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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by
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Abstract

[AURA]
By Stephanie Benassi, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Major Directors:
Paul Thulin, Associate Professor and Graduate Director,
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[AURA] is a collection of photographs of landscapes and objects that have been implicated in fringe beliefs, alternative narratives and the strange events that reside beyond the scope of our everyday experiences. These photographs represent the symbols used to describe phenomena and also concentrate on the areas surrounding the events. My investigation also examines how the affect of the landscape has contributed to the interpretations by those that witnessed it.

As a photographic collection, [AURA] investigates issues related to truth, as well as the role of subjectivity versus objectivity in my photographic practice. By concentrating this discussion on issues of sensation and the objects used to symbolize and identify the encounters with peculiar phenomena, I have been attempting to place emphasis on the way the aesthetics of the photograph can speak to issues outside of the image.
PART I
THE PARANORMAL LANDSCAPE
Mars was empty before we came. That’s not to say that nothing had ever happened. The planet was accreted, melted, roiled and cooled, leaving a surface scarred by enormous geological features: craters, canyons, volcanoes. But, all of that happened in mineral unconsciousness and unobserved. There were no witnesses --- except for us, looking from the planet next door, and that only in the last moment of its long history. We are all the consciousness that Mars had ever had.

Now everybody knows the history of Mars in the human mind: how for all generations it was one of the chief lights in the sky, because of its redness and fluctuating intensity, and the way it stalled in its wandering course through the stars and sometimes reversed direction. It seemed to be saying something with that. So perhaps it is not surprising that all of the oldest names for Mars have a particular weight on the tongue --- Nigral, Mangala, Auqaukuh, Harmakhis --- they sound as if they were even older than the ancient languages we find them in, as if they were fossil words from the Ice Age or before. Yes, for thousands of years Mars was a sacred power, representing blood, anger, war and the heart.

Then the first telescopes gave us a closer look, and we saw the little orange disk, with its whir poles and dark patches spreading and shrinking as the long seasons passed. No improvement in the technology of the telescope ever gave us much more than that; but the best Earthbound images gave Lowell enough blurs to inspire a story, the story we all know, of a dying world and a heroic people desperately building canals to hold off the final deadly encroachment of the desert.

It was a great story. But then Mariner and Viking sent back their photos and everything changed. Our knowledge of Mars expanded by magnitudes we literally knew millions of times more about the planet than we had before. And there before us flew a new world, a world, unsuspected.

It seemed, however, to be a world without life. People searched for signs of past or present Martian life, anything from microbes to the doomed canal builders or even alien visitors. As you know, no evidence of any of these has ever been found. And so the stories have naturally blossomed to fill the gap, just as in Lowell’s time, or in Homer’s, or in the caves or on the savannah --- stories of microfossils wrecked by our bio-organisms, of ruins found in the dust storms and then lost forever, of Big Man and all of his adventures, of the elusive little red people, always glimpsed out of the corner of the eye. And all of these tales are told in an attempt to give Mars life, or to bring it to life. Because we are still those animals who survived the Ice Age and looked up at the night sky in wonder and told stories. And Mars never ceased to be what it was to us from our beginning -- a great sign, a great symbol, a great power.

And so we came here. It had been a power; now it became a place.

(Stanley 2-3)
Looking for Phenomena

Centralia, a town located in the center of Pennsylvania, was established in 1866 as a result of its immense coal fields. Geographically, there is a vein that runs underneath the ground which contains 95% of anthracite coal in the United States. In 1962, in order to dispose of garbage that had been dumped into an abandoned strip mine, a large fire was started. This fire caused the land to collapse underneath and in a chain reaction ignited a vein of coal. The fire is still burning underneath the ground today and it is said that it could take up to 200 years for the coal to burn out. The fire continuously releases smoke and carbon dioxide above ground. I first read about this town in Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods*, in which he describes his visit:

*All around ... smoke was hovering wispily off the ground, and just behind it, great volumes of smoke were billowing from the earth over a large area. I walked over and found myself on the lip of a vast cauldron, perhaps an acre in extent, which was emitting thick, cloudlike, pure white smoke—the kind of smoke you get from burning tires or old blankets. It was impossible to tell through the stew of smoke how deep the hole was. The ground felt warm and was loosely covered in a fine ash* (Bryson 182).

Curiosity led me to go see the fog that was emitting (Figure 1). As I wandered through the mostly abandoned town, my interest was locked in on the living, breathing visual of the remnants of the inferno churning before me in the landscape.

Figure 1: Centralia. 12in. x 12in. 2009.
Centralia is a place that is trapped in the consequences of its past, but it also feels like a window or a portal that transports one into the fantasia of the projected future. Physically being in this space, in real time, describes a condition that seems far beyond the effects of a human miscalculation. This accident opened up a vault of mysteries and reveals the balancing acts of unseen forces that predominate all around. This iconic landscape and the fire smouldering beneath intersect the realms between the constructions of human history and natural phenomena, a scope that is outside of our understandings. We use interpretations to make it fit into our consciousness.

