2018

Enact in Disappearance

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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Enact in Disappearance

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

By

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Master of Fine Art
Photography + Film
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Abstract

ENACT IN DISAPPEARANCE

By Stephanie Dowda DeMer

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

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Enact in Disappearance excavates the unseen through the medium of photography in order to chart a new strategy for knowing and communing with a complicated world.
Introduction

In this paper, I will excavate the unseen through understanding visibility and practices in reflection as captured through photography. Through an examination of the antiquated black mirror, the Claude Glass, to the rise of spirit photography at the turn of the twentieth century, and then engaging with contemporary thinkers and artists in practices of visibility, I position my research as an aesthetic strategy of reflection that has informed my studio practice. “Enact in Disappearance” is an engagement within the visible, a strategy for seeing which extends into the image and through communion with natural phenomena in the realized artworks.

Photography is inextricably linked to the unseen, transcending representation to capture imagination, possibility, and ontological inquiry.\(^1\) In the original advent of the lens, photography was seen as a way for the world to paint itself, objectively, on a fixed surface. This notion was quickly dispelled, but the desire for the medium of photography to be objective and truthful still lingers.\(^2\) Noted photography critic and author Lyle Rexar

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\(^1\) (Margot Norton, *Double World*, 2010, p 40). In regards to the expanding dimensionality of our understanding of photography, Norton writes, “No longer do we consider photography to be a singular, fixed discipline… instead, it is a plural term, encompassing rich territory for artists to probe, provoke, expand, and reinterpret.”

\(^2\) Of photographer Nadja Bournonville’s work in regards to hysteria, unearths the 19\(^{th}\) century doctor Jean-Martin Charcot who photographed his institutionalized patients believing, “the camera cannot lie,” all while making models of those in altered states. The line between pretend or posed to inflicted is thin, but also the disbelief in the agency of either the photographer, in this case Dr. Charcot and subject, mental patients, reveals the true lack of understanding the depth to which photography can be used to show an intention (“Nadja Bournonville by Zoe Beloff,” *BOMB Magazine* [July 2013]).
argues, “Photography is not a looking at or a looking through but a looking with,”
dispelling the cache of thought that determines the photographic image is a kind of
documentation or eternal eye. In Rexar’s view, any medium that can “harness light”
embodies a kind of conceptual freedom. This freedom is a way of seeing that disregards
the subject’s ownership of the image, and instead moves the intention to the performance
of making.

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4 Petrit Helilaj’s Ru recent exhibition at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, Helga Christoffersen writes, “Re-envisioning thes relics from another era as migratory bird points towards their impermanence and Helilaj’s belief that they should belong to no contemporary culture.” Helilaj remakes the forms of recently discovered Kosovon relics and adds long metal bird legs to the 505 pieces. The transformation creates the metaphor of the bird, and thus applied to viewing the objects as one might seeing a live bird in the wild-unfixed.

5 Lyle Rexar, *Edge of Vision*. (New York, Aperture, 2013), pp 12-20. Rexar’s main argument in Edge of Vision is abstraction is the interstice of photography, not representation, which gives more agency to the artist/photographer while continuing to ask the viewer to look deeply at presented images.
The photograph is thus a space of phenomenological play between light and consciousness. A place the play can originate is in dreams, a private manifestation of thoughts, emotions, desires, impulses, or void. As artist Susan Hiller suggests, dreams are abundant throughout civilizations, eras, and people, but the investigatory tools used to uncover the meaning of dreams are as myriad as the meaning of dream symbols. However, in Hiller’s archive and research, she understands the failure of interpretation that lies not only in the dreamer’s disjointed sense of psychic space, but also a desire to

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6 Annie Dillard, *Teaching a stone to talk: Expeditions and Encounters.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). I am inspired by Annie Dillard’s premise IV in, Teaching a Stone to Talk, “The sea pronounces something, over and over, in a hoarse whisper; I cannot make it out. But God knows I have tried. At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening.” (Dillard, pp. 89-90). These acts are the beginning to the performance of making with phenomena—a beginning after completing some kind of knowing and diving into a deep listening.
universalize dreams instead of recognizing their subjective nature and purpose of uncovering personal meaning.⁷


