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Des Perdues: The Precariousness of Loss

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DES PERDUES: THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF LOSS

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

by

ALISSA DAVIS
B.F.A. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2005

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2008
Acknowledgments

For my Committee, who graciously allowed me to be the stubborn artist I am

(thankfully)

For my husband who reluctantly consented to move to Richmond

(devotedly)

For a hateful photographer and my harshest critic, RC-D

(gratefully)

For a most inspired artist, my mother

(lovingly)

And most of all for Jon Storm

(eternally)
Quotes

“Today our unsophisticated cameras record in their own way our hastily assembled and painted world.” - Nabokov

“Youth, youth—something savage—something pedantic. Detest your own age, Build a better one.” - Woolf

“By thinking of things you can understand them.” - Joyce

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1 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading (Random House, 1989)
2 Virginia Woolf, Jacob’s Room (New American Library, 2006), 119.
3 James Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 37.
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Abstract

DES PERDUES: THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF LOSS

By Alissa Davis, Master of Fine Arts

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: Susan Iverson
Professor of Fiber, Department of Craft/Material Studies

The majority of losses that take place in a day are not large, or sad, they are built almost entirely on behaviors and systems that have nothing to do with loss. Most of these, I discovered, are the result of deliberate carelessness. The word loss is as difficult to define as truth, but its variation is what makes it so interesting and evocative. It is not, and never has been, a definition of loss that I seek: it is not enough to simply say I lost this person or that place, we must consider what is left and what can still be lost. I am interested in the moments of transition that surround loss, when something is in danger of disappearing yet is not quite gone; this work focuses not on past losses, but future moments to be preserved. There is beauty and humanity that can be revealed in fugitive moments and events, and value in their documentation.
Preface

I have struggled greatly with the thesis form, this last formality before I am pushed, roughly at best, out of the institution and into a network of institutions. I was enthralled at first by the prospect of writing this, of unleashing all I have thought about my work during the past two years, by delving into my own thoughts like a stranger and an archaeologist hoping to find meager truths, yet recently my excitement waned. My newly found disillusionment has to do with organizing and dividing and categorizing and researching, chopping and slashing and mawling, what should be left to meander. There are many ways of communicating clearly with others, and yet for some strange reason we funnel our thoughts, limited by language, into forms even more limited. Like many of our society's formalities and structures, this 'thesis form' tried to hide itself under the clever guise of being open. It seems quite apparent now that a thesis, even from an artist about art, has a set purpose, one that, unfortunately, marches hand in hand with those networks I dread.

What I was hoping to find initially through research was a context of some kind, perhaps many kinds. I wanted to find proof in support of my work, essays already written that could validate my claims, evidence showing that what I am making and thinking has been thought important before. During my research, however, I realized the best proof I have has already been collected. What truly informs my work is not what I read now, after all the years of making, but what I have read before. Lines, quotes, stories, situations, and experiences are my true inspirations. My thesis is not a series of questions I have found answers to, but a grasping into the unknown. As earnestly as I would have
liked to talk about my work as though I were not the one making it, I realize I cannot.

One of the most important critiques of myself and my generation of thinkers has been from a literary critic who stated, “your generation is absurdly general.” More than can be accomplished if I am honest about what I know, what I have known, and more importantly, what I seek to know. Instead giving in to the general notion that generality is a guarantee of clarity, I will try to keep in mind that I am speaking not only to individuals, but as an individual. I strive to represent my thesis as clearly as possible, disregarding a form which will try to seduce and muddle my queries.
Introduction