The insights gathered from this landscape inspired me to set out on the quest for more examples that defy our structure of comprehension. This led me to research the discrepancies in the reports of an object that fell from the sky on December 9, 1965 in Kecksburg, PA.

A large, brilliant fireball was seen by thousands in at least six U.S. states and Ontario, Canada. It streaked over the Detroit, Michigan/Windsor, Ontario area, reportedly dropped hot metal debris over Michigan and northern Ohio, starting some grass fires, and caused sonic booms in Western Pennsylvania. It was generally assumed and reported by the press to be a meteor.

However, eyewitnesses in the small village of Kecksburg, about 30 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, claimed something crashed in the woods. A boy said he saw the object land; his mother saw a wisp of blue smoke arising from the woods and alerted authorities. Others from Kecksburg, including local volunteer fire department members, reported finding an object in the shape of an acorn and about as large as a Volkswagen Beetle. Writing resembling Egyptian hieroglyphics was also said to be in a band around the base of the object. Witnesses further reported that intense military presence, most notably the United States Army, secured the area, ordered civilians out, and then removed the object on a flatbed truck. At the time, however, the military claimed they searched the woods and found “absolutely nothing.”

The Tribune-Review from nearby Greensburg had a reporter at the scene; the headline in the newspaper the next day was “Unidentified Flying Object Falls near Kecksburg — Army Ropes off Area.”

The official explanation of the widely-seen fireball was that it was a mid-sized meteor. However speculation as to the identity of the Kecksburg object (if there was one — reports vary) also range from it being an alien craft to debris from Cosmos 96, a Soviet satellite.¹

The question, “what” fell from the sky was most intriguing to me because there were three very different classification as to what the object was speculated to be --- natural meteorite, artifact of Cold War technology (Soviet satellite), or extraterrestrial (alien space craft). This examination led me to develop an interest in questioning what happens when broad speculation transforms into a particular belief.

Unlike the fire at Centralia, which is still occurring, the Kecksburg Space Acorn incident had already happened and all of the information regarding the event remains in the form of stories. The Kecksburg occurrence is interesting to me because the phenomena is no longer based on an observable event but rather, on the cultural representations and belief systems that have arisen in the wake of the event. (Figure 2)
[AURA]: The Landscape

It's better not to know so much about what things mean or how they might be interpreted or you’ll be too afraid to let things keep happening. Psychology destroys the mystery, this kind of magic quality. It can be reduced to certain neuroses ... and since it is now named and defined it's lost its mystery and the potential for a vast, infinite experience” (David Lynch quoted by del Rio 178).

Stories of aliens, skunk apes, accidental bombings, Elvis sightings and secret testing facilities populate the fringes of our vision of history, science and the American experience. Encountering these fringe beliefs on their own terms involves an encounter with the unknown and the unknowable aspects of landscapes and our cultural behavior.

[AURA] is a collection of photographs of landscapes, and objects as well as performance experiences that engage the camera. These sequences have been implicated in fringe beliefs, alternative narratives and the strange events that reside beyond the scope of our everyday experiences. These photographs represent the symbols used to describe unusual phenomena and also concentrate on the extended area and the affect that the landscape may have had on the interpretations of those that witnessed it.

As a photographic collection, [AURA] investigates issues related to truth, as well as the role of subjectivity versus objectivity in my photographic practice. This discussion concentrates on issues of sensation and the objects used to symbolize and identify the encounters with these feelings. I have been attempting to place emphasis on the way the aesthetics, and the sensations generated by the photograph can speak about the disputed encounters which are outside of the image.

Each location I investigate has a story that activates the landscape with the presence of strange, foreign experiences. The stories, some recent while others are hundreds of years old, are passed on and become legends, or folklore used to describe the area. These stories remain inconclusive and some events have often occurred more than once.

In many cases these occurrences are not simply part of the past but rather, very present and always lurking. Whether it be in the form of the being itself or the notion of inconclusive findings, as in the case with the Space Acorn, these stories are still very much alive. As they continue they influence how the landscape is experienced. In essence, these stories transform the engagement with the natural world into a form of spectacle, where the enticement of a possible encounter with a mysterious creature or an unidentified object is intertwined with the perception of space (which is closer to spectacle than a communion with nature). The landscape is transformed from a banal part of a larger world to a specific location of the uncanny.
The fact is that nothing extraordinary exists for me to document at many of these locations - at least nothing as uncanny as the original sightings. The image itself does not indicate the presence of paranormal activity. The paranormal activity only exists in the form of language, which is something that is outside of the landscape (and the image of the landscape) and is subjectively brought for interpretation. This is not to suggest that the landscape images are void of activating a subjective experience. In fact, what I intend to bring to viewers is a suggestion of the sensations of possible encounters. The goal is to create an image that embodies phenomena rather than one that defines it.