Being interested in getting in close proximity to psychic space, I created a morning ritual. This ritual begins with creating candles, casted by pouring beeswax into holes in the ground. My intention with the candles is their residual grip of place imbued within the object. Each morning I light a candle, and with a handheld flat circular piece of glass, I hover the glass over the flame. The flame smokes the glass, marking the

translucent plane. Perhaps in this early waking moment, a language of the unconscious can be transcribed through an act that recognizes the potential for new language or knowing to rise. I think of this process of creating glass negatives as making maps of liminal space, a secret world hinting at a capacity for knowing.


In my studio practice, my interaction with phenomena is contingent on making. I am lured and transfixed by this bond—lit flame licking clear glass. The result, soot upon soot in a deepening burnt blackness. The entire process is almost precarious, influenced by such natural occurrences as wind, moisture, temperature, and movement to create a pattern. Jeffery Jerome Cohen’s ideas on geophilia place my entanglement with natural elements. “Geophilia goes farther and recognizes matter’s promiscuous desire to affiliate with other forms of matter, regardless of organic composition or resemblance to human
vitality.”⁸ In my work, geophilia acts as a force to ignite phenomena into being, where I can recognize a connection with natural elements in more of a communal way. The matter of nature desires to speak with us and through a process that provides some document of the interaction. Geophilia acknowledges my human being as a part of a world rather than the center of it.⁹ As a practice in my studio, making with this adjusted relationship of indiscernibility between my human self and the natural world enables messages to be exchanged without barrier of species— the possibility of opening up to what intrinsically feels hidden or unattainable in the human body form.


⁹ A slight nod to Donna Haraway’s idea of “being with kin,” from Staying with Trouble.
Chapter 1: Gazing with the Void

From the sixth century until the late nineteenth century, painters utilized a small, handheld convex blackened lens, later known as the Claude Glass, as a portable camera obscura, thus allowing an artist to move beyond the studio and into nature to render landscapes. The circular piece of glass was blackened on one side, usually with black paint, cloth, or paper, to create a peculiar reflective surface. The darkened mirror could reflect the world, and by enhancing line and shading details, help artists understand better the contours and gradients of the scene before them. Though no standardized method of production is available, the Claude Glass is usually a palm-sized circle, square or rectangle. Often the glass is encased with brass, bound in a book or free but wrapped inside of cloth for transportation. The glass has been named after the seventeenth century French painter Claude Lorain, whose work was exhibited alongside the black mirror in an exhibition titled “The Art of Claude Lorrain” in 1969 at the Hayward Gallery, London. 

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11 Also there is no true name to this object, the Claude Glass is the accepted name in Maillet’s research, due to its affiliation with the painter Claude Lorrain. Maillet notes that many fear-mongering names as well as simply “the black mirror” referred it to (Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass*. (Boston, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009).
A much more hidden history of the black mirror resides underneath, which is its use by individuals to access the unseen. Far less documented for fear of punishment from the church, the black mirror was known in occult realms to be a vehicle to commune with the spiritual realm, inquire into the future, or pursue a spiritual path outside of the official religion. Gazing into the shiny black surface the potential for mystifying powers is alluring. The reflected scene is broken down into an essence, lines distinct, shapes are discernable, and color muted. Practitioners would gaze into the darkened lens to discover some visual omen. Often, the guide would be a woman or young girl, enchanted with the powers of second sight. Perhaps the employment of a woman would give creditability to the ritual as there is a long history of women seers and healers in almost every patriarchal society, help deter any accusation of misconduct, as this type of act defied the church and should those be found to have and use a black mirror were sentenced to death for heresy.

Established power feared the use of the Claude Glass because it revealed individuals’ autonomy. From the sixth to eighteenth century, the church governed and controlled both society and culture, and anything that contradicted or attempted to erode this power was punishable. The occult uses of the glass were rarely documented, and not much history of the methodology of sorcery is readily available.

