform on the side of the road, from what he deemed was "the best location." From this position he and the world could clearly see the initials LP, which had been whitewashed onto the side of the mountain by local teens. Adams called it "a hideous and insulting scar on one of the great vistas of our land...." He then proceeded to "spot" it out of the film and print, altering the reality of the situation in order to present his vision of what it should be.⁵ To Adams the impact of man on the land was contradictory to the beauty of it.

⁴ John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams at 100* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2001), 29.

⁵ Ansel Adams, *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1983), 164.

Later, in the 1970's, an exhibition was organized that would debunk the visions of an untouched natural landscape held by Adams. "The New Topographics" was an exhibition that was radical in its time. The group of participating photographers pointed their cameras on the "man-altered" landscape.⁶ They photographed the effects of industrialization on the land. They did not shy from images of factories, roads, and houses, things that Ansel Adams considered to be invasive to the natural beauty of the land. Their work highlighted and dramatized the human occupation of the landscape. But these photographers still put man and nature at odds with each other. In his introductory essay to an exhibition titled In Response to Place, Andy Grundberg, a well-known photography critic and educator, observed of "The New Topographics" that "...the 'Man-Altered Landscape' of the past quarter century was simply the flip side of the same coin that Ansel Adams and his peers had used for the previous fifty years."⁷

The assumption that man's alteration of the land is an offense may stem from the viewpoint that nature has no clear method to oppose that alteration. With regard to structure and place, humankind has often had the mindset that we can do what we want and build what we want, wherever we want. We construct our own environments through the science of engineering and architecture, often bending natural order to suit a design. Yet nature is where we go when we feel like communing. It is what we seek outside our everyday existence, at a park or on vacation. While it is true the relationship is not symbiotic, the two, man and nature, are ultimately and without question linked.

⁶ Nancy Hall-Duncan, ed. New Topographics, Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, Exhibition Catalog (Carlisle, Massachusetts, Pentacle Press, 1975).

⁷ Andy Grundberg, "Place Matters," from In Response To Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places (Boston: Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown, and Company, 2001), 15.

Nature and man are swirled interlocked in the reality of the present. Today, man is a tourist in nature, and “most tourists feel compelled to put a camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable about what they encounter.”⁸

A similar paradox lies at the heart of photography. Photography itself is a record or impression of an actual thing, while at the same time it is a complete alteration of that thing. A photograph at its most basic is an image created from the impression of light and then made permanent. The light that makes the image is either emitted or reflected from an actual thing, leaving a pictorial residue of that thing. The actual image created is not the object or place being depicted, but there is an impression left by the thing that either looks like, or refers back to the object, place, or moment that made the image.

⁸Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 10.

Combined Alterations

“In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe.”

Susan Sontag, From On Photography, 1973

As with any photograph, my photographs exist only as a fragment of their referent. What reality and when are questions that might not be answerable. The only thing you can truthfully and honestly say about a photograph is that it is a photograph. The only thing you can truthfully and honestly say about a place is that at some moment, it existed. A photograph can only attempt to depict a place. It can only be an impression of a thing. The reality of a place lies only in one's experience of it, and an experience is always subjective. Once something is captured in a photograph, it ceases to be; it becomes at best an echo of the original thing or moment being depicted. Photography has had enormous impact on the way we perceive the world, and on the way we perceive ourselves in the world.

In her book titled On Photography, Susan Sontag wrote, “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.”⁹ This statement speaks to the impact photography can have on the way we interpret our surroundings. The power of a photograph lies not in what it represents, but in what it conjures. In his book, Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes

⁹ Sontag, S., On Photography, 4.

observed, “The photograph is in no way animated (I do not believe in ‘lifelike’ photographs), but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure.”¹⁰ In other words, the meaning of a photograph lies in what we bring to it: “The photograph suggests that our image of reality is made up of images.”¹¹ The influence of time, history, and physical perception are all aspects of understanding and defining an image we are confronted with. Photography has the ability to reference all of these things, and at the same time each photograph is an alteration.

