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## Body and Soul

Lise Nielsen

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Body and Soul**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## **Body and Soul**

Just like reading a good novel, photographs can allow us to see things differently. I have seen photographs that I will never forget, and I have seen photographs that have helped me to open my mind. In a world that has such a narrow perception of beauty, I have been able to find beauty in many unexpected forms. Beauty, I have found can be found in nature, in the simple, in the unusual, in the grotesque, and in the aged. This realization of unconventional beauty, coupled with my curiosity, is what brought me to the focus of my recent artwork: decay and death. This subject matter is universal, yet few people take the time to observe whatever truths may be had regarding the process.

## ***Body and Soul***

### **Introduction**

My interest in photography began when I was in tenth grade and I took my first photography class. I was immediately attracted to photography because of the relative quickness of producing an image, compared to painting and drawing, and the excitement that other people took in seeing my photographs. I was self taught in many respects, and enjoyed experimenting with the paper and chemicals in the darkroom to get different effects. The sense of freedom that I felt while taking pictures was what led me to take photography classes until the end of high school. When I first went to college, I studied marketing because I thought that studying art was impractical. Fortunately, I realized that my passion was photography, and switched to fine arts. Upon graduation, I began teaching at a local high school and have been teaching art, graphics, and photography there for the past seven years.

In 2004, I decided to apply to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I chose to focus on photography and computer arts because of my love of photography and its natural correlation to graphic design. Since then, I have been working on developing my photographic style, enhancing my technical skills with graphic design programs, and experimenting with various other media. Many of the skills that I have learned I have brought back to my own classroom. This has enriched both my teaching experience and my student's learning experience.

The MIS program has allowed me to reach a higher level of teaching and artistry.

### **Aesthetics**

Towards the end of my undergraduate education, I began photographing and painting decayed fruit. I began to realize that there was more character in objects and people that were aged. Later, when I was asked to choose a thesis for my MIS degree, I was certain that I wished to explore the process of decay and death in various forms. I began by showing the progression of decay in fruit and flowers from beginning to end in a series of computer transfers, as in *Life of a Mushroom* (Appendix, 1) and *Life of a Pepper* (Appendix, 2). As the objects begin to decay, I photographed new processes of molding, bruising, wrinkling, and parasitic activity.

I began to realize that decay and death was a massive and universal subject matter. Many people ignore the subject because of their fears and negative association with aging but that is what caught my curiosity. I wanted to observe how people and objects evolve over time. As my work progressed, I began photographing objects in isolation, or objects that had been abandoned due to their age. For instance, I noticed that for years, when I drove through the countryside, or through an old town, I would often see old chairs thrown outside in the yard someplace. I began to keep my eyes open for these old chairs when I was driving around, and I slowly started making a series of photographs

featuring them. The photograph *Arches with Chair* (Appendix, 3) was taken behind an old antique shop and shows the ruins of a secondary building with an old iron chair sitting out front. Old chairs represent a simpler time in the past, in which people would sit out in front of their homes and chat, have a cigarette, or read a book. With the onset of the Internet, fewer and fewer people are picking up books to read. Mothers are working full-time and not sitting and watching their kids play outside. Fewer people are taking smoke breaks or taking time to communicate with their neighbors. People are buying larger houses, many without yards, and working more hours to pay for them. I mourn the absence of the things from my childhood that no longer exist. In a way, the world that I knew as a child is dead. That interest in the passing of an era is expressed in my photographs of abandoned chairs.

I feel that photography is part intuition and part conscious planning. I must be in the right mood to translate that mood into my photograph, yet I must be aware of the light, and the angle, and the colors (if necessary) of my subject in order to produce a quality photograph. For example, in the photographs *Rotted Pear* (Appendix, 4) and *Rotted Apple near Windowsill* (Appendix, 5), the light streaming onto the objects and their surroundings highlights the subjects and adds beauty to otherwise unattractive subject matter. The utilization of depth of field adds compositional interest to *Rotted Pear*, and the angle of the window in *Rotted Apple near Windowsill* enhances the placement of the apple itself.

## Artistic Influences

I have spent a great deal of time looking at other artist's works throughout the years, for teaching purposes and for my own interest's sake. I guess that I consider many of the master photographers to be of god-like status. I have gone to look at shows and found myself mesmerized by the vision and by the mass and scope of work produced by these individuals.