The Claude Glass acts metaphorically in my work as the inquiry into making the unseen visible.¹² Sometimes this is a micro or macro perspective, but it is also in documenting other waves of light, or distorting a scene beyond the capacity of the naked eye. In the nineteenth century, with the development of photography, the lens was noted

¹² Maillet, “There is a phantasmic element here concerning the purity of the materials that involves the gaze, unlike vision, in a cultural process to which we will often return in what follows” p 16.
for its impeccable representation. The world could be held still, made timeless, and look remarkably similar to that perceived by the human eye. Scientists used the lens to dive deeper into understanding the physical world. Microphotography was invented; allowing blood cells, bug bodies, and plant parts could be examined with accuracy. Macro photography allowed the surface of the moon to be seen in a daguerreotype, and distant stars could be held still. The X-ray was developed, which created a new, objective representation of the inside of humans. However, the ideas of the lens being “nature’s paintbrush” were quickly dispelled as photography advanced as an art medium. It became clear that the lens was not a representational tool but rather one that had a distinct way of seeing, beyond that of the human eye, and with influence from the photographer. The link between seeing and knowing that photography had established in the beginning of its invention, and that kept it distinct from being an elevated art form like painting, was eroded. Though this link would not completely unhinge—it is an argument we still have today—this first crack allows for photography to strike up a conversation with art.
Chapter 2: Spirit Photography

4. William T. Mumler, *Bronson Murray*, 9.5x5.6 cm, Albumen silver print, 1862-1875.
Spiritual photography emerged alongside the use of photography in scientific inquiry. As we trusted the lens to tell us things about the world we could see, the lens could be trusted to reveal what we believed about the world beyond, the spiritual realm. One notable spirit photographer was William T. Mumler, who established a portrait studio first in Boston then in New York in the early 1860s. In 1860, Mumler made a self-portrait that captured his likeness and that of a ghost in his Boston studio. For the nearly a decade, Mumler photographed hundreds of people seeking to connect to a deceased loved one with their likeness accompanying their own portrait. In 1869, P.T. Barnum accused Mumler of fraud but the unfolding court case would never find Mumler guilty.\textsuperscript{13} Several expert witnesses oversaw Mumler’s studio process, each not being able to decipher any fraudulent activity. Thus, his process was deemed true. The reason for Mumler’s ability to capture the physical with the spiritual world was beyond an illusion, it resided in some other means of eliciting the spiritual and leveraging the technical abilities of the photographic medium.\textsuperscript{14}

The SFMOMA exhibition “Brought to Light,” curated by Corey Kelly on view October 11, 2008 to January 04, 2009, mapped the growth of scientific inquiry with the aid of photography. The developments of the technology of photography paralleled the acceptance of the representational nature of the medium. The medium became trusted to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} See Louis Kaplan, \textit{The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
  \item \textsuperscript{14} “Since photography had been able to conquer space and time and to reveal the microscopic and the telescopic, why not consider this spirit photography new extension of the medium? Here was the possibility of a visual “technology of the afterlife” that sought to bridge the living and the dead by means of photographic images to complement the aural rapping and the table turning in the séance room” (Kaplan, p 212).
\end{itemize}
show the world as we see it. And as lenses became stronger, the ability for photography to not only surpass human optics, but to document the unperceivable, unimaginable, and unknown was entrusted with the medium. The tension between the photography as a medium of representation or interpretation was stronger than ever. Yet the perception of truth in the medium is still something that to this day is argued and assessed. The quickened rate that photography was linked to the unseen in its dawn is noteworthy as it served as a medium, which a reality is captured where the maker intends the meaning.