“As communities of plants and animals, we exist as points of concentrated meaning in a network; we swim in a swarm or soup of continuous, multi directional communication, through which we achieve and surrender our separate identities. For plants, the messages are primarily biochemical ... our own is in one aspect largely composed of language; but in another aspect it is made up of embodiment” (Totton 398).

I use the legends as guidance for a purposeful encounter with the location that has been implicated with phenomena. If you examine the images, there are no human forms, figures, faces, or animals that can be seen conclusively. They are not reenactments of the events, as seen on the television series X Files. Rather, they exhibit an attempt to make a visual representation of the perceptual disturbances at these sites as a result of the possible presence of a supernatural phenomena.

Figure 3: Untitled Landscape (Orb Specimen) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2010.

Figure 4: Untitled Landscape (Trinity) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2009.
Figure 5: Untitled Landscape (Skunk Ape Ravine) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2009

Figure 6: Untitled Landscape (Lizard Man, Bishopville, SC #2) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2009

Figure 7: Untitled Landscape (Mars Bluff) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2010

Figure 8: Untitled Landscape (Perimeter Mountain Range of Area 51) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2010
The “Landscape” images in [AURA] are in a liminal state --- in between the attributes of physical space and the emotional impact of perceiving and defining its existence, which cannot be measured or seen in a photograph. The only truth available in these pictures is that the landscape, despite our desire otherwise remains shrouded in its own inscrutableness. This generates a similar dilemma of the landscapes explored in the work of Joel Sternfeld’s One This Site: Landscape in Memoriam, who approached this problem with the use of text.

I have never seen On This Site as photographic prints but I have engaged the book. The format is a systematic layout that consists of photographs on the right with direct quotes of newspaper captions on the left (Figure 9). This layout allows the viewer to imagine the acts within the frame of the image. Sternfeld’s work deals with tragic events in the format of a memoriam. The collection of documents is intend to serve as a record of events of the sites, but also encourages a contemplation regarding America’s violence. By framing these photographs in the context of a memoriam Sternfeld also suggests that by remembering these events, persons and sites, we can begin a healing process.

“I was struck by accounts of violence that I read in the newspaper; the vicious and the random nature of crimes seemed more extreme than I remembered, or perhaps it was the reporting that made them seem so. I began to reconsider violence in America. When it came time to photograph again, I found it difficult to see the landscape as I had seen it before... It occurred to me that I held something within: a list of places that I cannot forget because of the tragedies that identify them... I set out to photograph sites that were marked during my lifetime” (Sternfeld 101).

Figure 9 : Joel Sternfeld. “Across from 11777 Foothill Boulevard, Lake View Terrace, Los Angeles, California, November 1993.” from On This Site. 1993.
Unlike Sternfeld, I am interested in a different type of social coping mechanism. The events that I have chosen in [AURA] are guided by the skepticism that surrounds the stories attached to these sites which range from reasonable explanations to complete stupidity. I have chosen to eliminate captions or text to allow the images to function with a seriousness that is not commonly attributed to these seemingly “phony” events. This elimination of the specificities in the stories is an attempt to propose questions about how experiences are contextualized by our given modes of understanding and to forge connections between disparate events and locations that share similar bizarre possibilities.

My intention is for these places to be viewed in absence of the controversy and speculation that surrounds them in order to concentrate on the potential power that these sites might have over the imagination. This is to allow the viewer a visual experience that is in between what is known and unknown and initiate a thinking about possibilities that are neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intellect. Although this may not seem generous to the viewer, I believe that by allowing the images of the landscape to be evocative, yet resistant, the viewer is afforded more space to project, contemplate or use their imagination. This use of ambiguity and restraint is partially inspired by Hiroshi Sugimoto’s body of work entitled *Seascapes* (Figures 10 and 11.)

*Seascapes* is a collection of photographs of the sea and sky. These photographs present views of the horizon that are framed like a theater, but there is an absence of action where the stillness of the image resists clarity.

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*Seascapes*

*Water and air. So very commonplace are these substances, they hardly attract attention—and yet they vouchsafe our very existence. The beginnings of life are shrouded in myth: Let there [be] water and air. Living phenomena spontaneously generated from water and air in the presence of light, though that could just as easily suggest random coincidence as a Deity. Let’s just say that there happened to be a planet with water and air in our solar system, and moreover at precisely the right distance from the sun for the temperatures required to coax forth life. While hardly inconceivable that at least one such planet should exist in the vast reaches of universe, we search in vain for another similar example. Mystery of mysteries, water and air are right there before us in the sea. Every time I view the sea, I feel a calming sense of security, as if visiting my ancestral home; I embark on a voyage of seeing.*

2. ([Sugimoto](http://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/seascape.html))
Figure 10: Hiroshi Sugimoto. *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica*. 1980

Figure 11: Hiroshi Sugimoto. *Ligurian Sea, Saviore*. 1980
Sugimoto’s *Seascapes* are metaphors for vast oceanic space and become allegories that celebrate the mysteries of existence. The ambiguity in the seascape images transcend Sugimoto’s experience of capturing, or what he calls the voyage of seeing, and creates a viewing experience that takes advantage of these liminal aspects of the photographic image.

