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Memories We Forget

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Memories We Forget

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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December, 2005

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Artist Statement: *The Process and the Journey*

I have always preferred the journey to the destination. When I was growing up, my family drove back and forth between Florida and New York every summer. My father did the driving, my mother sat next to him, and my older brother and sister sat in the back seat. This left the cavernous back of the family station wagon for me and the luggage. There was no radio, very little conversation, and I didn't sleep. I spent these summer trips staring for endless hours, out of the back window of the car, transfixed on the expanse of open road behind us. Since I bought my first car I have traveled the country, and since I borrowed my first camera I have been documenting my travels. The miles of highway between destinations, the quiet hours, have interested me as much as, and often more than, the destination. The images in my exhibition are intended to document the journey.

These photographs are sequential montages with each photo composed of multiple overlapping images that bleed into one another making an expansive image of open space. Each finished product represents a panorama, but unlike traditional panoramic images, forward, not lateral, movement defines them. Each new frame advances the journey while maintaining a connection with the frame before it. The ambiguity and lack of detail refer to the experience and the quietness of the elapsed time the journey has taken. The finished images reference the journey without necessarily referencing the destination. The presentation size is meant to fill the viewers' vision, making an all-encompassing experience.

Where I'm From

When I started studying art education during my undergraduate days, I spent most of my time drawing portraits which were heavily detailed graphite drawings of the people I could convince to sit for me, usually sympathetic art students and close friends. As I drew, my hand would cramp up from the death grip I had on the pencil. My head would hang forward limply from my neck, and my eyes would be hovering inches above the paper. I was proud of the final product, but what really kept me going was the process. These hours of therapeutic concentration were as close to meditation as I have ever come.

The last time I made one of those drawings, my model was a classmate named Marnie, an incredibly beautiful girl who wasn't uncomfortable with my staring at her for five hours in a closed room. During the session, she mentioned that she started a photography class, and suggested that, if I was having trouble finding people to sit for me, I should take Photography 101 and then I could draw from the photos I took. Following her suggestion, the next semester I borrowed my brother's 1975-issue (my birth year) Canon AE1 and took Intro to Photography. All of my free time was immediately swallowed by the darkroom in the basement of the old college library, which became my second home for the next three and a half years. I fell in love with the process-driven technical art of photography.

Becoming an Artist

The two prominent passions in my life have always been travel and art. Naturally the main subject of my photos became travel documentaries. Since the day I got my driver's license when I was sixteen years old, I have been taking road trips, and since I took my first photography class, I have been documenting my travels.

I spent years shooting and printing straight black and white photographs of beautiful places. Vast rolling landscapes of South Dakota, the tension of thunderous waterfalls in the Scottish countryside, foggy mountains and glaciers of New Zealand: all of these places are beautiful, as were ice flats of Alaska in the summer, the open desert of Texas, the redwood forest in Northern California. All of these places were impressive before I got there, and after I left. My work was more of a treasure hunt than an expression of art. I knew these places would make for impressive photographs; therefore all I had to do was show up with film and a camera to capture the images. The work that followed was a practice of fine printing that landed safely in the realm of beautiful photos which I was somewhat proud of at the time.

I became better at composing the photos and better at printing. I was confident in my technical abilities, and my work was well received by my peers and professors. It wasn't hard to take beautiful photos of beautiful places, and printing them became easier as I progressed. But the easier the work became for me, and the more well received my work became in the photo department, the less I respected my own work. A professor of mine made a comment during a critique of a self portrait project that haunted me; she said "Even after having you as a student for three years, and seeing all your work, even

looking at these self portraits, you have uncanny ability to remove your entire personality from your work.”