My photographs illustrate these alterations in perception. The images exist in groups that are combined to create an implied panorama of a scene. Each frame is an individual image, with the frame next to it picking up the scene where the last left off. The sequences exist in 3, 4, or 5 frames. Some of these frames I previsualize. That is to say, I determine a composition before making the image, i.e., I will structure one frame of the sequence specifically and allow others to fall where they may. The frames fall next in line in the scene, and I have little control over what ends up in every individual frame. Chance plays a role, but as arbiter of the photograph, I ultimately decide. After all, I choose the place. I choose which image to start with, and which frame to end the sequence. Photography is inundated by duality and paradox. It is like scheduling a time for chance to occur.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 20.

¹¹ Andy Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real* from the book *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography since 1974* (New York: Aperture Foundation Publishers, 1999), 16.

The frames of each sequence do not align perfectly or even touch; there is space between them. It is our eye that finds the connecting rhythm and assembles them into one image. Within the broad panoramic scene there is interruption. Each ensemble of images contains other elements that interrupt our perception, allowing the scene to be one thing and the images that form it another.

“To West Point” (plate.1) is a 5-panel sequence of a road and its surroundings that lead to a small town called West Point in Virginia. The furthest left panel begins the road in the image, and as the scene pans to the right, the context of the road is revealed. This road, leading to a bridge, runs along a riverbank lined with marsh grass. The sequence as a whole leads from one individual frame to the next, but at the same time the whole is contained within its own composition. The complete sequence is as follows: On the left, a portion of a road comes into the frame. On the road is a vehicle, blurred by movement. In the distance some sort of factory rises from the horizon. The next frame to the right is the continuation of the road as it passes into a vanishing point on the horizon. Above the road is a sign warning tractor-trailers of low clearance. The center of the five panels is the edge of the road. It reveals the trimmed marsh grass at the edge of the road as the grass rises from the riverbank. The next-to-last frame is a frontal image of just the marsh grass with no other reference to man in the scene. The last frame is also of the marsh grass, but in this image an electrical power box sits in the grass at the edge of the road. Each of the panels is in color, except for the one that shows only marsh grass and no reference to the presence of man. This image is a traditional black and white print; this image interrupts the “flow” of the scene.

The natural “ideal” exists between roads and electrical boxes. This image allows Nature to be, while still allowing the structures of man to be within it, rather than putting the two at odds. They are together, but not the same.

These interruptions manifest in different ways with each sequence of images. In one, the interruption is purely of optical perception. In this sequence, titled *Willoughby Bay, Norfolk, Virginia*, each frame is in sharp focus depicting a low railing near the edge of a body of water. One of these frames is thrown out of focus enough to cause all of the detail in the image, including the horizon, to be lost. Yet this sequence is still perceived as a complete whole, even though one frame has less information to tie it to the rest.

In another sequence titled *1st and Broad, Richmond, Va.*, the interruption is an alteration of time, with a portion of the image having been made at a different time of day from the others. The sequence depicts a busy street intersection during the afternoon. In the second frame from the left the scene was photographed in twilight allowing the lights of the cars and the city to create streaks of movement across the image.

Each of the sequences exists as a complete view of a place, yet each is made up of individual photographs. They are combinations of photographs, they are fragmented and clear, imperfect and idealized all at the same time.

The Exhibition

The exhibition titled *Combined Alterations* opened the 6th of May 2005 in the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. The exhibit consisted of six image sequences (see list of plates) which varied from three, four, or five frames per sequence. The completed sequences measured 52 inches, 68 inches, and 85 inches in length, respectively. Each grouping was framed separately. The individual panels of a given sequence were mounted on Gator board and affixed inside the black frame without matting or glass. The panels in each sequence were spaced approximately 1/2-inch from each other and “floated” off the frame backing approximately the same distance. The framed sequences were hung on three adjoining walls on the third floor of the gallery. The gallery walls were painted black to blend with the finish on the frames. The majority of the photographs in the exhibition were chromogenic prints measuring 16”x20”. The black and white panels were selenium-toned silver gelatin prints of the same dimensions.