The landscapes in [AURA] sustain their meaning through the limits of the photograph’s capacity to produce a legible image. The images are inspired by specific stories but visually they behave similar to the mysterious wonders that surround and define them. It is through ambiguity that the landscape images function as metaphors for the omnipresent primal feelings associated with the unknown in which the affects of it cannot be defined.

“[A]ffect --- sets of forces that critical language has not yet been able to encounter on their own terms without reducing them to a more familiar discourse of representation and judgement --- is the proper name for that which largely remains unknown” (Abel 57).

In his book, *Still Life With Woodpecker*, Tom Robbins describes how the affect of Haleakala, the dormant volcano in Hawaii, is lost in language descriptors.

> It was Haleakala, erupting in tandem with a lesser volcano, that created the island of Maui. It must have been a show. The crater was seven and one half miles across, the cone more than ten thousand feet high, yet Haleakala had a presence at which even the most impressive measurements didn’t.

> Such an eerie, unfamiliar place was Haleakala that there was a tendency to associate it with other worlds, outer spaces. Indeed, an unusually large percentage of visitors who camped there overnight in order to view the famous Haleakala sunrise, the sun awakening in its own bedroom, swore to having seen oddly lighted forms in the sky. To the dormant volcano, with its crumbly cromlechs, its lunar contours, it black and red sands, supernatural properties came to be attributed. Many regarded it a universal center, an intergalactic connecting point, a cosmic beanhill, the earth terminal for spaceships of all degrees of substance a visibility. So many people claimed to have seen UFOs buzzing Haleakala that it turned into a mecca for flying-saucer fans and would be cosmic cosmopolitans. Individuals, entire cults with outer-space orientations settled in the valleys near the base of the mountain (Robbins 47).
This passage illustrates how a community can generate hysteria and surround a place with it’s subjective speculation. Robbins makes note, that words and measurements cannot accurately describe the affect of the volcano’s presence. The sensations felt by the visitors in their encounters with the Haleakala, (“eerie” and “unfamiliar” and perhaps “unearthly” landscape) were not quantifiable in the usual representational sense. In their minds, if it was unlike another place on Earth, the only logical comparison or metaphorical link is to the entities of outer space.

The landscape images included in [AURA] have characteristics that are similar to Robbins’ description of Haleakala. To achieve this type of image, I begin by creating a collection of photographs of specific landscapes, often returning to the landscapes to photograph more than once until I find a mysterious visual that I like.

There is a spontaneity while looking and taking photographs and often there is little preparation for my journey into the landscape. I take advantage of available lighting and record similar vantage points at different times of the day and often feel lucky when there is some overcast weather. Inclement weather seems to put a charge in the atmosphere that creates a more interesting aesthetic. In addition, the quality of light at these sites changes their depictions. Some reveal a powerful sense of darkness while others, such as the swamp at Bishopville (Figure 12), present unusual light anomalies. In the image of the swamp, there are two distinct mysterious light blurs that form half circles that begin at the bottom of the picture and stretch to the right side of the frame. Because of this lighting, this image references the tradition of spirit photography (Figure 13), where unknown light anomalies or orbs were presented as evidence suggesting that the camera could reach into and translate the residual matter of the spiritual world.

Usually the space seems to present itself to me and I find myself embracing the idiosyncrasies that occur while recording and interacting with it. The relinquishment of control while capturing creates a better system for discovering these haunting anomalies. After I record and collect as many images as possible, I embrace the gap between what I see with the naked eye and what is recorded. At this stage, after the development of the negatives, there is a careful search for recordings that seem to have the appearance of “other worldliness,” presence or at least encourages the idea of searching and attempting to project into another realm.
Figure 12: Untitled Landscape (Lizard Man, Bishopville, SC #1) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2009

Figure 13: Spiritualist known as Mr. Reeves with photographer Frederick Hudson. Albumen Print. 10 cm. x 7.5 cm. Clara Harris with spirit of her father. The attitude is that in which he used to walk in the latter part of his life. He had bad attacks of gout & limped with a stick. 1872.
In the specific image of the trees located at Roanoke Island (Figure 14), I have injected my presence in the form of lights. The trees are lit with car headlights that penetrate into the darkness as if one were looking for something, but the light only emphasizes the neon green lichen on the trunk of the closest tree. The image of Great Swamp (Figure 15) also exhibits an attempt to peer into the darkness beyond into low canopy of trees that surround the deep blue pond water. There is a light streak in the left half of the frame that mirrors the streaks in the swamp at Bishopville. This light steak in the Great Swamp, however, exhibits a visual cue that it possesses more momentum and speed, as it scrapes by and eventually gets lost within the forest. All of the images suggest that some kind of activity is present, but what it is remains distant and inconclusive. Part of the affect of the landscape images is the implication of forces, swirling and streaking, through the stillness allowing any kind of nuance, like a slight motion or breeze, to exert more power within the frame.
Figure 15: Untitled Landscape (Great Swamp) from [AURA]. 36in. x 36in. 2010
PART 2: [AURA]: THE RELICS
Objects of Phenomena

The “Relics” are a collection of photographs of objects located at the sites I have visited. Examples of the objects in this collection include a wood cut replica of an ancient Mayan relief that depicts a pilot or astronaut (Figure 16), a Very Large Array Radio Telescope (Figure 22), and NASA’s Aero Shell that was made in 1965 (Figure 23).