In retrospect, the safe road I had been traveling left no room for expression. At the time, I spent my efforts perfecting the printing process without knowing exactly where I would take it. I had the craftsmanship to be proud of, but I was not proud of the images. They were too safe. I was using what I knew about composition as a crutch to lean on until I could figure out how to put my experiences into my art. I was using universal paradigms of beauty as a crutch. My work expressed nothing more personal than my love of travel, and to me, that's not enough. That realization was the equivalent of running into a brick wall. I felt like I was pretending to be an artist. I felt like a fraud. I was afraid to express myself. When people asked if I was an artist, I said that I wasn't an artist, I was a photographer. To me this was admitting that I had ability, but no original ideas. As long as I lacked the confidence to put myself into my work, I was not an artist.

I was twenty five years old, and beginning my graduate studies at VCU, before I really considered myself an artist.

Of course, hiding behind technical abilities was my way of expressing myself without even knowing it. I was expressing that I was scared, and I felt like I had to overachieve with hard work and technical abilities to make up for deficiencies because if I didn't, people would see that I wasn't as smart as they were. Looking back now I can admit that I was an artist for as long as I can remember. One of my earliest childhood memories is of my kindergarten teacher Mrs. Wienstien, who singled me out as the class artist because the trees I was drawing had roots that tapered out where the trunk met the

grass. I have been an artist since that day. I have been an artist practicing my techniques until I found something I could say out loud. I was an artist who was practicing, but not yet producing.

Beauty from Truth

Since the beginning of photography, there has been a false belief that photos were about truth. The idea was that a photo showed exactly what something looked like. Photography was a way of documenting rather than a way of expressing. If you had pictures, you could prove anything.

Studying photography has made it clear to me that photos do not equal truth. A photo is, at best, an artist's rendition of truth. Mathew Brady's photos of the Civil War's battlegrounds were often staged and contrived by moving bodies around. Postcard photos from the Belgium Congo were staged by the Africans who figured out how to make money on tourists by showing them what they wanted to see, and hand colored in Belgium by people who never even went to Africa. At the very best, a photo is an idea of what the photographer wants you to see. The image is removed from time, and there is no reference to sound, touch or smell. There is no peripheral, no reference to the experience other than one person's view that has been cropped into a rectangular shape. A photo has no more reference to truth than any other art form. A photographer shows us what he wants us to see just as a painter does.

After I realized that photography does not equal truth, and after I realized it was imperative that I abandon my reliance on the traditional ideas of beauty, I found that I could achieve beauty from being true.

I don't have to seek out beauty to make art. When I have an idea, when my idea is personal, when my idea expresses, when I am truthful to my idea, when I am truthful to my process, I know that beauty will follow. Regardless of the subject matter, regardless

of what the images contain, regardless of what my viewers might see in the work; if I am true to my idea, beauty will follow.

Beauty does not just come from truth, it relies on it. Beauty is truth. Truth is beauty. No matter how unsettling it might be, no matter how far from the traditional ideology of beauty, truth is beautiful.

My Influences, My Library

There is no shortage of people I've known, artists I've studied, books I've read, and places I've gone that have influenced me. I am, as we all are, a walking library full of experiences that we are both conscious and unconscious of. Every night we go to sleep a different person from the night before, influenced by our experiences of the day. Every image we see, person we meet, and song we hear, is recorded in our brains.

I am influenced by the raw presentation of work from The Starn Twins, Dug and Mike Starn. The presentation of their work shows the process that they used. There are often photos collaged visibly together with tape. They use metal bars and clamps to fasten Plexiglas, which is left on to hold the work together. They abandoned traditional ideas of framing a finished image, and let the industrial materials they used frame their work and reference the process at the same time. Their work is large and imposing. It commands attention, and even if the viewer doesn't like it, it leaves an impression on you. You have an idea of the construction of it, and the materials used.

I am influenced by the Polaroid photo montage work of David Hockney. The idea of his Polaroid images, collaged together to make one large image, is beautiful in its simplicity. The use of multiple photos to make up one image also influenced me to stretch that idea and work with multiple exposures on film. His work made it clear to me that the idea of the work is more important than the final product. The images he used wouldn't have held my attention had they been straight photos, but the way he deconstructed the scenes using multiple photos, and then reconstructed them by layering the photos on top of each other made an uninteresting subject interesting. It makes

viewers stop and scan the image for imperfections, for missing information and it forces viewers to reconstruct the images in their own heads.

