2008

Moments of Absorption

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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May 5th, 2008
MOMENTS OF ABSORPTION

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

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2008
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Abstract

MOMENTS OF ABSORPTION

By Sarah K. Kaufman, M.F.A.

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Paul Thulin
Professor, Photography and Film

Moments of Absorption explores the conceptual and visual themes that are presented in my MFA thesis exhibition. The research looks into the absorption of the nude subject, the gestures that communicate this absorption, and the domestic space as a stage for the presentation of these gestures. This work investigates a tension between the theatrical and the natural as represented by images.
**Introduction**

I knock at the stone’s front door  
“It’s only me, let me come in.  
I want to enter your insides,  
Have a look around  
Breathe my fill of you.”

My photography is an inherently human investigation. The images are views into the private world of another person. My practice involves visiting people in their homes and making photographs about the relationships among the subjects, their bodies, and their spaces. This glimpse into the personal world of a stranger can be mundane, fascinating, uncomfortable, and beautiful. When made into images, these private worlds are incredibly particular, but can become more universal as the viewer calls on their own experience for comparison. Perhaps upon looking through a photograph into another persons’ privately focused moments, we may recognize something about our own.

In tending to our everyday ablutions we enter a mode that is seldom examined by others. Involvement with daily routines often allows for moments of emotional pause and reflection wherein one can become self-absorbed, both body and mind. The work studies these private moments that vary immensely in intensity and content depending on each
unique situation, from washing to reading, to daydreaming nude in bed. The images
hopefully allow the viewer in turn to become absorbed by the details and gestures within
another person's domestic space and everyday rituals. The possibility for a quiet intensity
within mundane moments is highlighted and heightened.

**Background:**

People like to look at people and there is no question that a photograph can offer a
glimpse, an invitation to take in all that can be communicated about a person through
pausing a moment. A passing gesture can fulfill its expressive potential when stilled by a
photograph. One of the fundamental strengths of photography is its ability to picture the
ephemeral and what Cartier-Bresson named the decisive moment. Bresson democratically
believed that, “There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment”\(^2\) As a
photographer of people, he sought out and valued the spark that could reveal itself in even
the most mundane environments and situations. Although the decisive moment is
inherently unquantifiable, one can begin to analyze what bestows power upon image and
makes us want to look. In his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes names these meaning-
giving forces *punctum*. Within the context of photographing people, the ideas of Barthes
and Bresson are inseparably related. Barthes defines the punctum as the detail in a
photograph that captures the viewer. Of Punctum, he states, “Certain details prick me. If
they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally.”\(^3\)

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The notion that the punctum appear in an image by virtue of an unpredictable force ties into the decisive moment that cannot be created, but only awaited and possibly aided along by a sensitive and patient observer.

The thesis work begins to fulfill its goals when three main elements come together and are articulated through a perfect moment and its punctum. The key elements in this work with people are the subjects’ absorption as communicated through gesture and the home as a stage where the subject can begin or appear to reveal unguarded moments to the camera. In hindsight, it is clear that the work developed in phases that lead up to the thesis project. Each of the elements that define my current practice finds its roots in previous photographic investigations. These initial explorations were never fully resolved but informed the work presented in the thesis exhibition.
Gesture of the Subject

An image made in my first months of graduate school, *Grandma Bending*, foregrounds the importance of nuanced gesture in the thesis work. The woman in the photograph hunches beside a gracefully cascading shrub. Her body mimics the shape of the plant. At first glance it seems that the woman might be in pain or distress but with a
closer look it is apparent that in her shirt she is cradling pears from the ground. Her face shows a concerned expression that turns out to be one of concentration rather than unrest. Her ambiguous gesture speaks at first of drama but then reveals its subtlety. *Grandma* is not self-conscious while being photographed and thus her expression is not for the camera and speaks with honesty about the moment. The woman’s actions only become gesture or non-verbal communication through their presentation as an image. In the words of Susan Sontag, “In the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject’s essence…frontality also implies in the most vivid way the subject’s cooperation.” ⁴ Within this interpretation, my grandmother’s inward-turned gesture can be misread as guarded.