The “Relic” images provide context for the landscape images discussed previously. These physical objects are most often used as indicators, commemorations, or signposts that represent particular manifestations of these phenomena. Since these objects condense the often contradictory or elusive nature of the phenomena said to have taken place they can be seen as a symbolic judgement that excludes or obscures additional information that exists pertaining to these occurrences. The “Relic” images document the testimony of these subjective judgements. They are built to signify that a particular phenomena is “true” (to those who believe) although this truth is inconclusive.

Figure 16: Untitled Relic (Roswell) from [AURA] 49 in x 49 in 2009
The object investigation with the “Relic” is similar in structure to the work of artist Joachim Koester. Koester is interested in groups of people that have evaded historical documentation. For *Night of the Magicians*, Koester photographs decaying, abandoned buildings that are said to have once housed some of the most historically elusive occult groups of the past, including the Abbey of Thelema in Sicily (Figures 20, 21, 22). The “Abbey” refers to a small house that was used as a temple and spiritual teaching center founded by Aleister Crowley and Leah Hirsig in Cefalù in 1920.

Koester seems interested in the idea that these occult groups are said to have existed, but any significant proof of what or how they practiced remains a mystery. His collection of images show the site of these alleged activities in their current dilapidated state, where all that remains is the evidence of human vandalism and the buildings’ re-absorbtion into the surrounding wilderness (Figures 20, 21, 22). Koester concentrates on the gap in the historical recordings of the occult groups and uses a system that pieces together a narrative which is based on the sediments at the site as well as the stories and rumors of their unusual practices.
“I was so overwhelmed by the scene’s dormant qualities that I had to pause. It seemed to me as if sediments, pieces of leftover narratives and ideas from the individuals that once passed through this place had formed knots, as tangled as the bushes and trees that were now taking over, creating a kind of sleeping presence.”

Koester seems to be describing the same kind of presence or affect that I am exploring. He also seems to have trouble describing these sensations using language without referencing the nature that has invaded the structures themselves (Figure 17). The phenomena he describes has to do with what is there in front of him and what is said to have possibly taken place, as well as his emotional reactions to viewing the artifact remnants of the mysterious narratives of fringe occult practices. For Koester, it seems that the physical structure of “the Abbey” offers a representation that can act in the place of language showing the edge of our known world as it gives way to the mysteries beyond.

Figure 18: Joachim Koester. “The Abbey of Thelema #1.” The Morning of Magicians. 2005

The images that make up *Morning of the Magicians* function as a form of persuasion, using the visual affect to open a conversation regarding the existence and the practice of secretive rituals. There is a suggestion that there are alternative narratives and histories that will forever remain a mystery. This position is different from authoritative traditions that present photographic images with captions, such as Sternfeld’s *On This Site*, where the word captions tell what the image is and how it is meant to be seen. Like a puzzle without resolution, Koester allows for the viewer to analyze the visuals and create possible theories or narratives rather than accept what is laid out before them. The “Relics” in [AURA] function similarly to *Morning of the Magicians*, at once being like language in their capacity to make the abstract and evasive feelings visible, and yet, generate possibilities and discussions rather than conclusions. And, in essence, all of the images in [AURA] encapsulate the dynamic of possibility.

Figure 19: Joachim Koester. “The Room of Nightmares #1.” *The Morning of Magicians*. 2005
A good example of this is in the “Relic” image of Earth’s Intergalactic Mailbox at the ranch that is outside the perimeter of the Nellis Air Force Range located in the Mojave Desert of Nevada (Figure 19). Within the perimeter of the base is Groom Lake which is the geographical marking point for the legendary and unmarked testing facility known as Area 51. It is said that the location of the mailbox is the perfect viewing area for all air traffic and according to “UFO-Ologists,” this includes extraterrestrial air craft and unidentified flying objects. This ordinary post has two mailboxes connected to it and is now known as “Earth’s Intergalactic Mailbox,” as its name states, is a post box for written commutation between extraterrestrials and humans.