I could not talk about my own work without mentioning these masters who taught me what great photography is. Seeing a photographic image of something is much more potent, much more real, than mere words could ever be. Great photography can pull deep emotions out of viewers or make them think about an existence other than their own. This is why many times a single photograph has inspired an initiative to better the human existence or the world in which we live. For instance, Lewis Hines' (1874-1940) photographs, such as *Girl Worker in Carolina Cotton Mill* taken in 1908, documented the child labor abuses and injustices of the time period. Hines' photographs were instrumental in convincing Congress to create laws to protect children from industrial profiteers. By 1920 the number of child laborers was cut to nearly half of what it had been in 1910. Similarly, Ansel Adams' (1902-1984) photography of Yosemite National Park taken in the 1970's was instrumental in convincing President Ford to maintain funding for environmental preservation.

During my show *Embracing Every Moment*, a guest mentioned to me that my work reminded her of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004). Her



observation made perfect sense to me, because Bresson is famous for capturing what is referred to as the *decisive moment*. This moment refers to a photographer's ability to capture a compelling moment on film. Bresson mastered the different ways of capturing a specific moment. He paid careful attention to lighting, the juxtaposition of objects, the movement of his subjects, and the best possible moment in which to click the shutter. Similarly to Bresson, I concentrate on these aspects but I also have an autobiographical component to my *decisive moment*. For me, a huge part of the photographic process is preserving things that will no longer be a part of my life in the future. I take photographs of people as a way to keep them with me, and I take photographs of memorable moments in time in order to keep them alive. All things must pass in life, but photography for me has become a way of having a record of my life, of things that I have experienced, and people that I have known long after they have passed on.

Another photographer with whom I feel a bit of connection is the Virginian, Sally Mann (1951- ). She also has completed a body of work surrounding subject matter related to death. This work entitled *What Remains* was recently on exhibit in Washington, DC and in New York this year. I had already been photographing and painting decayed subject matter previous to her show, and was very excited to see what Mann's photographic perspective on the subject would be. I was interested primarily in the aura that she had created in her straight black and white images by her use of a hazy focus. I

also observed that the corpses that Mann photographed were almost one with nature again, lying on the forest floor, naked in woody debris. What I found most impressive about the work was the large scale daguerreotypes. I have a passion for alternative processes, particularly daguerreotypes, and I felt that using a historical process strongly agreed with the subject's relativity to time.

Mann, like myself, is an autobiographical photographer. She decided to create a body of work pertaining to death, after the death of her dog, and a murder in her yard by an escaped convict. Within the last few years, a close friend of mine and some family members have passed away. I chose not to photograph my friend the last week that she was alive, despite her permission to do so. Instead, I photographed the dirt that I threw upon her grave because that was the one moment in which I felt that she was gone forever. I also photographed the tree that she lies under, the card that her partner left for her upon her grave, and the church where the funeral was held. The only tangible thing that I had left of her, besides gifts that she had given me and my memory of her, were the photographs that I had taken of her while she was alive, and the photographs of her gravesite that I took after she passed away.

For many photographers, such as Annie Leibovitz (1949- ) who recently published a book entitled *Life in Pictures* (2006), an important aspect of photography is capturing their own life as realistically as possible. Although Leibovitz photographs celebrities and other subjects as well, she has a large body of photographs that she has taken of her partner, alive and dead, as well

as of her children, home, and friends. The novelist Willa Cather (1873-1947) wrote about this desire to capture the true essence of one's life in her book *The Song of the Lark* (1915). Cather wrote, "What was any art but a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself-life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose." (Cather 1915, IV.iii) It is undeniable that art is influenced by life, so I believe that some aspect of life must be present in any artist's artwork, whether it is literal or abstract. Like all of the other influential life experiences that find their way directly or indirectly into my photography, the death and loss that I have experienced are expressed in my work.

Undoubtedly, many different types of photographers have influenced me. From each one I take something valuable. I am able to see what each one of them saw through their viewfinder long after they have seen it. For me to see through someone else's eyes for a few moments is truly a gift. The desire to give this gift back to others is one of the things that inspire me to capture the decisive moments in life, and its dissolution.