I am influenced by the work ethics of my father and brother. It seems to me that my father worked harder than any man alive. When I was growing up he was seldom around during the week because he worked so much. He came home tired and weary, but he didn't complain. He had a wife and three kids to take care of and he did what he had to do to take care of things. My brother decided at age eleven that he wanted to be a chef, and he has dedicated everyday since then to being the best chef he can be. They are the two most driven people I have ever known, and anytime I feel stagnant, or that I am not working enough, I think about them, and I get back to work. Their influence has made me into a more diligent artist. I am not afraid of the hard work it takes to make art, and I am driven to stretch an idea and work until I am proud of it.

I am influenced by the disabilities of Chuck Close. Chuck Close is my favorite artist, but not just for the impressive paintings that he's made. I attended an artist's lecture of his at the Smithsonian in 1999. He spoke about the enormous physical disabilities that he had to overcome to regain his ability to make art, but he also spoke of the learning disabilities he had to overcome to be successful as a child. I took notes at the lecture that I still have and look back on every time I need motivation.

I am influenced by the book *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. If I were to read Jack Kerouac today I would probably find it juvenile. However reading it during the tentative years between my late teens and early twenties, it became a passport to travel the country and experience it every chance I could. If I could do it while broke, it would make for a better, more meaningful experience. I have driven back and forth, from top to bottom,

from Washington DC to Alaska, with or without money countless times, but always with a camera. I don't save money, I don't buy expensive things, and I don't own anything that I have to worry about. My passion is to experience every part of the world I am fortunate enough to make it to.

Another influence is the classes I've taken through the VCU Interdisciplinary Studies program, which have kept me motivated and working as an artist. They also added countless processes to my artistic repertoire. The computer graphics and digital photography classes I've taken have forced me to learn the digital end of photography, which I was prone to resist and personally had discredited from its inception. Without the digital skills I learned I wouldn't have the opportunity to print as large as I printed the photos for my exhibition.

The Big Idea

The idea for this project comes from the centerpiece, *Coney Island (Appendix 1)*, that I shot in June of 2000, the first time I was using the Holga camera. That particular image depicts the progression down the boardwalk passed the concessions, then through the crowds of the gaming area, up to the Wonderwheel with the final shot taken shooting out of the window of one of the cars of the Wonderwheel back out towards the crowds of the boardwalk.

The successes of the Coney Island image lead me to continue working on the Holga images. From there I started the series of highwayscape photos that I spent the next two and a half years shooting. The premise of these photos is to document the images that are familiar to me as the places I drive past on a regular basis. I shot the images from the driver's seat as I was driving from one place to the next. I made a deliberate effort not to concentrate on the physical landmarks that might make for more recognizable photos; instead I shot the frames at regulated intervals. For instance, the *Rock Creek Parkway (Appendix, 2)* photo was shot at thirty second intervals, regardless of what was visible out of the windshield of the car. The images reference the fleeting and foggy sights that we don't quite remember from a familiar journey.

In addition to *Rock Creek Parkway*, I also included other journeys that referenced my everyday travels. *Route 66 West (Appendix, 3)* is a series of shots from the four mile stretch of Route 66 that I drive to work every day. *Mount Pleasant Street, (Appendix, 4)* and *Adams Mill Road (Appendix, 5)* are taken from the drive through my neighborhood in Washington DC.

Three of the pieces were a series of water photos presented as a triptych (Appendix, 6,7,8). Each photo was of one drop of water, shot with a 35mm camera and six close up filters stacked up on the lens. The photos were printed three feet high by four feet long, which removed all context and reference of the subject. The results more closely resembled hazy landscapes rather than the actual drops of water.