History and Influence

I grew up in a military family. We lived all over the United States, on both east coast and west coast, and for some time overseas. Every three or four years we would pack up and move to another town. This experience is not unique. In fact, it is the experience of any child who grows up in a military family or in a family whose parent's career demands it. As common as this experience is, I have come to realize, that living this way had a profound influence on me and on the way I perceive my surroundings. My father was in the Navy; we were always near the water. I did not realize it at the time, but just as my awareness of my physical environment and surroundings was becoming sharply defined, so was my attraction to water. Living this way, taught me that familiar things are constantly in flux. I think my attraction to water and nature came from trying to relate to these fluctuations in my environment.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, "One can and cannot step into the same river twice"¹². In other words, the water flowing in a river is constantly changing but the river itself remains the same. The river as a whole is what we see. We know the water is moving and changing, and we know the living natural environment around us is doing the same. It would be impossible to be conscious of every molecule of water that

¹²Grolier Encyclopedia of Knowledge, Vol. 9, (Connecticut: Grolier, Inc., 1991), 211.

passed through a river, just as it would be impossible to observe every cell in a living thing as it grew, multiplied, and died. These things happen as time passes. We eventually become aware of the effect of these changes. With this knowledge we can say, paraphrasing Heraclitus, you can never step into the same river twice. Photography is like that. No matter how hard you try, you can never create the same image twice. This is true of any subject; if nothing else, time changes. The photographs may look alike, but time has passed between them; no matter how insignificant the duration, they are not the same.

I first discovered photography while living on a NATO base in Iceland. I was around twelve years old and I signed up for a summer volunteer internship program on base to stay busy while school was out. I was assigned to the Naval Photography Lab. My relationship with image making began here, in a land as unique and foreign as one is likely to find anywhere. At the time I was inexperienced with photographic craft and unaware of the influence the medium could have. I simply loved the practice of freezing a moment, capturing a place in time, and being surprised by the result. Before this experience I always thought I would become an architect or engineer. After my first experiences with a camera however, I knew my life would somehow always involve photography.

I first began to truly understand and explore image making my first year in college at Ohio State University. This was my first exposure to the possibility of photography as a form of art. An exhibition on campus of Robert Frank's images from his book titled The Americans was on view at the campus art museum, The Wexner Center. These photographs somehow achieved more than I ever thought 83 images could.

Jack Kerouac said it best in his introduction, “ The humor, the sadness, the EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness of these pictures!”¹³ These images were shown together with the photographer’s notes and some contact sheets. For the first time I began to truly understand photography.

Early on, I had a great appreciation for the images of Robert Frank and the work of other photographers such as Sally Mann in her book, Immediate Family, though the images I was making were very different. My camera lens kept finding its way to the environment around me. I began to seek out the work of photographers who saw the world the way I did. Photographers like William Eggleston, Walker Evans, and Robert Adams began to inform my way of seeing. I was never really attracted to idealized images of nature as in the work of Ansel Adams. The closest I have come to admiration of an ideal is in the seascape photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto, though Sugimoto’s images are not merely a formal ideal. His seascapes are as much about time, space, and memory as they are about the vastness of the ocean. The images are a paradox of simplicity and infinity.

Recently, the works of photographers Thomas Struth and Thomas Flechtner have had a great influence on me. I have become more interested in images that depict the physical world as it actually exists with both natural and man-made elements together. The stoic photographs of cities and buildings by Thomas Struth reveal the grandness of man’s structures and the density of populations that exist in those places. The photographs from Thomas Flechtner’s collection, titled Snow, are excellent examples of

¹³ Jack Kerouac, Introduction to The Americans by Robert Frank, ©1959, 3rd ed. (New York; SCALO Publishers, 1995)

the interaction between man and the natural environment. Flechtner photographs the cities in and around his native Switzerland. His images of snow banks and building facades explore the interaction between the elements of man and nature. The photographs depict snowdrifts as they form around parking structures, buildings, and tunnels, challenging the function of these structures.

