

# SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

By

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This thesis is an invitation to participate in the viewership and operation of fictional narratives. The making of this work is an attempt to understand the dichotomy of enjoying the trick and knowing its method. In construction and content of this work, I have satisfied my desire to make and my imagination to conceive fictional stories. I create dramatic narratives that function as singular frames of a film that I have never seen. I don't have to know everything that is going to happen with any of the characters I have found along the way. Each photograph is intended to provide possibilities rather than a definitive story.



SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

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By

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# Suspension of Disbelief

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to Marshal Jarvis on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. You have inspired me greatly with your integrity, courage, work ethic and love.

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## INTRODUCTION

William Henry Fox Talbot stood a few feet before guests at his Lacock Abbey home with what appeared to be a swatch of elaborate lace. He asked the guests if the object that he was holding was a good representation of the lace. The people replied that, “they were not so easily deceived, for that it was evidently no picture, but the piece of lace itself” (Talbot B2). Since the very beginning, photography has been an accurate way to portray the real not only because of its exceptional rendering but also because of our *will*. The very same medium that is sufficient to show us the truth in the world is also known to augment reality. Knowing the fictional capacity of photography doesn’t mean we invest ourselves in the content any less. The photographic image in both still and motion format has provided the most visually credible display of fiction. Still, it is only part of the equation. No matter how precise photography’s replication ability is, it still requires the power of will to digest. Prior to the age of the photographic image, Samuel Taylor Coleridge summed this investment into being the “willing suspension of disbelief.”

*In 1817, poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief." describing it as a "poetic faith" in "persons and characters supernatural or at least romantic... a transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith" (Ferri ix).*

In short, I interpreted what Coleridge was saying as essentially characterizing the "make" in "make belief." This concept fascinated me because I easily saw how it applies to much of any of my experiences in making or viewing photographs and films. In both photography and cinema I aim to be active in my viewership. I prefer for the medium to show but not tell; ambiguity and mystery allow me to insert myself into the fictional world displayed. Cinema receives viewer involvement on a grand scale. Even when movies are considered to be complete in the telling of

their fictions, rarely are they comprehensive. The photograph presents a finite amount of detail regardless of any amount of time. I revel within the tension of second-guessing my own theories to resolve the narrative.

In acknowledging Coleridge's theory as crucial to how I experience the photographic image, this work has become a way to enact upon the suspension of disbelief in making it. Elements of performance, assembling and interacting with fictional scenes relied on poetic faith in what I was making to become real – if only for a moment during the making of it. Ferri clarifies in his book, "Willing Suspension of Disbelief – Poetic Faith in Film", that poetic faith does not equate to blind faith but an act that requires imagination (Ferri, 18-19). The imagination has been a key factor in the making and viewing of photography since the beginning.

## THE HISTORY

The 19th century is a distinguishable time period for scientific discovery in multiple fields. These fields benefited from the photograph as a means to announce, prove, test and document discovery. Scientific usage of photography established the medium's truthfulness – a characteristic that was sought out in the beginnings of art photography. As photography became an industry and a consumer product, it changed not only how people experience reality but remember it.

In *Photography: A Cultural History*, Mary Marien elaborates on the impact of the introduction of photography on experience and memory, "No prior medium fully presaged the common photograph's ability to externalize remembrance, or to produce images conceived of as genuinely akin to actual experience. The sense of personal encounter, of being there, connected individual experience with national and scientific events" (Marien 71). A photograph can change the way a moment is remembered forever. The portrayal of a finite and minuscule moment of time can alter the context of an event, skew perception, and foster first-impressions of people never met.