The Process Shall Set You Free

While attending an artist's lecture at the Smithsonian in 1999, a member of the audience asked Chuck Close how he stayed motivated, and he replied, "By a strong belief that the process shall set you free."

The process I used for my photos took me three years to perfect. It started with the purchase of my first *Holga* camera for twenty dollars. The camera is made in China entirely out of cheap plastic, including the lens, which eliminates any semblance of detail and sharpness from the negatives. The plastic design of the camera lends itself to light leaks, and the back of the camera occasionally falls open, ruining all the film in the camera. The shutter is operated by a simple spring inside the camera that wears out after too much use. Essentially, the *Holga* camera is a cheap laughable toy compared to the high-tech cameras bought and sold for thousands of dollars. However there are a few benefits to the camera. The camera uses medium format film, and the average negative is ten times bigger than a 35mm negative. The largest advantage is that the shutter of the camera and the film advancer work independently of each other. This enabled me to overlap the images inside the camera. I collaged the images while shooting the film, overlapping each shot, and letting the images bleed together.

The black and white *Kodak* 400 speed film I use is processed by hand using *Kodak T-max* developer for optimum contrast. The film is then cut into six to eight inch strips, and contact printed to make positive images onto photo paper in the darkroom. The positives are then scanned into the computer at the highest resolution the scanner will allow.

I open the images in *Adobe Photoshop* to adjust the lightness contrast, and then invert the images back into negatives, which is only way I manipulate the images. I do not fix scratches, dust, or any of the imperfections that the processing might cause. I do not add or remove any information to the images. I do not edit the images any further then the contrast and resizing. The digital negatives were then resized to the maximum size I could print in the darkroom facility I had available to me. I had the digital negatives printed onto paper from a large format plotter printer.

The paper negatives were then brought back into the darkroom for contact printing. I bought black and white photo paper in rolls that were thirty inches wide by ninety feet long. I also bought a piece of Plexiglas fifty inches wide by twenty high, and a quarter inch thick, which was used to hold the negative down on top of the photo paper. I laid the photo paper down on a long table in the darkroom, with the negative laying on top of it, and the Plexiglas holding it all down. To expose the image I used the white lights of the darkroom in two second intervals.

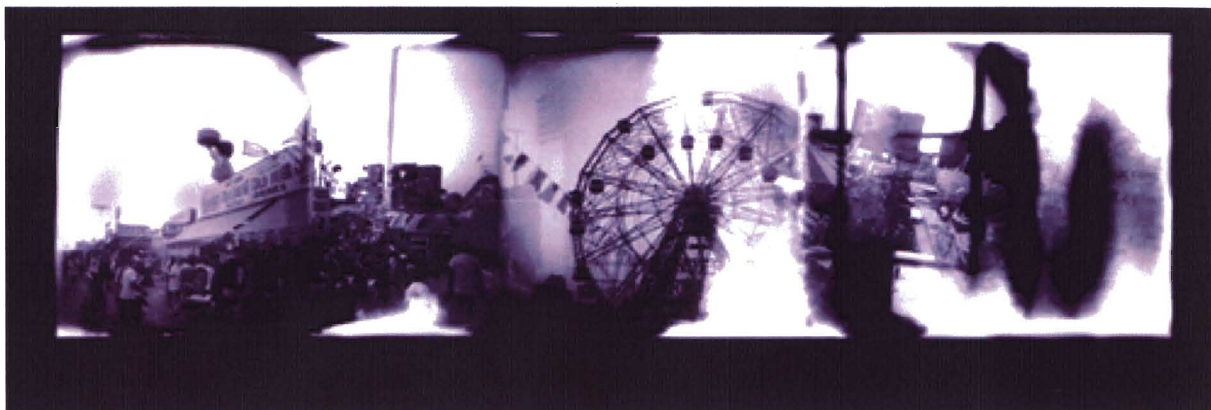
To process the exposed photo paper, I laid the paper down in the sink with the emulsion side facing up. I then applied the developer using a towel that had been soaking in the chemical. The towel was dragged across the image for three to four minutes as evenly as possible for full development. Then I washed the developer off of the image using pitchers of cold water I filled from the darkroom sink. I then applied the fixer to the image using the same towel method as the developer for ten to fifteen minutes. To wash the image I used pitchers of cold water for twenty to thirty minutes. After the image was washed I hung it up to drip dry.