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Sally Mann on gesture:
There’s no way that I can get the pictures that I do without the children working their particular magic in the picture either by the way they shift their weight or by the expression they give or just some small gestural thing that becomes the punctum of the image…You can’t force someone to do that. They have to give you the picture.⁵

The eloquent gestural instants of which Sally Mann speaks cannot be fabricated, although my undertaking has been to build a framework (stage) in which they can just happen. Unconscious gestures communicate the absorption that is central in the work. A

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⁵ Ovation TV, “Genius of Photography: We are Family,” video, Jan 2008, March 2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXDQRkJUXvY>
painter working in the same vein with a model would look for the accidental moments when the subject fell out of her pose - when she slipped out of her awareness of modeling and back into herself. In an essay entitled *The numbing of the American mind: culture as an anesthetic*, Thomas de Zengotita writes, “During those accidental and transitional moments, we actually get the feeling of the real we were so frantically pursuing when we were busy.” He proposes that Americans are so distracted that the moments when we are actually just being only arise by accident in-between all the rest. My work recognizes the value in the unintentional moments of quiet “just being,” that arise out of domestic bodily routines.

Jérôme Bel, a French/Brazilian avant-garde choreographer created a dance that sets up a framework for these very moments to reveal themselves. In *A Chorus Line*, part of his larger work, *The Show Must Go On*, everyday people get up on stage, decide on a gesture of their own, and then dance to the music using only this gesture. The result is an incredibly “real” conglomeration of movements that are awkward and even uncomfortable to watch at first. Honesty seems to replace drama, which is jarring in the context of a theatrical stage. Bel undermines the stage by blurring the line between performance and life. The contemporary scholar of dance, Maia Jordaan, writes of his work that, “When Jérôme Bel had one of his performers ask this question – “To be … or not to be” – in *The Last Performance* (1998), he set up a critique of representation. Re-Read this famous

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Shakespearean quote from Hamlet as: To represent … or not to represent … that is the question in contemporary dance.”  
The tension in Bel’s work revolves around the use of the stage as a frame for something more genuine than dramatic. However, ultimately an arresting and overflowing blend of the two is produced.

Tim Etchells, the artistic director of Forced Entertainment, a performance art group, writes beautifully about Bel’s Chorus Line. Etchells' interpretation of the piece resonates strongly with the ideas that come together in my thesis work:

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Maia Jordaan, “To be…or not to be…that is the question,” weblog posting, thewinger.com, Aug. 2007, April 2008
< http://thewinger.com/words/category/andre-lepecki/>
Bel’s cast…is perhaps simply a list of people - presented value free, without judgment or comment, for our inspection…Roy Faudre (Wooster Group)...said a beautiful thing: “The live actor is the one who says, "Look I am a person in front of you. You can look at me from the top of my head to the tips of my feet".” [Bel] understands that theatre is a frame (game) constructed so that people can look at other people…In The Show Must Go On I find myself looking at the people, my eyes scanning left to right and back again at whim… I start to think that everyone looks beautiful in Jerome’s shows and I cannot fathom it at first... Perhaps this beauty arises because everyone here is (allowed to be? shown as?) present in a mode that is resolutely without drama. Like the subjects of Warhol’s Screen Tests (1964-66) it does not matter if these dancers sweat or shrug or focus, yawn or smile or flutter their eyes or scratch their arses. Jonathon Jones wrote about the Screen Tests, “You can judge Warhol's subjects harshly or kindly, laugh at them or love them. Mostly you study and, as you watch, cool down. You do not judge, after all, but become aware of the endurance of looking, and the tenderness of allowing yourself to be looked at.” (The Guardian, August 2001). No matter what, Bel’s dancers are present before us in their perfections and in their defects, in their ticks, in their stupid ideas and enthusiasms and in their cover-ups…they somehow appear...‘comfortable in their own skins’, resigned to the act of being watched. Where drama might demand or force my attention on a moment-by-moment basis, the gift of The Show, in common with so much of Bel’s work, is that it gives me the space and the time to look...to be bored...to find an interest. The uniformity of the line, the slowness of change in the piece and the simplicity of movement, all hide (or rather, occasion) a wealth of vivid, amazing detail.