### **Inspiration**

A significant influence upon my artwork is the natural world. Although I do not consider myself religious, I have always found a strong sense of spirituality within nature. For instance, I wanted to capture the stunning beauty of color and texture that is found in nature, which can be seen in photographs

such as *Still Life of a Bottle and Rotted Apple* (Appendix, 6) and *The Last Leaf* (Appendix, 7). The richness and depth that is found in the natural world can rarely be replicated in the man-made world. Even the eye of the camera is unable to see all of the colors that exist in nature. I believe that all of the natural elements are somehow interconnected, and that by understanding nature, one can become closer to her true self. I was able to see what would happen to my own body by observing the stages of decay in flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Humans, like these objects, are generally born flawless and slowly see signs of age and the wear and tear of life. Factors such as sunlight, food, water, and the interaction and proximity to others affect us as well. Bruising and disease cause a shorter lifespan in all living things. I also noticed that certain species are more durable than others.

Another series of digital photographs that I took of voodoo dolls was initially inspired by the destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. I have always considered the people and the city of New Orleans to be full of energy and beautiful strangeness and I wanted to capture this. A version of the voodoo religion, which originally came from Haiti, was embraced by rural African-Americans in New Orleans. Voodoo dolls are not actually part of the original Haitian religion but they are the symbol most associated with voodoo in America. Most people associate the voodoo doll with wishing harm or death upon another individual because people stick pins in them as a representation of piercing a real person's organs. I thought that it would be interesting to

collect a variety of these dolls and to photograph them, which can be seen in 5 *Voodoo Dolls* (Appendix, 8). I found some voodoo dolls, and made some others based on photographs that I found online. I found backdrops that complemented the colors and style of each doll, digitally photographed them, and then adjusted the color in Photoshop for maximum intensity, and printed them on high gloss paper. *Voodoo X* (Appendix,9) is a digitalized photograph based upon one of the various voodoo dolls.

New Orleans is like no other American city. Outsiders either love it or hate it because the people who live in New Orleans are incredibly vivacious, or immoral, and their festivals are a celebration of freedom in America, or debauchery, depending how one looks at it. Regardless, the photographs that I took were dramatic, much like the city itself.

### **Composing Imagery**

After years of exploring different artistic media, I have come to the understanding that traditional photography is more scientific than painting, drawing, sculpture, and printmaking. Initially, the purpose of photography was for scientists and physicians to record samples of different species of plants and animals, as well as medical procedures. Not until the last century was photography considered an art form. Photography also relies upon the use of chemistry and variables such as temperature, light, and perspective.

Since I have been studying photography almost twenty years, I have had

the opportunity to experiment with many of the scientific attributes of the art form. I have used traditional photographic processes, alternative processes, and digital processes. I have composed photographs outdoors and in the studio, worked in a black and white darkroom, color darkroom, and a digital darkroom.

During my studies in the MIS program, I was able to once again work in a black and white darkroom, which brought me full-circle back to my foundation. In one series of photographs, I incorporated both analog and digital technology for a striking effect. I took digital photographs of dead animals and made the background of each photo black in Photoshop. I then made photograms, which are photographic prints made (without a camera) by placing objects on a light-sensitive surface and exposing them to light. By placing small bones and feathers around the edges of the photographic paper, I created frames with them. I scanned the photograms into the computer, and merged the digital images and the analog images together. I then printed out the composite images on transfer paper, distressed the edge, and transferred the images onto archival paper as a finished piece. The resulting series were aged looking photographs of deceased animals framed by bones and feathers, as seen in *Dead Sparrow* (Appendix, 10).

Another observation that I made was while photographing road kill was approaching a deer that had been hit by a car. At first I thought the deer was dead. As I neared the animal I saw that it was almost dead, but not quite yet. I

recall that I was immediately concerned that the deer would have a reaction that I couldn't predict. For instance, it might start shaking, kicking, or biting me. I also noticed that I was instinctively connected to the animal and I felt the immediate weight of sadness fall upon my body. When I approached other animals that were already dead, I didn't feel any of these things. The struggle was over for the animal, and the animal seemed like an object rather than a living thing.