Seven of the ten pieces I finished I framed with simple half inch aluminum frames, while the remaining three pieces I presented in an untraditional manner. Those pieces were clamped together with aluminum vise clamps and adhered to long pieces of framing wood that I had painted black. They were then hung from the wall in that raw, unrefined state.

The ten images, which took three years to conceive and complete, reflect my love of process. They also show that I have the confidence and the technical ability to make art – that I am an artist. I am able to express myself in photography; I can step back and know that I have done my best without cutting corners, without compromise, and that I have said what I intended to say.

Appendix

1. *Coney Island*, digital print, 8' x 3', 2000
2. *Rock Creek Parkway*, silver print, 48" x 16", 2003
3. *Route 66 West*, silver print, 50" x 18", 2003
4. *Mount Pleasant Street*, silver print, 50" x 20", 2003
5. *Adams Mill Road*, silver print, 44" x 14", 2004
6. *Water #1*, digital print, 3' x 4', 2003
7. *Water #2*, digital print, 3' x 4', 2003
8. *Water #3*, digital print, 3' x 4', 2003



Coney Island, digital print, 8' x 3', 2000

Figure 1



Rock Creek Parkway, silver print, 52" x 12", 2003

Figure 2



Route 66 West, silver print, 50" x 18", 2003

Figure 3



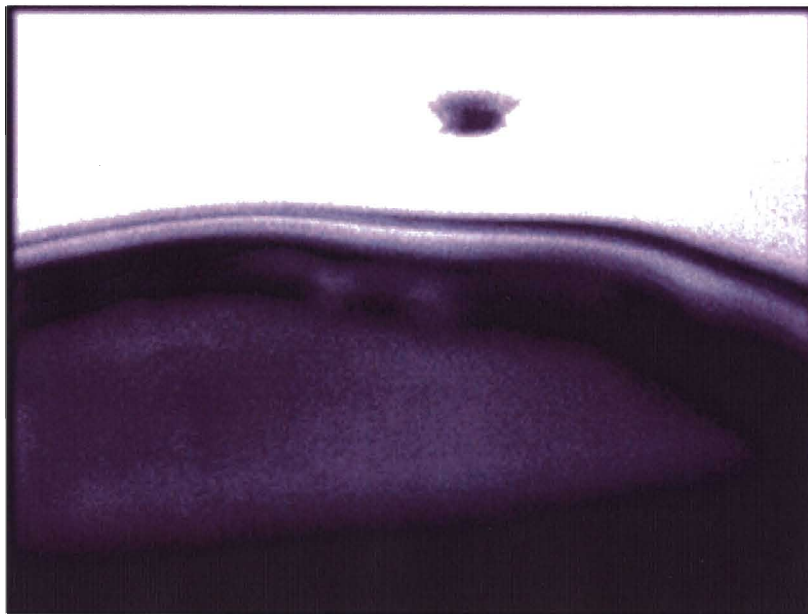
Mount Pleasant Street, silver print, 50" x 20", 2003