Photography didn't always have to tell the truth. Gunnar Swanson states in *On Notions of Truth in Photography: Semiotics and the Stereograph*, "The seduction of the apparent "realism" of the photograph has long obscured the issues of subjectivity and intent" (Swanson 1). The realism that benefited science inspired creative minds to take to the medium to realize their fictions in the real world. Just like the photograph, the motion picture also deviated from being a realistic document and served to portray fiction in the most credible and immersive way. In 1903, Edwin S. Porter directed what is considered to be the first narrative motion picture film titled, *The Great Train Robbery*. When I first

watched this film, I was interested in knowing what made the film important in film history. The primitive method of displaying the violent and aggressive nature of western train robbers was a constant reminder that I was watching something dated with the intention of analyzing its importance in cinema history. Although effects were crude in comparison to modern cinema, they were extremely violent in nature. This film certainly required the importation of violence that I am accustomed to with modern cinema in order to obtain the desired effect. However, I do not believe that the accuracy of special effects in cinema to be the singular factor in a film's effectiveness. After all, how is it that we as an audience can determine what is and isn't realistic if we cannot rely on our own experience to confirm it? I have wholeheartedly bought into movies that are not realistic but registered with me on an emotional level.

Initially, I took interest to *The Great Train Robbery* to better understand how the film became a cultural phenomenon. The film's dated and primitive method of portraying a story helped me to understand how I watch films, comprehend narratives, and acknowledge expectations in this form of entertainment. In essence, the film became a way to recognize the effect of modern cinema by reinterpreting its foundation. It is because of this film that I discovered the suspension of disbelief. Instead of pointing my finger at one particular film, viewership became the focus to be able to unpack what I was learning about myself. Neither age, special effects, nor realism has a consistent effect on my investment in a film.

## THE ARTISTS

Artists such as Henry Peach Robinson and Oscar Reijlander in the late 1850's utilized the medium to elevate works of literary fiction and tableau vivant inspired images by rendering them with the accuracy and acute detail of photography. Robinson especially utilized the combination of multiple negatives as a way to assemble dramatic and mundane scenes of 19th century life. In Henry Peach Robinson's "Fading Away", multiple negatives were assembled to create a dramatic scene of a young woman's passing.



Figure 1, *Fading Away*, Henry Peach Robinson, 1858

The scene captured did not unfold in the presence of a camera, but in a darkroom instead. Robinson's technique is inspirational in the process of making this work.

Robinson compressed multiple negatives shot in different locations and subjects into one seamless photograph with impeccable craft. In doing so, he left little evidence of the construction of fiction. In this instance, the method of his trick is sufficiently withheld from the audience.



Figure 2, *Untitled Film Still #84*, Cindy Sherman, 1978

Much later, in the 1970's, Cindy Sherman did little to withhold the method of trickery from her audience. In her "Untitled Film Still" body of work, even the title of each photograph regards the way we watch and invest ourselves into cinema. Only one person

appears in the photographs in this series of work, which is herself, assuming an array of characterizations familiar to anyone that is no stranger to cinema. Sherman states, “Some people have told me they remember the movie that one of my images is derived from, but in fact I had no film in mind at all” (Respini 18). The reception of this work relies on the viewer’s familiarity of filmic archetypes, or even clichés, to imagine the narrative that is unresolved in a singular photograph. In other words, Sherman’s work makes the method blatantly obvious but still manages to be magic.

Like Sherman’s film stills, Gregory Crewdson’s photographs are made within a cinematic production. Much like Robinson, the intricacy of construction in Crewdson’s photographs is nearly hidden by how complete and well done they are made. The scenarios, often oddities that contrast the mundane, appear cinematic in the way they are lit on location. The mystery in his photographs encourages further inspection for any detail that might support the ambiguous narrative. The titles of Crewdson’s work don’t give much of an indication or meaning to the content of the image. They are either minimally descriptive in the scene or remain untitled. Crewdson keeps the imagination engaged by telling us something that we already know or, in the instance of countless untitled works, tells nothing.

In “Untitled (Dylan on the Floor),” a man, appearing desperate, is in search of something beneath the floor of what is assumed to be his home. Holes that he has cut in the floor reveal beams of supernatural light. Among many details in the photograph is unfinished Chinese take-out boxes and half-filled glasses of various beverages.



Figure 3, *Untitled (Dylan on the Floor)*, Gregory Crewdson, 2001

Combining that with the inexplicable search for something beneath, the photograph entails this character's intrinsic glass half-full disposition.