The thesis work shares with Bel’s the intention of letting a viewer look at another person just being, in a straightforward context. Somehow the subjects are able to present themselves to the viewer while remaining honest. The proscenium of the stage functions as an opening, not a barrier around which to peek. In the thesis imagery, Moments of Absorption, the frame of the photograph serves the same goal. My methodology involves

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spending time with strangers in as natural and comfortable a way as possible. The project is a collaboration between the model and myself in an effort to overcome boundaries and the inherent problem that perhaps a person cannot “just be” in the presence of someone who is watching them.
Absorption of The Subject

The aforementioned image, *Grandma Bending*, which pushed the research towards gesture also exemplifies the idea of absorption. The woman’s absorption with her task is so intense that she almost appears to be in a state of emotional duress. This state of absorption implies a pureness of focus, unselfconsciousness, and aloneness in the experience of the moment.

Figure 3, *Adrian Walker*

Jeff Wall on Absorption of the Subject:
But I don't think it is necessarily clear that Adrian Walker is a portrait. I think there is a fusion of a couple of possible ways of looking at the picture generically. One is that it is a picture of someone engaged in his occupation and not paying any attention to, or responding to the fact that he is being observed by, the spectator. In Michael Fried's interesting book about
absorption and theatricality in late eighteenth-century painting, he talks about the different relationships between figures in pictures and their spectators. He identified an 'absorptive mode', exemplified by painters like Chardin, in which figures are immersed in their own world and activities and display no awareness of the construct of the picture and the necessary presence of the viewer. Obviously, the 'theatrical mode' was just the opposite. In absorptive pictures, we are looking at figures who appear not to be 'acting out' their world, only 'being in' it. Both, of course, are modes of performance. I think Adrian Walker is 'absorptive'.

The mode of being-there-ness that Wall’s Adrian Walker describes is the opposite of distractedness. The absorptive moment can be seen as a moment full of concentrated life. These moments pull us inward, especially when the absorptive mode pertains to our own bodies. The moment can be whole, circular, and in some way essential to humanness.

My grandmother’s pear gleaning aligns with Adrian Walker’s sort of absorption. Both subjects focus upon an external object and activity that encompasses their entire beings in that moment. These two works raise questions regarding what would happen if that focus were to reflect back on the subject. The Ancient Greek figure of the Spinario exemplifies Michael Fried and Jeff Wall’s notion of absorption, as specifically turned in upon the subject self by the subject himself. The thorn-puller focuses his entire physicality on the task of extracting his thorn and although we cannot ever know his mind, we can assume through the intensity of his gesture, that his thoughts are aligned with his actions.

The subsequent photographs, *Shower Pictures*, investigated the *Spinario’s* variation of the Friedian/Wallian absorption. The work explored a variety of people taking showers. Photographing the ritual of the shower harkened back to the endless paintings of bathers throughout art history, among the most well known of which are the works of Degas, Cezanne, Courbet, and Renoir. I hoped to find the shower to be a place where I could observe the self-involvement regarding the body, and thus the emotional state of absorption and an equilibrium of mind and body that might ensue. The poet Rainier Maria Rilke, in his immense solitude, was concerned with the body in relation to human states of absorption and movements in and out of oneself:

Rilke had a longstanding interest in modes of transition between internal and exterior space. Cox traces "the rhythm of absorption of self into world, world into self" to his earliest verse…in the poem "Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen," Rilke coins the term "Weltinnenraum" for the space in which this experience occurs. What is new in the Sonnets is a
focus on the body as the mediator between self and world and on bodily functions as modes of transition between inner and outer space... Our dual composition of mind and body fascinated him; the body figured as the transitional element between mind and world, that part of ourselves that anchors us to the earth and sets limits to the unending speculation of the mind.\textsuperscript{10}

Excerpt from Rilke’s Sonnett mentioned above, \textit{Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen}:

\begin{quote}
Through all creatures spreads a single space: \\
World-inner-space. Birds go quietly flying \\
straight through us. O, I that want to grow, \\
I look outside, and inside me grows the tree. \\
I worry, and inside me stands the house. \\
I beware, and inside me there is care. \\
The beloved I became: against me rests \\
fair Creation’s image and cries her fill.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

The body lies between the mind and the world as a doorway between interior and exterior.