I had moments taking photographs of dead subjects in which I felt bothered by the fact that they were deceased, but more often I found that I was only concerned with the composition of my image. I have experienced a similar situation in the past when I drew or painted nude models. Although it is often looked upon as a novelty by non-artistic individuals to be in a room with nude models, I am less interested in the fact that the model is nude, and more interested in having the opportunity to create my own artwork as a result of having a model. This dehumanizing nature of the model or subject generally doesn't bother me, but occasionally it can make photography difficult.

I believe that traditional photography will still exist in the future but I predict that it will be considered an alternative process. I was therefore glad to have the opportunity to work in a traditional darkroom at least one last time.

## **Conclusion**

Being in graduate school has helped me to form my intent as an artist. I

have begun to refine my own personal style. My photographs are a reflection of myself, and during the past few years I have looked at the part of myself that questions mortality and the stages of life. Taking photographs of people and experiences in my life allows me to remember them when they have long past. The photographs give me a sense of permanence, while living in a time period in which things change very rapidly. The ability to do this is an immeasurable gift.



### Bibliography

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Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York, NY: Picador, 1977.

## Appendix

### Slide List

1. *Life of a Mushroom*, digital photo transfers, 7" X 28", 2004.
2. *Life of a Pepper*, digital photo transfers, 7" X 28", 2004.
3. *Arches with Chair*, black and white photograph, 10" X 8", 2005.
4. *Rotted Pear*, black and white photograph, 8" X 10", 2005.
5. *Rotted Apple near Windowsill*, digital photograph, 11" X 14", 2004.
6. *Still Life of a Bottle and Rotted Apple*, digital photograph, 8" X 10", 2004.
7. *The Last Leaf*, digital photograph, 10" X 8", 2004.
8. *5 Voodoo Dolls*, digital photograph, 8" X 10", 2006.
9. *Voodoo X*, digital photograph, 10" X 8", 2006.
10. *Dead Sparrow*, digital photo transfer, 10" X 8", 2004.

## **Lise Nielsen**

### **Education:**

- 2007                    Master of Interdisciplinary Studies  
                             Photography/Computer Art  
                             Virginia Commonwealth University  
                             Richmond, Virginia
- 1999                    Bachelor of Fine Arts, Cum Laude  
                             Shepherd College  
                             Shepherdstown, West Virginia
- 1996                    Associate in Applied Art Degree, Cum Laude  
                             Major: Fine Arts Specialization: Photography  
                             Northern Virginia Community College

**Certification:**     Art Education PreK-12  
                             Collegiate Professional License: Virginia  
                             Praxis Exams Passed: Art Content Knowledge, Reading,  
                             Writing, and Mathematics  
                             TSIPS Complete (Technology Standards for Instructional  
                             Personnel)

### **Teaching Experience:**

- 1999-Present         Art Teacher, Osbourn High  
                             Manassas City Public Schools  
                             Manassas, VA
- 2001                    1st Grade Teacher (Summer), Hayden Elementary  
                             Manassas City Public Schools  
                             Manassas, VA

### **Related Experience:**

- 1999                    Photographer  
                             The Fairfax Observer, Fairfax, VA  
                             The Connection Newspapers, Mclean, VA  
                             Shepherd Picket Newspaper, Shepherdstown, WVA

**Related Experience Continued:**

- 1999 Intern  
The Washington Center of Photography  
Washington, DC
- 1999 Volunteer/Photography Outreach Program for Teens  
Martha's Table Shelter  
Washington, DC

**Exhibitions:**

- 2007 *Body and Soul*  
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition,  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.  
The Center for the Arts at the Candy Factory,  
Manassas, Virginia
- 2005 *Dolls*  
Zig Zag Gallery  
The Plains, VA
- 2000 *Juried Art Exhibition*  
The Blue Elephant Gallery  
Frederick, MD
- 1999 *"-IZE", A Group Photography Show*  
Shepherd College  
Shepherdstown, WVA
- 1999 *Embracing Every Moment*  
The Entler Gallery  
Shepherdstown, WVA
- 1999 *Benefit Auction - 10 Local Artists*  
The Men's Club  
Shepherdstown, WVA
- 1999 *Juried Art Exhibition*  
Studio 105  
Shepherdstown, WVA
- 1999 *1999 Regional Juried Art Exhibition*  
The Delaplaine Visual Arts Center  
Delaplaine, MD
- 1997 *Photographica and The Color II Photography Show*  
Shepherd College  
Shepherdstown, WVA