Without exception, these artists are constructing oddity by circumstance by means of lighting, scale, character, narrative, and/or constructed sets. Adrien Broom's portfolio "Being" stages peculiar incidents both on-location sites, as well as constructed sets and heightens the mystery with creative lightning that is inspirational to the construction of my images. The direction, intensity, and placement of lights in her photographs are otherworldly, much like that of Nicky Hamilton, and Holly Andres. Even though the actions/gestures within the photograph are natural, context, lighting technique and location support the interpretation of the image content as mysterious.

Ferri suggests that we attempt to demystify content by comparing "...unclear information to what is clear and familiar" (Ferri 23). Like these artists, I want to leave room for this imaginative resolution to occur in my work. The transfer from my imagination to the viewer's is the process I enjoy as a viewer and a maker.

## WHAT I MADE

### *Dramatis Personae*

As if by accident, I stumbled across photographing peculiar characters, creating narratives that were approachable by anyone familiar with basic filmic archetypes of people and plot. I say this was by accident because I did it more for the goal of having fun than claiming it as my art. I did it because Eddie Perkins was interesting - Well, as interesting as a guy could be for barely speaking, avoiding eye contact, and making you feel like he just dug through the dresser of someone's sister. I don't have any proof of that but I didn't need any in order to make images that give that vibe. There is the awkward,



Figure 4, *Eddie Perkins*, Addison Brown, 2017

introverted side of him that I relate to that helps when deciding the content of a photograph. The photographs of Eddie were theatrical in nature and I felt as if I had assumed the role of a director. Shortly after this inspiration, Eddie became even more reclusive and hadn't stepped in front of the camera for many years, perhaps due to stigmatic effects.

### *The 'Make' in 'Make Belief'*

I had a need to photograph a bandit, reminiscent to one that might have been seen on an early movie screen 113 years ago. What I got is a delusional, arrogant scofflaw known as "Clyde Jamison Basilus III." He is insistent that there is no one else of his namesake; the "III" is simply an indication that he is, indeed, 'the charm.' This along with the head trip of actually being a time traveling bandit from 1903 is most commonly attributed to his uncanny ability to "woo any woman and humble any man." Oh yeah, he



brought his brother along, too, but this is best reserved for another time. Of course, not all is bad about him. Although I'm a skeptic of the integrity of his time-traveling claim, the methods of his deviation and nonconformity are so dated that it is endearing and downright entertaining. I think that he believes that the movie-going experience is limited enough to make direct references to the DeLorean as a time traveling device as if "Back to the Future" had an inconsequential screening in front of 25 people and then forgotten.



Figure 5, *Clyde Jamison Basilus III*, Addison Brown, 2017

An explanation that he provides for anything that he doesn't understand or is complex in nature is simply "microchips." His fearless interaction with strangers is deserving of my admiration. Initially, the goal of photographing Clyde was to poke at the cultural circumstances regarding violence and anti-governmental action as intrigue and inspiration to the birth of cinema. I started to make photographs of Clyde to tell his story. Better yet, not his story, but my story of him. Being presumptuous with Clyde's story is a good way of getting yourself into a never-ending, boastful diatribe.

Rewind back to my undergraduate studies to the time when I was meeting about twice a month with my English professor, Dr. Jennifer Garland, to discuss the not-so-



Figure 6, *Switch*, Addison Brown, 2017

English subject of Film Noir. What about Film Noir and the abandonment of the ideal is not interesting? The bad guy, who arrived to this status by tragic and inexplicable fate, encouraged me as a viewer to consider the gray areas of morality that are not so easily reasoned with or discouraged.

At this time, Dr. Garland and I discussed Nick "Switch"

Hinders, a man very much belonging to a Film Noir plot. I finally met him in my second year of graduate school. He is a mystery. Not only because I don't know much about him but because he spends so much time trying to be a mystery to everyone else that he hardly knows himself. Of course, that depends on which self he is that day. If there is one thing that he is certain of, every experience that occurs is bound to end in doom. It is a bit amusing to see someone be that dramatic and take everything so seriously (I know of absolutely no one else like that).