Another strong influence on me was an exhibition I saw at the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington D.C. sometime in 2001. The Nature Conservancy organized this exhibition, titled "In Response to Place." Andy Grundberg, a photography critic and curator, was asked to select twelve photographers of international reputation to visit and photograph specific locations. Each photographer chose his or her own location from a list provided by the Conservancy. The list was of places around the world which the Conservancy had deemed to be "The Last Great Places." This was essentially an endangered species list for places. These locations, on the verge of extinction by man's influence, were given one last opportunity to strut their stuff. The photographers included artists such as William Christenberry, Lee Freidlander, Annie Leibovitz, Mary Ellen Mark, Sally Mann, and William Wegman. For me, the strength of this exhibition came from the way in which each photographer decided to depict his or her chosen place. Many photographed the land, as you might expect. Others photographed the people that inhabit the lands. Still others chose to photograph details of things that existed in the place. This exhibit had a strong influence on me because of the sheer diversity of interpretation of each place, and because of the power of the resulting images. Each place

became something completely unique in the hands of the photographer who experienced it.

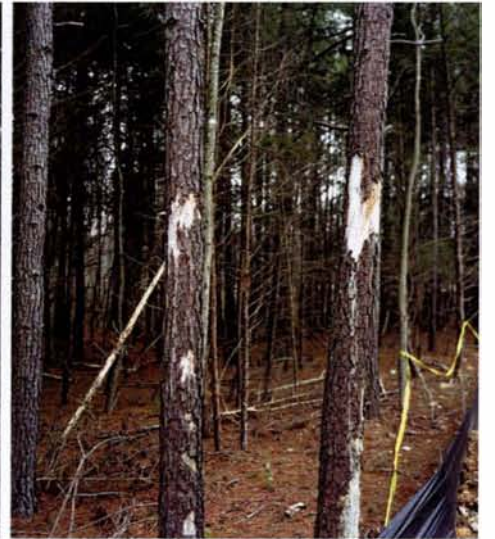
I have often been overwhelmed by the impact a place can have on me. Photography seems to be the ideal tool for exploring an experience of a place. A photograph can come close to literally representing a place, but it can never actually become that place, literally or otherwise. A photographer is charged with interpreting his or her individual experience of a place, or moment. With regard to the medium itself, I am continually amazed by what any moment photographed can look like and become.

Plates

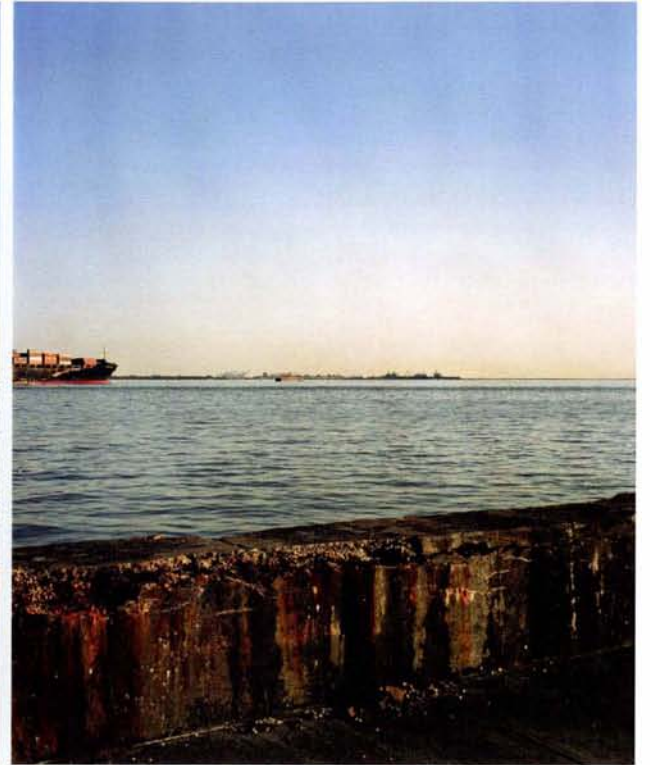












Vitae

