

Particular Aims: Narratives and Desolate Scenarios in Photography

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Art and Art History Departmental Honors Thesis
University of Colorado at Boulder
April 8, 2014

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Abstract

Contemporary photography with an attention to aesthetic detail, light process, and documentation can result in art works that are banal, leaving a vacuum of absent representation in a world full of narrative. This thesis concerns the presence of narrative in my photographic work and the work of contemporary photographers with which I identify. This work includes explorations of environment with controlled lighting and emphasizing clear narratives. This process provides an opportunity for self-reflection and for viewers to question their values where they are left separated from thought-provoking narrative. In my work, I present narratives in contemporary scenarios that tend to be crude mishaps of daily life. Seemingly mundane images are twisted to show other perceptions of a particular event, often a dark and harsh reality. I draw from and reflect on the visual concepts of contemporary photographers to push narrative works in the photographic medium.

Focus on: Gregory Crewdson

Gregory Crewdson creates imagery that is both unattainable and uncapturable through traditional documentation through the medium. In *Untitled* (FIG. 1) from his series, 'Beneath the Roses', Crewdson portrays a woman centered within a garden-bed surrounded by flowers with turned over dirt in a kitchen. The scene is an unlikely occurrence in the everyday world. Crewdson creates his photos through an elaborate production process much like that employed by the film industry. Everything is brought to the set and/or created from scratch to present reflections of the artist's imaginary world.

According to Contemporary Art Critic Johanna Drucker, “The photograph, in Crewdson’s case, is hardly a document of the real. Nor is it a formal play of light and dark with the inconceivable unreality of a staged images, daring us to believe in the fantasy it projects.” (Drucker 10) The aesthetic details of the artist photographs are overly romanticized fantasies to the condition that lack relationship to the individuals that are viewing the imagery. Craft overwhelms the vision in Crewdson’s work; he is obsessed with detail.

“Let’s entertain for a moment the idea that the most direct parallel for Crewdson’s work is not among his contemporaries, but with John Everett Millais. The late-nineteenth century painter who was renowned for his “meticulous” attention to craft.”(Drucker 43) With this parallel connection to craftsmanship where does the link lie to the contemporary world? “It doesn’t index an actual event, but rather, plays with the inconceivable unreality of staged image.” (Drucker 10) With elaborate definition to detail and no room for reflection of the real world, how does an individual see past the mundane form tremendous aptitude of aesthetic detail? At far ends of the spectrum of artistic subsistence he leaves you with everything and nothing, nothing being the mundane. “Nor is it a formal play of light and dark arranged on a surface.” (Drucker p.10) His emphasis is the craft and not the concept of light in his photographs.

Focus on: Marian Drew’s Lighting Processes

Marian Drew creates her work in rural and ruinesque landscapes through a process of extended or long exposure in combination with a handheld light source. In her series *Still*

Life/Australiana (2003-2009) Drew utilizes road kill such as pelicans, wombats, and porcupines in Australia where she collects the creatures to develop still life compositions. These works are stunning reflections on the grand tradition of European still life paintings, although Drew's work lacks specific description or intentionality. As described by the art critique Louis Nowra from *Journal Art and Australia*, "Drew's road kill are merely victims to be enjoyed by the lachrymose viewer." (Nowra) The title *Pelican with fish on Linen* (FIG.2) is an exact description of the photograph. A deceased Pelican is placed on white table clothed table. Positioned on its backside against a painted background surrounded by a set of fish and hermit crab shell. The title is an opportunity for another avenue of narrative or expansion of story. The work states obvious titles that describe the objects already visible in the image. Marian Drew's work critiques a contemporary view of ethics of everyday drivers, but falls short of narrative.