Figure 4



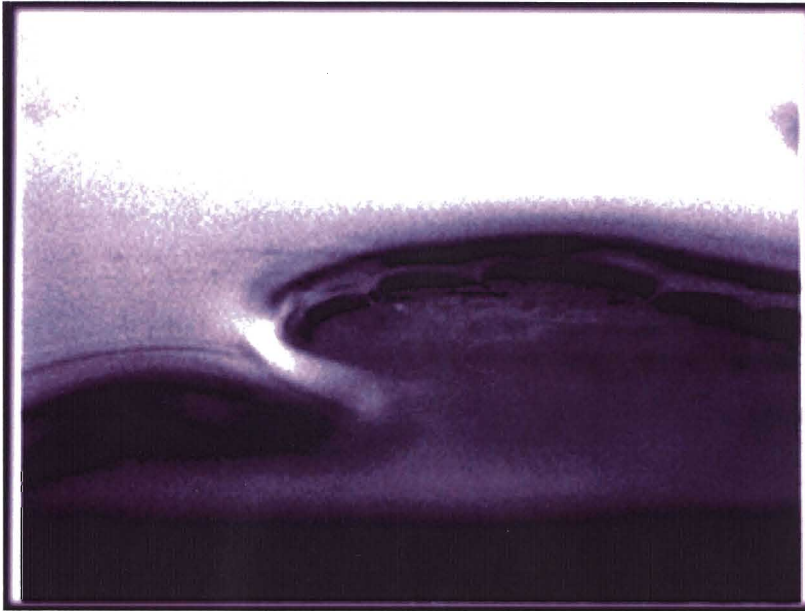
Adams Mill Road, silver print, 44" x 18", 2004

Figure 5



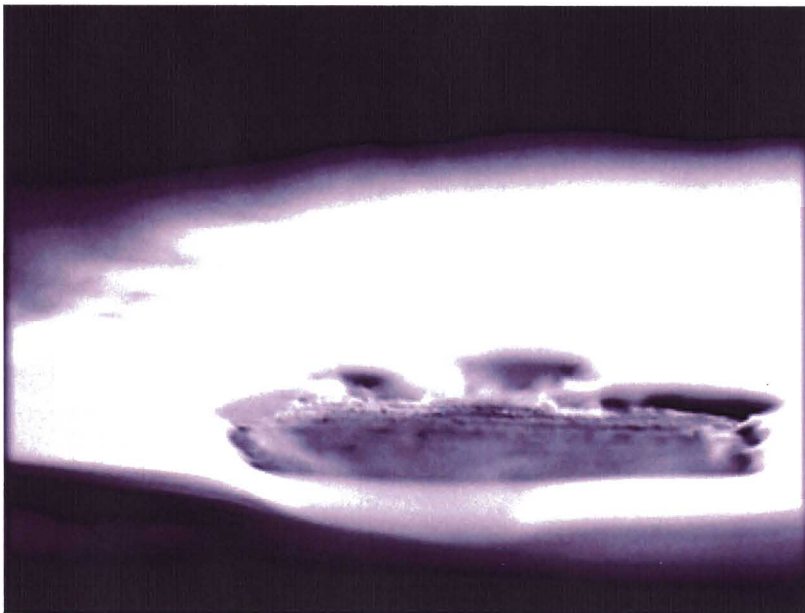
Water #1, digital print, 3' x 4', 2003

Figure 6



Water #2, digital print, 3' x 4', 2003

Figure 7



Water #3, digital print, 3' x 4', 2003

Figure 8

Michaël Dax Iacovone

Education:

- 2000 - 2005 Masters Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU)
- 1994-1998 Bachelors of Science in Art Education,
State University of New York, New Paltz NY

Teaching Experience:

- 2005 – present West Potomac High School
Fairfax County Public Schools
Alexandria, Virginia
- 2000 - 2005 Falls Church High School
Fairfax County Public Schools
Falls Church, Virginia

Grants:

- 2005 Young Artist Grant
DC Arts Council
- 2002 Printmaking Discipline Grant
Mid Atlantic Arts Council

Exhibition:

- 2005 Exhibited *Coney Island* photo in
The Brooklynite Magazine
- 2005 VCU Thesis exhibition
MOCA Gallery
Washington DC
- 2004 Printmaking Group show
Mason Gross School for the Arts
Rutgers University, New Jersey