Viewed as the most objective means of truth, photography was quickly elevated to a position of trust. The medium informs the way we look at the world to such an extent that it has become how we see and define it. Even though photography dances across the spectrum of objectivity and subjectivity, it retreats more often into the illusion of truth-bearer. The mode of perception is also controlled by cultural tides. The medium’s power lies in its ability to resonate with the world, to replace the world, and be the source to which we compare reality. Questioning the space behind the lens is obtuse. The matter is presented in front of us, impeccably representing what we can see, even when it is something (planets, blood cells, etc.) that we cannot see without a lens.

When we question the nature of photography, we are questioning the world. We frame our inquiry through the lens, and with each picture, we are making an argument about reality, epistemology, and metaphysics. The medium of photography uses the real to aid in the philosophical inquiry, using representation, abstraction, and fiction to present the intention of the photo maker. We are simultaneously enchanted and disgusted by the world and how it seemingly reveals itself through the medium of photography.
Photography is also the medium of light and darkness. It is the medium of the seen and unseen, flowing simultaneously between these poles. The dichromatic space of photography makes it ripe to discuss truth and illusion. It also elicits inquiry of the world we do not see. The mode by which the medium is executed—journalism, documentation, art, portraiture—relies on the world as a tool and subject, however the illustrative nature of the outcome remains in the space of fabrication, though always with a hint of the discussion of truth residing in the image.

Contemporary photography thus asks not what the image is of but what it is about. The nature of inquiry has shifted from the initial consideration of the representational assumption of the lens into a quizzical space that first assumes philosophical notions then thinks about aesthetics.
Chapter 3: Psychic Essence

Photographer Sarah Charlesworth explored the limitations of the lens in the realm of higher levels of perception. In her series, Academy of Secrets, Charlesworth re-imagines the higher-level symbols of the secret realm that exist in the commonplace. Charlesworth states, “I view each artwork, in a sense, as the alchemist might understand the transformation of matter, into something animate with psyche essence.”15 For Charlesworth, photography is embodiment. In her highly realized studio photographs, she chooses such bold, sacred colors as white, red, yellow and black as backgrounds on which she arranges objects tinted to match the hue of the background. In Subtle Body (1989), seven objects are arranged in direct relation to Chakra points, starting from a snail at the bottom center, moving through a lotus, fetus, heart, cake, pitcher and ending at the top with a golden disk. The series explores the archetypes of spiritual life and through geometric arrangements of symbols; Charlesworth networks the forms as a way to “construct a consciousness within the world.”16


Charlesworth spent her life’s work “engaged (with) questions regarding photography’s role in culture… it is an engagement with the problem rather than the medium.”\textsuperscript{17} Charlesworth’s work posits that if photography is not about the utility of its object-ness, but about a way to investigate, represent or rest within our culture, then we have to look more at who is using the lens and the meaning of the represented.


Through symbols, Charlesworth reflects back to the viewer their proposed assumptions of objects and signs as well as conflates an understanding between new and

\textsuperscript{17} Betsy Sussler, “Sarah Charlesworth”, Bomb Magazine (January 1, 1990).
old.\textsuperscript{18} If the symbol is taken out of context, positioned next to another symbol, and shown in a similar hue, what then does it mean to see and understand the symbol? If the symbol is aestheticized, how can it be understood as a source of power? When Charlesworth breaks our assumed encounter with signs and allows for a visual space to reimagine, reexamine and redefine icons of powers, it is understood that it is within the framework of our culture that we trust or are controlled by the presence of icons. Further, Charlesworth disassembles the spiritual plane as one built of culture and places it into the space of the individual, allowing for her own assignment of meaning to symbols, magnifying the individualistic relation to higher powers.

If photography is a problem rather than a medium, an intricate question verses something that openly conveys, then what we see within the frame is not a translation or representation of the world, but instead the perplexity of the meaning of being. Charlesworth is front and center in untying our cultural need to understand the origin of the image. To understand photography as a space of inquiry is to be humbled by existence.