In support of the rest of the work, I found Charles Kesler, Marcy Fletcher, and Kenny Roberts (the one exception) to be a big help. Charles assumed the role of a prison guard and Marcy brought a lot of drama to the production. And by Marcy bringing a lot of drama, I actually mean Kenny Roberts. I made the mistake of assuming Marcy



Figure 7, *Charles Kesler*, Addison Brown, 2017



Figure 8, *Kenny Roberts*, Addison Brown, 2017

needed more time to prep for a shoot than Kenny. Kenny could barely sit still long enough for a 9 second exposure as if some magnetic force existed between his hands and pompadour hairstyle. He barely noticed I ever spoke as he wet his fingers to slick his eyebrows. In the making of “Ice Cream”, he failed to play his intended role. Initially, I wanted to show the ideal and popular high school couple having fun at the expense of Eddie Perkins outside of a diner. Instead, I got Kenny shoving an ice cream cone in the face of Eddie, putting his jacket around Marcy and attempting to escort her away. He succeeded in the ice cream attack and placing the jacket around

Marcy but nothing more. We more than obliged him to escort himself away. I photographed the aftermath. Only one portrait of Kenny exists in my thesis and nothing more - he's a jackass.

Again assuming the directorial role brought energy to my creativity once again. In many ways I felt connected to the way I thought movies were made and I didn't have to put the pressure to be like any of the famous directors, film crews and writers I idolize from all the films that I love. This body of work is the closest I have felt to that process of which is still predominantly a mystery to me. The fascination of this mystery and the question of how that magic is assembled into any determined runtime of a film is without a doubt inspirational to how I produce images. I border that line between wanting to know and not wanting to know how these productions make these amazing stories. They make me so willing to disregard any distinction between fiction and reality. It isn't for fear of no longer being affected by the magic but more for the desire to maintain the state of discovery.



Figure 9, *Marcy Fletcher*, Addison Brown, 2017

### *Layered Photographs on Glass*

Incorporated into this body of work is a technique of layering photographs on glass. The photographic process of producing the images from multiple glass plates dates back to the era of Henry Peach Robinson. Robinson produced composite images from multiple glass negatives to make prints on paper, whereas I am using glass plates in positive form physically layered together. Displaying multiple plates that combine to

make a singular image divulges the method of its manufacture to the viewer. Each plate produced is a one-off image that is dependent on its counterparts to make a cohesive scene. The arrangement of plates is a constant reminder to the viewer that it is an assembled construct in the medium of photography. The effort of an active viewer will find the appropriate viewing angle to make sense of the composition and pull the necessary details from the pieces to grasp an understanding of what is happening in the scene.



Figure 10, *Diner* (Expanded Plate View), Addison Brown, 2017

The process used to make the photographs is Wet Plate Collodion, an earlier process from the 1850s. I chose this not to declare a certain time of the images or nostalgia, but to construct multi-layered images that are contingent on the viewer's angle of view. The process is imperfect and always has artifacts of its creation that challenge the suspension of disbelief. The materiality of the process is inspirational in terms of crafting an object. Presenting narratives in this process either takes advantage of the trust in the primitive method or relies on the acknowledgment that dramatization is a long-standing tradition in the medium. Collodion positives on glass render a unique image in which the blacks are transparent and the mid tones and highlights are rendered in silver.

This is especially unique when made on glass - otherwise known as an Ambrotype. By darkening specific areas and intentionally leaving others transparent, I am able to make an image that uses several images on separate plates. This layering effect is one that also dates back to the nineteenth century in the form of combination printing with negatives. My process shows how the image is made by the terracing of elements as separate images instead of concealing it in a unified print.