I have photographed this image at a three-quarter vantage point so that the viewer can get an idea of the shape and depth of the two boxes suggesting the amount of mail that this box receives. This vantage point also reveals the graffiti that has been put there by U.F.O. explorers and tourists. The shadow of the rock in the background shows the time to be around noon. This time of day allowed for the clearest, brightest image of this object. The bright light and clear day also allows for great depth of field to reveal the surrounding area. In the distance is the Timpahute Mountain Range which visually blocks the Yucca Flat Mountain Range. The two mountain Ranges (Timpahute and the Yucca Flat) provide a natural barrier that circles Area 51. The Yucca Flat Mountain Range is said to be the most radiated nuclear blast site on the face of the Earth. This image acts as a geographical locus point in an intricate narrative that includes secret military activity, a possible hidden environmental hazard, U.F.O. sightings and extraterrestrial contact. This simple mailbox in the desert is both a vantage point and receptacle of these multiple narratives and mysteries. Individual “Landscapes,” such as Mars Bluff (Figure 20a), have similar narrative structures, but, the primary focus oscillates between object and nature.
The “Relic” images are more straightforward than the “Landscapes.” For the “Relic” images there is a more strategic approach because it is a collection or archive of my own creation that show objects which are implicated as evidence of phenomena and the paranormal. Like a traditional archive, the images do not hide or try to shroud the objects in obscurity but rather present them as “matter of fact.” As mentioned previously with the image of “Earth’s Intergalactic Mailbox,” I often try to choose a vantage point which pictorially describes both the object and its environment. My photographic approach is particular to each object in order to accurately describe its material qualities and atmosphere: to show what it is made of, how it is presented in the world, and its history as an object.

**Symbols of Phenomena**

At this point, it is important to explain that all of the images that make up [AURA] are meant to be seen in an art context and intended as art objects, and not to be classified within other institutional realms such as anthropology, history or science. This allows for [AURA] to function on a fictional and level which I believe reveals more than pure documentary mode. Although these objects exist out in the world, as images they are not intended to function in service of already established histories or reportage, but instead are meant to establish a new narrative about the edges our knowledge, the extremes of our beliefs and the use of collective symbols to code our encounters with the unknown.

However, by displaying the “Relic” images and the “Landscapes” together, opposing one another, my goal is both to show that they are linked by a shared phenomena as well as frustrate the expectations of the index and its capacity to place value and generate conclusions. The coupled presentation enables a conceptual interaction between the images. The “Relics” trigger associations between their concrete physical existence and the evocative landscape images that are opposite of them, suggesting that the objects would not exist without the sensations and perceptions of the phenomena felt in the landscape and reflexively that the landscapes are contaminated by the representations that mark them (both the stories and physical objects). A simple way of defining this relationship between the two collections is as affects and effects, not the usual cause and effect. In this case, since the cause is undefined --- we can only encounter what is produced or brought to bear, its symptoms, and can only imagine what vision or sensation could trigger such seemingly mad or unusual stories, symbols, and monuments.

Represented in [AURA] are symbols that are widely acknowledged in our culture, such as the green alien, the radio telescope from the Very Large Array (Figure 22). Because these ideas and symbols permeate culture, it would be hard for the viewer not to bring pre-established thoughts influenced by media, tabloids and sci-fi
movies. This works in favor to the collection as a whole because the lesser known objects such as the cast of Skunk Ape’s footprint (Figure 21) or the more ambiguous documents like the Air Pump where Elvis was seen in 1977 (Figure 24), become implicated by the more widely known symbols. The combination of recognizable and obscure symbols provides an opportunity for the collection to open a larger conversation without simply resorting to the common popular culture narratives involving aliens or Bigfoot.

Figure 21: Untitled Relic (Skunk Ape Cast) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2009.

Figure 22: Untitled Relic (Very Large Array) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2009.

Figure 23: Untitled Relic (Aero Shell) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2009.

Figure 24: Untitled Relic (Elvis Sighting, 1977) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2010.
Without hierarchy this collection functions like a code to a series of open ended questions. One of interest is ‘how does one represent that, which cannot be represented?’ Or, more precisely, ‘how do those that experience phenomena --- happenings that are outside of the normal framework of experience ---- choose to account (through language and image) the sensations or disorientation they perceive?’ These questions are borrowed from Trevor Paglen’s statement for his work entitled *Symbology (Volume 1)*.

*Paglen’s Symbology (Volume 1)* (Figures 25 and 26) is a collection of uniform patches that represent secret branches and programs of the United States Military. The artist’s statement for *Symbology (Volume 1)* describes how the symbolism and visual language is used to both reveal and protect military secrets.