In process the artist uses a handheld light source to illuminate and emphasize aspects of road kill in addition to the surface and landscape in the photograph. This technique of spot lighting is used to help create an aura, a presence of life, to a dark surrounded object. There seems to be an attraction to light sources even when oblivious to its presence. A curious characteristic exists in the animal kingdom where creatures present and create their own light source. *Bioluminescence* is ability for certain plants and animals that exist in darkness to create emit, flash, even, glow over long periods of time without hurting themselves in the process. The phenomenon has a number of different functions that is stated In Zielinski Siegfried's book *Deep Time of the Media: Toward Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*: "Fireflies produce their soft intermittent light

especially for the purpose of courtship, whereas certain species of fish use light to lure their prey.”(Zielinski 14) It’s a beautiful and mysterious process that gives a lingering attraction. Drew utilizes this aura of light to emphasize the lifeless creatures in her still lives to draw and attract her audience.

Focus on: Jason Lazarus

To illustrate my interest in narrative in contemporary photography, I will focus on the artist Jason Lazarus’s series *2004-Present*. The photographic work explores and investigates both the mundane and narrative with the help of a written description. Unlike Gregory Crewdson, Lazarus never creates the scenarios that are captured in his work. Documenting his experiences of everyday life and presenting the work chronologically in series. The photographer presents untitled pieces but gives descriptions of each event documented image. Aesthetically simple, the images themselves are of subjects or items in clean sight. . For example, in untitled (FIG. 3), the photograph consists of a pillow with a large wet spot that is lying on grass green colored carpet. The description then underneath the work reads: *The first time I saw my father unconscious (the pillow my sister placed under his head) May 24th 2008.*

This is one example of how Lazarus applies his own personal experience to affect his potential audiences. He restrains information by not presenting the full story at once. Then, by progression presents the brief detail of the event in text. The combination of image and written narrative strongly captures an individual’s imagination than if separated. The

photograph is the artifact that holds the residue of Lazarus's experience, where the caption amplifies the image to provoke a stimulating narrative. Novelist, Art Critic, and Art Historian John Berger writes about the aspects in photography in his book *About Looking* on creating context for narrative. He argues, "Photographs in themselves do not narrate. Photographs preserve instant appearances." (Berger 55) He later continues to elaborate; "The aim must be to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it be its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images." (Berger 64)

Personal Work

My past work has been an exploration in digital photographic practice through traditional photography technique that has led me up to my most recent series. Light sensitive material, in the early years of photography, lacked the refinement of being useful. It was necessary to have long exposures of the subject, landscape, and objects being documented in order to achieve a comprehensible and clear image. I utilize this technique of long or extend exposure in my practice. Also, I am interested in the background stories of documentation and portrait photography but the ideas and concepts of being able to "capture" light to create an image. Mentioned in Susan Sontag's *Critical Narrative, On Photography*:

"Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation

of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)—a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.”(Sontag 120)

A concept that stands out from my contemporaries in my work is not only pushing for stimulating narrative but also the presence of myself in my photographs. In my process of photographing these events or scenes I’m psychically in front of the camera during the length of the exposure. The physics and ability to capture an image in a camera only function when light is present and reflecting off the exterior of an item or surface. I have complete control over the light source and never shine the light directly on myself. Though not present visibly in the photograph, the physical existence of myself is impeded in the creation of the photograph in the duration of process. Sontag Argues, “Unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don’t seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject—mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine, which is tireless, and which even when capricious can produce a result that is interesting and never entirely wrong.”(Sontag 41)

In my past series *Trash 2012*, *Objects 2012* and, *Long Exposure Portraits 2012-Present*, I have observed aspects of my environment by means of either documentation or

portraiture. Photograph, *Shelter on the hill* (FIG.4) depicts trash spilled out from a turned over dumpster found in the cities business district of Boulder. *This is what I do when you are not around* (FIG.5) is a compositional construct of a single pillow interacting within the environment of a living room, the same pillow being seen in the corners of a room, underneath a couch, and underneath cushions. The portrait titled *Untitled Exposure #3* (FIG.6) is of a woman seated, her back turned to the audience, on a floor of a dark room leaning on a coffee table cluttered with miscellaneous objects. By combining digital photography and the technique extended or long exposure I have created a distinct style utilizing a handheld light source to expose all while photographing my subjects or objects in complete darkness. These investigations have led me up to my most recent body of work *Particular Aims 2013*.