\textsuperscript{18} Sarah Charlesworth, “A Declaration of Dependence”, 1975 p. 01. Charlesworth writes, “When we discuss a work of art or an art tradition, we are discussing a phenomenon which exists in an integral relationship with the entire complex of human social and historical forces defining the development of that work or tradition.” Integral to Charlesworth approach is the awareness of the baggage of history or society that accompanies the looking. I extend this further in inquiry with the baggage a gazing into and with.”
Chapter 4: Embodiment as Interstice

In his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Monty Merleau-Ponty suffuses the body and world, making indistinguishable with perceptual phenomenology. Hoisted later by contemporary thinkers, object-oriented ontology would leverage the union between consciousness and objects into objects within consciousness. And further, for art, this would create a sort of netting of objects, so to speak, though in a language and way dissimilar to humans, but with as much intention of being as concentric human thinking maintains. The artist thus continues to complicate ontological phenomenology by using objects to create within, surrounding, or as reference to an art practice. Charlesworth examined both the artist’s ability to infuse objects with a perceptual meaning as well as provide a visual plane for a new creation myth of perception in her photographic series, *Natural Magic*. Charlesworth narrows in on the subject of magic, the space of suspended belief magicians create on stage, and the veracity of what you see. In *Levitating Woman* (1992-93), we see a covered horizontal body lingering in dark space.
Charlesworth has taken a photograph of a magician’s trick, without the magician present. It’s as if this figure is hung in the mental place of the forgotten. But what she has really photographed is our willingness to perceive one sensation and believe another. The trick she plays is not in the mechanics that make a floating body, but in the presentation of the magic itself. As Charlesworth states in an interview with Betsy Sussler, “I’ve been trying to disrupt the neat distinction between order and chaos, conscious and unconscious, found and made.”

Charlesworth makes the psychic-space tangible and explorative within the frame of the lens. Looking, seeing, and experiencing are not about

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a distinction between or union of, but about a new space that evokes expansion. Within my practice, moving into making art of and with the world, my body and expansion allows me to understand the scope of the camera and how the camera can be expanded.


In Stephen Shore’s recent photograph, *New York, New York, May 19th, 2017* (2017), he purposely frames urban detritus strewn like confetti around a root and granite. The image is shot from above, a sense of towering is gleaned from the stance of the photographer—I cannot avoid feeling Shore’s presence too. The ground is a braid of granite, asphalt, and root. Two objects stand out against the dark, natural backdrop; a red coffee stirrer and a fern leaf. Looking closer, it appears as if all the trash is falling caught in mid-toss by the lens. The sensation of motion unfolding into the horror of trash and
forgotten-ness weighs more heavily than the exuberance felt with captured movement. Something long and sad is captured in these dominating images of waste and natural invasion. Perhaps this is a new sensation of the sublime. Where a century ago, images of a dawn-infused valley or a mountain scape might have elicited a sensation of awe so overwhelming the viewer would consider the divine; here, towering five to six feet above an arrangement of trash, we can seek to have a similar or even inverted reaction. Instead of feeling a fullness of beauty erupt inside, there is a longing for the world to take over, wash away the cigarette butts, and start again, refreshed. But this type of awe, tinged in regret and complacency, does not consider the “thing-power” of the material objects, a term used to propose that nonhuman things have agency due to a kind of earthly force permeating through nature, humans, society, and the cosmos.  

For me, photography is not representing, or telling through my voice a story I heard, but is participating with natural phenomenon. There is no translation, since it is the substance of an activity or a force from nature. This understanding in my practice allowed for me to see nature as an active participant or collaborator, instead of an object to be enacted upon or represented.

Artists Allora & Calzadilla, moved Dan Flavin’s Puerto Rican Light (1965), into a cave on the colonized and economically-fragile island and also named it Puerto Rican Light. Art critic, Lilly Lampe explores the relationship between a spiritual experience and an art experience, for Lampe, the spiritual is distinct from religious and in the case with

20 Jane Bennett coins “thing-power” in Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things, on page 10 writes, “But it is more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means the direction of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind. Perhaps the claim to a vitality intrinsic to matter itself becomes more plausible if one takes a long view of time.” (pp. 10-11).
Puerto Rican Light (2017) the experience further intertwines politics and the power of nature.