*Military culture is filled with a totemic visual language consisting of symbols and insignia that signify everything from various unit and command affiliations to significant events, and noteworthy programs. A typical uniform will sport patches identifying its wearer’s job, program affiliation, achievements and place within the military hierarchy. These markers of identity and program heraldry begin to create a peculiar symbolic regime when they depict one’s affiliation with what defense-industry insiders call the “black world” – the world of classified programs, projects, and places, whose outlines, even existence, are deeply-held secrets. Nonetheless, the Pentagon’s “black world” is replete with the rich symbolic language that characterizes other, less obscure, military activities.*

*The symbols and insignia shown in the Symbology series provide a glimpse into how contemporary military units answer questions that have historically been the purview of mystery cults, secret societies, religions, and mystics: How does one represent that which, by definition, must not be represented?*

Figure 25: Trevor Paglen. *Symbology (Volume 1)*. 2006

There is an obvious sharing of imagery between the military insignias found in Paglen’s *Symbology (Volume 1)* and the representations found within the circles of the fringe believers as depicted in [AURA] (Figures 27, 28 and 29). It is Paglen’s agenda to show how these comical representations are used by government sanctioned entities or authorities. The fact that there is a visual overlap with the fringe believers’ objects and myths suggests that even the insiders (military) participate (even if ironically) in this mythology and transform it into a form of code that symbolizes the secrecy of their routines and clandestine activity.

The military obviously acknowledges the power of the unknown and know how to represent it without disclosing its reality. The insignia found in the military patches of *Symbology (Volume 1)* reinforce the imagery shown in my “Relic” photographs as symbols of the unknown. The patches acknowledge that something is happening within these secret branches of government, yet the tongue-in-cheek images prevent any true deciphering as to what is happening. If the patches suggest that yes, it is true that the government is doing something that they want to keep secret, what they are hiding is probably not an alien craft, as depicted in the insignia.

Figure 26 : Trevor Paglen. Detail, *Symbology (Volume 1)*, 2006

Figure 27 : Untitled Relic (Shrine) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2010.
Figure 28: Untitled Relic (Air Traffic Controller) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2010.

Figure 29: Detail of Untitled Relic (Air Traffic Controller) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2010.
PART 3: AURA: THE EXPERIMENT
In Part 3, “Aura: The Experiment,” I am working with the concepts and capacity of photographing one’s thoughts, also known as “Thoughtography.” The term, Thoughtography or Nensha, was coined by Tomokichi Fukurai, an assistant professor of psychology at Tokyo University in 1910. Thoughtography is the ability to psychically “burn” images from one’s mind onto surfaces. One of the most documented cases of this supernatural ability was performed by Ted Serios, a bellhop at a Hilton Hotel in Chicago. A series of tests to prove Serios’ ability were documented.

“More than 400 hundred of Serios’ psychic photographs contain specific images. These images, usually of buildings, are generally somewhat blurry or distorted, but recognizable nevertheless. On some occasions Eisenbud or another experimenter would select a ‘target’ image before hand but conceal its identity from Serios (for example, by sealing the image in an opaque envelop). Some of Serios’ images were judged to be successes (‘hits’) although the correspondences were not very close... Serios also produced hundreds of so called ‘blackies’ and ‘whities’ (Braude 155 - 156).”

Figure 30: Untitled Image.

Figure 31: Ted Serios. “Hilton Hotel in Denver.” *Thoughtography*. 1963 - 1967. (Serios “target” was to obtain a thought image of the Hilton Hotel in Chicago where he was once employed, but instead produced an image of Hilton Hotel in Denver.)
I created a set of Polaroid “Thoughtography” images for [AURA] through a series of performances that mimic Serios’ and Eisenbud’s procedure. To do this performance, I covered the lens of the camera and attached a Polaroid back. This Polaroid back device converted my traditional film camera into an instant Polaroid camera. My intentions was to use an instamatic process that preserves the image as an “original” and not a reproduction. Instant film is a direct process and the chemical reactions that occur can vary from picture to picture. As a result, they appear to have evidence of energy transferred directly to film. For the performance, I placed the camera on a tripod and position it three feet from my head. With the camera set at bulb I then pressed the shutter release and attempted to project thoughts. The exposure time was determined by the length of the time that I could mentally produce a thought before becoming distracted by another thought. Times often ranged from two seconds to eight minutes.

This process resulted in a collection of 197 abstract “thought” Polaroids (Figures 34 and 35) and one Polaroid document of a performance. They are an array of dark, nonrepresentational images containing varying chemical occurrences. The Polaroids are arranged in a seven by four and a half foot grid with the performance document image placed at the bottom left (Figure 32). The wall of the grid is painted gray with a glitter paint. The expanse of the wall is lit with stage lighting and colored gels (Figure 33). The colored stage lighting activates the sparkle of the glitter. The intention of this presentation is to combine the spectacle of light and the subjectivity of the Polaroid images.
Figure 33: “Aura: The Experiment.” from [AURA]. 197 Documents (Polaroids), Stage Lights, Glitter Paint; Performance Document (February 15, 2010 at 10:22 PM). 7 ft x 4 1/2 ft. 2010.
Figure 34: “Aura: The Experiment.” from [AURA]. Document Detail, Performance date: February 12, 2010 at 7:35 PM. 2010.