In the thesis photographs, the presence of the nude body is elemental in representing the opening of the subject self to the camera.


Photographing people in the shower offered a view into one absorptive activity regarding the body but it was limited in terms of light, environment, and variety of gesture. The veil of the shower curtain also presented an obstacle to seeing that pushed the interpretation of the images toward peeping or voyeurism. In relation to *Grandma Bending*, the images had gained an awareness of the body, its vulnerability and ability to communicate absorption. However they had lost the environmental context that my grandmother’s garden provided. The human subject had lost its individuality. It became apparent that a single photograph could express the ideas within the shower images and become one phase in a much larger investigation. Subsequently, I began to look for subjects who were willing to let me into their homes to photograph them in the nude. Friends and family were most readily available and I asked to visit and photograph them engaging in their everyday activities regarding the body. The importance of the home environment as a stage where my subjects could present themselves to me became clear.
Home as the Stage for Authentic Absorptive Gestural Moments

Perhaps one's own habitat and objects are part of the foundation for entering an absorbed state amidst the everyday. Although the home provides a relatively safe environment, once the photographer enters the scenario, the domestic space is no longer private. The presence of the photographer fills the space with a theatrical tension. Driven by a need for diversity among the subjects and their spaces, I placed an add on Craigslist explaining my project and soliciting models. Now, working with strangers, these tensions increased and made the search for a natural moment more difficult. I asked my models to go through their daily routines and often arrived in the morning in order to be there for the “real thing.” Still, it was unclear whether the gestures that the subjects were sharing with me were authentic or re-enactments for the camera. They were an indefinable combination of both. The moments that became successful images were those that portrayed an honesty, that same honesty that Jérôme Bel sought to facilitate on his stage.

The work of photographer Larry Sultan deals with the concept of home and especially the notion that the private domestic environment also functions as theater. Sultan has approached the home from two perspectives. In his work on his parents, Pictures From Home, he is at once part of the theater and an outside observer. Even as a member of the family, his presence as a photographer emphasizes the stage upon which his parents perform. Sultan investigates his parents, their lives, and their relationship with
him through the gestures and interactions that take place in their home. Here is where the relationships unfold and the interiors speak about the lives of their inhabitants. In the body of thesis work, the home is the stage for a revelation of a private yet approachable world.

Figure 6, *Pictures From Home*
In his series, *The Valley*, Sultan photographs in suburban homes that are being used as porn sets. The porn stars inhabit these domestic interiors as if their own. These houses are literally being used as stages, but Sultan captures the actors in their off-camera moments, just being. The subjects are no longer acting for the rolling camera, but perhaps they still perform in a different way for Sultan’s lens. The resulting images deal with the tension between the real and the staged. The critic Eve Meltzer, for *Frieze Magazine*, writes that Sultan deals with the idea that, “home is always a place of both life and theatre, and drawing a line between the two is an impossible task.”

The photographer Lily Almog sees the bed as a stage where people (specifically women,) might begin to reveal themselves. She generally finds her subjects by asking strangers on the street to model. Of her portraits of women on their beds she writes:

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The portrait of a woman in her private chamber reveal and uncover the layers of personality that may be beneath what is overtly apparent. While a common theme directs my actions, each portrait becomes a kind of unplanned exploration of the sitter and myself. I've chosen the bedroom as a kind of stage, a comfortable place to undress personality; for the bedroom is a place where people can lose consciousness - and self-consciousness. The bed itself is like an empty canvas and a place where one relinquishes absolute control and permits unseen aspects of oneself to emerge.13

Although she writes of losing self-consciousness, Almog’s images function as portraits in which the subject seems to be overtly aware of and performing for the camera. They wear costumes and use props as in the above image. Almog treats the home as an unambiguous stage, whereas Sultan presents a more fluid understanding.