A metaphysical mutation occurs with the politicized placement of a pre-existing art object into the very location that the original title describes. Allora & Calzadilla subtly acknowledge Flavin’s flippant naming of his work—he never visited Puerto Rico—and turns his phenomenological intentions for his work on its head by having his light bathe an actual space rather than a white cube. Their appropriation inverts the readymade process while also taking aim at agnostic views of art experiences. The power of the work comes from the balance between these severe problems in which the art

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21 Lilly Lampe, “Allora & Calzadilla’s Puerto Rican Light”, Art Papers (Winter 2017). Lampe writes that Allora & Calzadilla’s relocation of Flavin’s works, not only relocates the physicality of this art piece, but also alters to aura of the pieces meaning (pp19-21).
world not only accepts a stripped power, but the removal of power—agency as well as utility.

Emboldened, imbued, embodied—slight conceptual maneuvers between these words; we are asked with each work to understand the concepts of to hold, be held, or be placed within. In the artistic exchange of the nonphysical between the physical where a new dialogue is opened between an art object and its meaning. The dialogue is radically contingent on its presentation and all its possible histories, memories and being-ness as it is created. The accepted practice of photography depends on at least three physical forms—the photograph-taker, the camera apparatus, and something beyond the lens. I wanted to shake up this construct, and within my practice start to dismantle one or all of the parts that made a photograph, the logical triangulation of forms. I started by going through the elements of the apparatus, the sensation of capturing on a surface, and the reflectivity of light in order to create an ontological understanding of the “is” in the phenomenology of “what” that rests unseen between the physical forms.
Chapter 5: Unbodied-ness and Omnipresence

As Helen Westgeest writes in the introduction of *Take Place*:

The context of these spatial media appears to change the experience of place in and of photographs. As a result of its chameleonic character, photography proves to be able to present places either as static and physical or as dynamic and immaterial.\(^{22}\)

The concept of place begets an investigation into how it is seen. Through the lens, a place is documented, captured, and commented upon. However, these actions also reveal the inquiry of how place is portrayed in the frame of an image. I ask where is the tenderness? Does photography allow for softness of understanding, openness or is the entire mechanism intended to be rigid and claimed? How is an idea held in the lens, does it pass through, stain itself on the surface, or appear as an aura of sorts around the mechanism and final images?

The series, *Find a Fallen Star: Stars Fell on Alabama*, by Regine Petersen, is a wandering walk through an archive that links present day photographs, written accounts, and artistic play around the account of Ann Elizabeth Hodges being struck by a meteorite in Oak Grove, Alabama in 1954. Petersen’s multilayered narratives are propelled by the rare occurrences of her subject of meteorite falls. As Natasha Christina writes of Petersen’s series, “They (photographs) are tied into a powerful and dense semantic threshold, whose main quest is reinforcing an insightful exploration or the potential abilities of the image to both sustain and challenge its proper core foundation: myth.”

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Petersen lets the photograph become a witness. The witness tells the story not
told, perhaps that Hodges never recovered from this contact with the meteorite and a
recovery was only made possible by her voice, which was drowned out by the patriarchal
society in which she lived.

Peterson then inquires if this voice rests somewhere in Alabama, somewhere in
the archive of the Sylacauga meteorite and if photography can raise it from dormancy.
How does the revival occur? I practice the revival of past voices through the motion of
expressing smoke onto pieces of cut glass. The motion of hovering the glass in the flame
of a candle I make out of beeswax and earth, feels like the transmission of a message of
phenomenon. Through the elements in performance—fire, candle, glass, tracing—the result is a phantom visual caught in as fragile soot on glass. The visual, and how it bears itself visible, is beyond elemental. I ask how to read the myth, how to make known what is not stuff of language, but of spiritual substance.