### *Legerdemain*

In *Moving Image Technology from Zoetrope to Digital*, Leo Enticknap states, “No means has ever been devised of continually recording the sequence of changing light over an extended period of time as it is perceived by the human optical and nervous system, and then reproducing it in a way that is perceived identically to the original source. The ‘moving image’ technologies we have today are all, without exception, based on the discovery during the mid-nineteenth century that a sequence of still images, photographed or created in rapid succession, will, when projected or otherwise mechanically displayed in equally rapid succession, be perceived by the human brain as a continuously moving image” (Enticknap 6). In short, the effect of motion pictures does not reproduce motion exactly from the source and relies on displaying images in a faster rate than our brains can individually process. Even though a flipbook is much more primitive in comparison to cinema, they operate on the same principles.

Part of cinema's magic is withholding the audience from the technical apparatus and operator and placing the audience between the image and its origin. Even when I was much younger, I remember when I wasn't so enthralled with the movie I was watching, I

would look up to see a singular dust beam of light, flicking in accordance to the screen. Tracing the light back to its origin, it disappeared into a small rectangle in a black wall. In times when the movie wasn't enough to hold my interest, the production of the image and its mystery did. Is the magic completely lost when we know its method? Or would



Figure 11, Testing *Legerdemain* with Woodshop Instructor Judd Snapp, 2017

we persevere to find the magic within the medium to spite the distraction of its creation? As the cornerstone of this thesis, I have made a Mutoscope. “Legerdemain”. It is an early motion picture device from the late 19th century that is essentially a crank driven flipbook. This device was invented after the motion picture camera with the aim to bring the motion picture experience to those in a pub or arcade. The viewer took a chance to either deposit money or keep walking - All that was there to sell them was a single marquee, most of the time with one photograph aimed to entice. After this point, it was all up to the viewer.

I think of the Mutoscope as a parlay - that is the viewer took a chance in investing in the machine for rewardable content. The Mutoscope offers an individual experience as opposed to the group setting of cinema. The operation is entirely contingent upon the viewer in terms of a physical motion to rotate the wheel of images and



Figure 12, *Legerdemain*, Addison Brown, 2017

the willingness to interpret the primitive method of portraying a motion picture. Instead of being between the source and image, as with cinema, the viewer is in front of the film and the source within one object. Any motion picture is dependent upon active viewership but seldom is it reliant on its viewer as operator. “Legerdemain” requires both an active viewer and an operator.

As a device and an elaborate frame for a film, I intend to provide an immersive experience for the viewer. The film renders the exchange between fiction to reality by swapping what is perceived to be on screen into reality. Movement of the camera is cyclical, mimicking the motion of the device. Circular motion of camera movement is done in hopes that the operator would feel a direct connection to, not only the machine, but the content and camera movement that they are viewing. This brief moment in which fiction becomes reality is preserved in the actions of the operators of this device.

## **WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?**

New technology and means of viewership continues to change our relation to the photographic image. Given the abundance of the photographic image, what inspires me to keep looking continues to remain an interest for me as a maker as well as a viewer. As a break from the passive viewer experience, I have employed antiquated methods of photographic ephemera in a modern context to consider the stipulations of the suspension of disbelief. Doing so poses the challenges of exposing the process which either interrupts the imagination or is overcome by the power of will.

As a means to do so, content revolves around instances of my imagination in fictional narratives and performance. In this work, I have divulged both the trick and its method. In the instance of empathetic viewership, the trick prevails despite the knowledge of the method. Is it possible to know both and function impartially? The answer might benefit the future of photography.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**WORKS CITED**

Figure 1, *Fading Away*, Henry Peach Robinson, 1858.

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Figure 2, *Untitled Film Still #84*, Cindy Sherman, 1978.

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/cindy-sherman-untitled-film-still-number-84>

Figure 3, *Untitled (Dylan on the Floor)*, Gregory Crewdson, 2001.

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/gregory-crewdson-untitled-dylan-on-the-floor>

Figure 4, *Eddie Perkins*, Addison Brown, 2017.

Figures 4-9, Selected works from MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Suspension of Disbelief*, 2017.

Figure 10, Expanded view of *Diner* (for demonstrative purposes) from MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Suspension of Disbelief*, 2017.

Figure 11, Photograph showing testing of *Legerdemain* with Judd Snapp, 2017.

Figure 12, *Legerdemain*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Suspension of Disbelief*, 2017.