Figure 35: “Aura: The Experiment.” from [AURA]. Document Detail, Performance date: March 1, 2010 at 4:55 PM. 2010.
“Aura: The Experiment” presents a mode in which the camera is regarded as a scientific instrument designed to be in opposition to subjectivity --- it merely transposes or records. The camera is free of the subjective desires of both the operator and the subject and, as a result, the images produced are viewed as a form of measurement capable of being evaluated by the scientific method. They are not to be interpreted for any kind of meaning beyond that of the experiment. Unfortunately, “[p]hotographs are never just simple views of reality, they are also ideas and interpretations. The ... photograph is not just made by a bald technical operation of snapping someone in front of the camera, it is also constituted by the ‘performance’ of the portrait, and by the way the resultant image is incorporated into people’s lives after it is made” (Jolly 145).

In this experiment with “Thoughtography,” I am interested in what it can show us on a conceptual level. If it is believed that one can transfer one’s thoughts to light sensitive paper, then the images produced could be thought of as representing that person’s subjectivity, regardless of what they appear as or look like. Also, by disproving these images by saying that the camera and photographs, in general, are not objective articles but completely subjective (and easily manipulated), the images are opened up to the viewer’s subjective responses or interpretations. In both cases objectivity has been denied and this is further compounded by the absence of the index in the individual photographs. The index has been replaced by the suggestion.

“The extent to which beliefs are useful to us is determined by the mechanism for transmitting these beliefs. In the case of the humans being, the mechanism is culture... For culture to propagate belief systems effectively, it must be able to take full advantage of an extraordinary evolutionary adaptation that makes counter - intelligence of all sorts possible. That is the most fascinating of all human characteristics, namely suggestibility” (Schumaker 37).

In this sense, if the Polaroids represent pure subjectivity: free of questions of truth or objectivity. They suggest that whatever judgement is brought to the images does not change the action that produced them, nor their existence as such. The objects produced in “Aura: The Experiment” are just as inconclusive as the “Landscape” images and the “Relic” images. “Aura: The Experiment” triggers an implication that all of the images in [AURA]’s collection exploit subjectivity as material matter to be investigated.
The phenomena I have been investigating are by nature outside the representational abilities of language. My focus has been on the visual attributes and relics that surround these strange happenings, the landscapes that staged the events and possibly participated in their reception. There is also an examination of the visual symbols that have come to contain the spirit, essence, or dominant expression of these ahistorical episodes. With a focus explicitly on these visuals, my endeavor has been to remove them from the confines of language and the judgements of our common sense. I want these places to be viewed anew with less emphasis on what they are not (so what if they are not true, not real, nor verifiable). My intention is to put more concentration on what they represent about our human capacity to define our experiences --- to convince our fellow beings of even the strangest beings, and the necessity of our belief that we are part of something larger and are capable of discovering new realms of understanding.

While the dishes at VLA point towards distant galaxies, there is a man in a swamp still wondering what the fuck he saw that night.

Figure 36: Untitled Relic (Saber Tooth Tiger) from [AURA] 30 in x 30 in 2010.


Stephanie Benassi

Education
Master of Fine Arts
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2010

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography
Minor Art History
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
May 2004
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Guest Lectures and Awards
January 2010 Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate Thesis / Dissertation Assistantship
March 2009 1708 Graduate Artist Forum Lecture
January 2007 Excellence in Mentoring Award from the Rhode Island Mentoring Partnership
December 2006 Visiting artist for Junior Photography students
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
November 2006 Visiting artist for Junior Photography students
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
February 2005 Visiting artist for Studio Photography students
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
Exhibitions

Group Shows:

May 2010
MFA Thesis Exhibition (Round 2)
Anderson Gallery
Richmond, VA

January - April 2010
Balloon Boy Blues and Other Photographic Disruptions
Capital One
Richmond, VA

March 2010
Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner
Richmond, VA

November 2009
Where Is The Art?
Richmond, VA

May 2009
Five Past One
VCU Candidacy Exhibition
Richmond, VA

Spring 2009
1708 Graduate Artist Forum Nominee
1708 Gallery’s Fourth Annual Graduate Artist Forum
Richmond, VA

Spring 2009
1708 Forum Exhibit
Capital One
Richmond, VA

January 2009
Blend
Fab Gallery VCUArts
Richmond, VA

November 2008
Hurt Feelings and Reputations
Richmond, VA
Biography

My father worked as a civilian cartographer for the Defense Mapping Agency. The information he worked with was confidential and top secret. My mother would take my brother and I to visit him in an unmarked brick building and where we had to sign in and pass through several sets of security. Inside there were tables with tiny pins that connected to each other with various colors of thin thread. When I was five I asked what he “made maps of.” He would pull me aside and whisper “Utah.” Because I was a young child, Utah seemed like a far away place that held an elusive mystery. Later, as an adult, he told me that they were maps of Iran and Iraq that were composed from aerial photographs taken by military planes.

The curiosity about the elusive mysteries that I first encountered as a child has lingered through my artistic thoughts. This curiosity drives me to seek out the unfamiliar, to investigate the fringes of culture and gain access to areas just off of the map.

Self Portrait in Utah. 2010