11. Regine Petersen, *Dog (Impact Site #1)*, 30 x 36.5 cm, Archival pigment ink print, Undated.

The logic of knowing the spiritual substance is to recognize its unbodied-ness. Unbodied-ness feels close to invisibility, unseen as the sensation of the uncontained. It seems counterintuitive to make visible works of the unbodied-ness instead of the disembodied. Though the disembodied implies a body once was present, and some force has removed its parts, unembodied implies the wholly abstract. Unbodied-ness implies the out of body or the abstract in wait of physical possession. It relies on aspects of the physical and the nonphysical, as well as the liminal space of existence between. Like
Petersen’s work, the unbodied appears between the photographs, as something the viewer intuits about the images through what is both there and not there.

Stacy Alaimo brings forward ideas of “elemental ecocriticism” as a space even Milton imagined as non-dualistic, thus allowing, “original matter is part of God and animation is the spirit of God.”

Further, Alaimo states:

But what makes new materialism essential for environmentalism, feminism, and other social movements is the insistence that matter is not something outside us that knowers capture or disclose but always the stuff that we ourselves are, the stuff that is lively and often unpredictable.

Matter thus has agency, it acts, reacts, inspires, and snuffs out. I implore this sensation of materialism as I interact with elements, find a space for it to scribe, change, and affect another material. Perhaps invoke a voice, a message, a current that rests just beyond the ability to see or hear, as the element might exist bare. Nature with consciousness becomes a partner for me in making. And the hovering of element in element, glass in the flame, let’s the beginning spark; a gravitational force colliding into a trace of the ethereal.

My photographs are made through natural discourse. The gesture is a gathering of elements onto surfaces that become photographs. Sometimes the surface is more straightforward, where a scene has been documented, and at other times the surface is a presence of phenomenon. Through the elemental, my mind and body have undergone a transformation in the process, and that process is presented as a substance of the photograph—all to entangle matter in a sense of wonder.

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Conclusion

In my thesis exhibition, “Enact in Disappearance”, I created an installation that leveraged reflection between works and in the concepts. With large format archival prints, a large-scale glass negative made from candle flame, a hand-blown Claude Glass, beeswax earth casted candles, and contact prints from small glass negatives, the space was a performance in playing with visibility. The strategy for seeing is discovered as a viewer moves through the space and catches glimpses of reflections of some works on the surface of an adjacent piece. The exhibition can also be seen linearly, where a conceptual telling occurs. The story unfolds aesthetically; each distinct work relies on another work to be made. Hence, the presence of the candles that made the glass negatives, or the dirt from the ground where a large format photograph was made.

12. Stephanie DeMer, Enact in Disappearance (Installation detail), Dimensions variable, glass, soot, beeswax, dirt, archival pigment prints, 2018.
Compelled by the Claude Glass, I became interested in how alluring the obscured reflection was to think about the unseen. As the glass was used as a divinatory tool, I understood this object as precursor to the photographic lens with the ability for the viewer to gaze into it and reveal a desired mystery. Centuries later, seeking to make tangible the invisible with spirit photography became another philosophical point for my research. Conceptualizing both what could be seen through a camera lens and what could be captured suggests the camera engages not just with the empirical world but also with the photo-takers intension. As William Mumler intended, the world of the afterlife and our life could cohabitate inside the frame of a photograph. I thought about spirit photography when I visited Yellowstone National Park to retrace one of the last trips of my mother before she passed away. Something in the intention of creating a portal between my camera lens and the past when she too gazed into the landscape, felt like a kind of spirit photography, a kind less reliant on bodies and more reliant on communion with place.
Thinking about psychic essence, I researched contemporary artists who imbue their work with an ability to transfer. As with Sarah Charlesworth, she worked through symbols in an alchemic manner. I inferred this strategy as a way to transfer place and history through using materials of place to make art pieces with. The image and the mixed-media objects are in relation with one another, themselves informing an understanding that each thing is made from another. In the pieces made from beeswax, candle flame, glass, and photographs, the psychical relationship reveals the unseen. “Enact in Disappearance,” is a process of revealing, a practice in understanding the unseen.
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