Like Almog, my work deals with an encounter with a stranger. This scenario is inherently not as comfortable as that of Sultan photographing his parents. Given the nature of his family relationship with the subject, his work flows back and forth between the natural and the staged. His parents are themselves as much as they act at being themselves. Even in a familiar environment, the photographer is always separated from the subject as the camera functions like the proscenium of the stage. As a photographer of strangers I grapple with an additional layer of distance. Although I ask my subjects to feel at ease with me, I only hope for what seems to be a fleeting lapse in their self-consciousness. I can create my image of this “natural” moment, but can never know if I have captured something genuine. Herein lies the tension at the heart of the work.
Conclusions

The three major elements that define my thesis work are thoroughly linked to one another. The absorption that I study is expressed through the bodies and gestures of my subjects. The gestures that speak most powerfully and subtly are those that arise in the instant of unselfconsciousness, of feeling at home in oneself. The concept of home as stage is important in my work visually as well as psychologically. The spaces where the images are made each have the potential to speak about their inhabitants through their contents. The objects and decorations in a persons’ domestic space can offer bits of punctum and interest just as the human gestures do. The thesis images offer a view of the subject’s environment that supports the expression of the absorptive moment. The unguarded gestures that the work investigates are fragile. The subject’s naked bodies convey vulnerability as well as the desire for openness. As the subjects reveal their private spaces along with their bodies, the shedding of physical barriers represents an attempt at sharing something honest with the photographer. Nakedness fits intuitively in the home.

The search for the decisive moment will always involve chance. The longer I have been involved with this body of work and research, the better I have been able to define my methodology and requirements for an image. I do not fabricate Wall’s perfect moment, nor do I sit and wait for Bresson’s. The work takes from both methodologies as
it deals with a tension between the natural and staged. I facilitate an environment where a quiet decisive moment can occur. Like Jérôme Bel, I frame a stage where the subject might present his or herself as naturally as possible. Even if the expressive gesture appears, the environment must bear equal qualitative import. Color, light, and space must support the subject and the image must appear wholly resolved.
MFA Thesis Exhibition

For the Masters of Fine Arts Thesis Show five images are presented. They were photographed between February of 2007 and March of 2008 on a medium format Rollieflex twin lens reflex camera. The images were shot with natural light, and a long exposure usually between an eighth and a full second. The combination of these technical aspects imbues the photographs with an atmosphere that is painterly or even cinematic at times. The natural light plays a role in the emotional quality of the pictures. It illuminates the magic of the mundane moments that I photograph. It romanticizes the unromantic and the everyday that people sit for me.

Digital C-prints were made from drum scans of the negatives in order to achieve the best possible image quality. C-printing preserves the work’s engagement with the tradition of the fine art photographic print. Each image measures forty four by forty four inches including a two inch white border all around, framed in simple white wood. The photographs are selected for their success in articulating the central themes in the work and also for their collective cohesiveness. Color, composition, and emotion work together among the five pieces. The large size was chosen for this presentation in order to allow the viewer to become absorbed by the images, just as the subjects appear absorbed in their worlds. The scale encourages the viewer to explore the environments within the photographs and to feel the presence of the subjects’ bodies.
Figure 10, *Untitled*
Figure 11, *Untitled*
Figure 12, *Untitled*
Figure 13, *Untitled*
Literature Cited
Literature Cited


Jordaan, Maia. “To be…or not to be…that is the question,” weblog posting, thewinger.com, Aug. 2007, April 2008 <http://thewinger.com/words/category/andre-lepecki/>


Ovation TV, “Genius of Photography: We are Family,” video, Jan 2008, March 2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXDQRKjUXvY>


VITA

Sarah Kaufman was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1981. She graduated from Germantown Friends School in 1999. She received a B.A. in Fine Art with a concentration in Photography and a minor in Spanish from Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania, in 2003. She was awarded departmental honors for her undergraduate thesis work. Sarah presented her first solo exhibition of photographs at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia in February of 2007 and received an M.F.A in Photography and Film from Virginia Commonwealth University in May of 2008.