Thesis Work

Gregory Crewdsons, Jason Lazarus, and Marian Drew have stylistic forms of creating contemporary points of vision in the medium of photography. In my work, similarities can be illustrated from Crewdsons aesthetic in detail, Lazarus's emphasis on narrative, and Drew's process of lighting. I have considered these artists in the development of my practice and thesis body of work. Differently, through process and concept, I use the aspects of light and darkness to present a clear narrative. I bring light to information imperative for the narrative and leave the rest in darkness as I see fit, leaving mystery within these everyday desolate scenes.

For my series of thesis photographs, I have revisited a manifesto by the artist Claus Oldenburg from his 1961 project *Store Days: Documents from The Store*. In Oldenburg's writing he begins every sentence with the phrase, "I am for the art of..." and finishes with a number of everyday nuances that seemingly lack significance. I have revisited these written statements by interpreting the described events, actions, and accidents by depicting an unlikely reality. My efforts are to present a glimpse of everyday life as a both a desolate and stimulating experience that I have been witness to or imagined in the world. My photographic series considers a relationship between Oldenburg's work and my own interpretation of present-day society.

From Oldenburg's literature, *Store Day's*, I have taken the below statements as foundations in my photographs that are seen in progression of this thesis:

"I am for the art of conversation between the sidewalk and a blind man's metal stick." I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero. I am for an artist who vanishes, turning up in a white cap painting signs or hallways. I am for the art of sweat that develops between crossed legs."(Oldenburg 39-42)

The statements have acted as a foundation to my work and not used as literal depictions. With these statements I have expanded and explored the narrative with a question of how these situations may have occurred or may look like in modern day society, rather than leaving the situations bland and broad. The settings or environments in

the series are locations that exist on their own rather than being sought out in my imaginary. The narrative, being the event, situation, or occurrence, in my everyday experiences are in consistent flux as would be with any other individual, I just see what fits to be presented in my artistic practice.

In the photograph titled, *A Colloquy of a Blind Mans Walking stick and Concrete* (FIG.7) a situation is open to the elements. An unlikely but not improbable event of a blind man crawling about a street in search of his white cane as a car approaches his path. With no signs of the vehicle stopping, a tension is created, not only between the man and the vehicle, but also in the moments right before the collision. The landscape is not presented clearly to the viewer; instead it has been exaggerated with lighting – focusing on specific elements to highlight the key figures. The man in the image is without help in an urban environment long after the sun has set. In my composition, the narrative formula is simple and all present to compose a pending desolate and tragic incident not overly dramatized, a crude misfortune, moments before the accident.

In *Ignorant sprouts* (FIG. 8) the emphasis is put on the children that are positioned in the middle of the composition. The light is coming from the children as if they are the light source. The Mothers are positioned in front of them shielding their eyes from the blinding light. The figures are positioned in one-point perspective in order to leave a clear view of the scene. They exist in an empty living room with only the figures and children's toys surrounding them. The figures are positioned in a very orderly compositional structure that creates a visual flow of lines. These lines can be traced via the... staring from

the children leading to the shadows of the wall on the edge of the photo. The title *Ignorant Sprouts* suggests a stubborn nature of blind growth that represents toddlers. Blind awareness, ignorance, and pure intentions are but a few characteristics of a child's behavior that this work expresses. The covering of the eyes can be a physical or metaphorical protection to this ignorance, and I want to capture how overwhelmed individuals can become from innocent characters. Children, being the concentrating in the work, I portray the lack of self-awareness of their actions and tendencies.

An ironic failure in occupations is working on the outskirts of the desired profession not being able to cross into the preferred professional realm. The image in *A Particular Ruts View* (FIG. 9) presents the non-academic artist in the absurdity of priming walls to prepare the surface for him to paint on. The task presented is not to show the sad and laborious task of painting. The wall is painted white to emphasize the humor that it isn't necessary to prime walls in the graffiti practice; Graffiti artist via tradition tend to paint over created work by using the color palettes that seem appropriate. My emphasis in this particular narrative is the white wall that is almost completed in the photograph. The joke is on the artistic touch of the gleaming blank white wall that has been so "craftily" painted so other artists, which are drawn to the surface, paint and destroy the accomplishment of the individuals labor.

Missed the Midnight Train (FIG.10) is a view of a woman working on fabric on top of a tightly packed dinner table. Her face is blurred or transparent due to the nature of the process of long exposure. The ambiguity of the figure is a conscious decision so no direct

references to the individual is suggested but enough information is given to keep the narrative afloat from specificity. Underneath the woman's feet and chair that she sits in is a puddle of liquid suggesting reminisce of one relieving oneself. The fluid on the hardwood floor is emphasized with lighting. I want to narrate views of bodily alleviation provoked through emotional and physical incentive, an experience that can be created by feelings of nervousness, anxiety, and or fright

Conclusion

Contemporary photographers such as Gregory Crewdson, Marion Drew, and Jason Lazarus all reflect on contemporary times; their visions touch on the mundane that exists in their observed world. Crewdson creates imagery from a strictly internal vision, Lazarus documents chronologically tragic and stimulating events in his life that is strengthened together with written text, and Drew's work explores and concentrates still life through stylistically lighting process. All having different artistic styles, these photographers limit their vision to the mundane and stun stimulating aspects of the everyday life.

With a conscious consideration of the artist's works and techniques, I have explored these aspects of the commonplace with my own varying narrative. To make clear what is being viewed and make sense of the story with my own artistic process of emphasized lighting and long exposure. Having strong connection, not solely with audience but in concepts that embrace a linkage of the photograph and myself. "In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it

functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.”(Sontag 18) Through the series *Particular Aims*, I hope to arouse and kindle viewers insight of the potential desolate experience of the everyday that has deemed mundane.



FIG. 1 – Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 'Beneath the Roses'; 2004, Digital chromogenic print, 57 x 88 inches



FIG. 2 – Marian Drew, *Pelican with fish on linen*, 'Still Life/Australiana (2003-2009', 2005; (material or dimensions not specified)



FIG. 3 – Jason Lazarus, *The first time I saw my father unconscious (the pillow my sister placed under his head)* May 24th, 2008, '2004-Present', 2008, archival pigment print; 16 x 20 inches



FIG. 4 - George P. Perez, *Shelter On the Hill*, 2012, 'Trash', archival inkjet print; 18 x 12 inches



FIG. 5 - George P. Perez, *This is what I do when you are not around*, 'Objects', 2012, archival inkjet print; 18 x 12 inches



FIG. 6 - George P. Perez, *Untitled Exposure #3, 2012, ')*, Long Exposure Portraits 2012-Present', archival inkjet print; 20 x 13 inches



FIG. 7 - George P. Perez, *A Colloquy Between the Ground and a Stick*, 'Particular Aims', 2013; archival inkjet print; 40 x 60 inches.

(Thesis Work)



FIG. 8 - George P. Perez, *Ignorant Sprouts*, 'Particular Aims'; 2013; archival inkjet print; 40 x 60 inches.

(Thesis Work)



FIG. 9 - George P. Perez, *In a Ruts Perspective*, 'Particular Aims'; 2013; archival inkjet print; 40 x 60 inches.

(Thesis Work)



FIG. 10 - George P. Perez, *Missed the Midnight Train*, 'Particular Aims'; 2013; archival inkjet print; 40 x 60 inches.

(Thesis Work)

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