My thesis work began with two endings, both of which took place as I started graduate study. Though they seemed quite unrelated at the time, as experiences provoking different emotions and problems to be assessed, the first has led directly into the second. The body of work I have produced over the past two years was inspired and motivated by losses of several kinds. The first ending was leaving my temporary, and slightly illegal, home in the south of France. I returned to the extravagant suburbs of southern California with the taste of a fresh baked *gallette* in my mouth, the stilted form of French e's and r's resting on my tongue, a muddled account of the habits, behaviors, and stupidities of Americans ringing in my ears. My head was filled with raging (though unspoken) protests against the foreign assaults on my past, and unanswered questions pertaining to their truth. There is so much beauty in French culture that I want for my own, such a delicate European mixture of justice and injustice, and so much disgust I felt towards the pale, overweight, and perky strangers I returned to. There is no easy way to leave a place you have painfully grown to love, nor to return to the place you loved all your life by having been born there. It feels like landing a plane without a paved runway or functioning wheels, a rapid descent followed by a hard smack with reality, the rush of a skidding halt where a year whirls by. The landing pushed the restful Mediterranean days of lazy thought away faster than I would have believed possible, and forced me to question notions of place, history, and, most pressingly, validity. In a manner akin to siblings squabbles, I found myself torn between my own criticisms of America and Americans, and those spawned from afar. Adam Gopnik, in *Paris to the Moon*, pokes fun
at the French for blaming their countries problems on others, problems referred to as “distant errors”⁴. Urgent phone calls from family members concerned by dramatic American media stories, however, sobered me into thinking about our own misrepresentations. It is easier to laugh at cultures we have not been trained to understand, than to see our own ingrained blindness. The disappearance of my fake French life left my eyes on the America I thought I had known. How much truth could be found in familiar ways of seeing?

Home seemed an ideal location to begin finding answers to these questions. When reached, however, home did not match my mental pictures. The California real estate market had not stopped booming simply because I was away. On the contrary I think it rapidly increased, and with its growth came construction desperately trying to make and sell. My hometown had been covered over in the horrible manner we have of building, all the topsoil of my teenage memories had been scraped away and sold. I felt like the aged man in Wings of Desire⁵, searching in vain for his lost Platz. Holding up memories like slides to the light, I was appalled to find no similarities in my current landscape. I seemed caught between two completely opposing emotions, utter annoyance at having come home in the first place, and shocking disappointment to find that home had, without permission, disappeared. Stagnating for the summer in the suburbs, looking for a promising way to process these changes, a new ending, the death of a friend, provided a different place to start.

Though the beginning of my thesis work is rooted in the soil of many losses,

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⁴ Adam Gopnik, Paris to the Moon (Random House, 2002), 87.
evidence of these losses has become harder and harder to come by. Initially, I felt such
evidence to be vital. Without it how could I show others, or even myself, the tangibility
of loss? Developers, both literally and metaphorically, have a genius for erasing the past.
How to show what my past looked like when there was little but images to prove it ever
existed? The chief struggle of this body of work, though disguised under layers of other
meanings, was in discovering a logical form for loss, giving shape to its abstract
character. It is a difficult endeavor to work with what is most impermanent in our
everyday lives.

Loss should always be plural, and even a singular loss creates a tangled mass of
subsequent losses. I discovered through making and discussing these works that loss is
generally overly dramatized. Events outside of the mundane—accidents, deaths, any
mutation of routine—are considered the most unnerving. They have the tendency to
become a subject people avoid through denial, dismissal, or detachment. Loss is treated
like pregnancy in the 19th century, as a shameful weaknesses to be hidden, at all costs,
from others. Losses are held at bay by centuries of etiquette forcing us to ignore what can
be as obvious as a large, pregnant woman. The majority of losses that take place in a day,
however, are not large, or sad, they are built almost entirely on behaviors and systems
that have nothing to do with loss. Most of these, I discovered, are the result of deliberate
carelessness. The word loss is as difficult to define as truth, but its variation is what
makes it so interesting and evocative. It is not, and never has been, a definition of loss
that I seek: it is not enough to simply say I lost this person or that place, we must
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transition that surround loss, when something is in danger of disappearing yet is not quite
gone; this work focuses not on past losses, but future moments to be preserved. There is
beauty and humanity that can be revealed in fugitive moments and events, and value in
their documentation.
Lived Experience

“The past is not as separate from the present as its manipulators would like us to think.”6

The magic of images for me has always started here—the snapshot. This snapshot renders a boy, an object in perpetual change, for a fraction of a second, still. Similar to a scientist looking through a microscope, observing too closely a fraction of the world he hardly comprehends, now I too can look. Who is this boy? Time collapses, and the past, present, and future become linear and melded inseparably together. If I could have been present at the moment this picture was taken I would have laughed at the boy's outlandish and clearly borrowed outfit: those oversized boots, that teal coat, the tie that seems to belong to him, the hat, the gesture of poise his small fingers hold, the cane that appears to be larger than the subject himself, and the absurdity with which his attitude matches that of the comedia7 character behind him. If I had been present then I would have been amused by more than this photo contains, by his manners, voice, and antics. Even now, I laugh.

This snapshot flings together fact and fiction. I believe when looking now that this moment was real; I could estimate a time in the early 1980's when this could have been taken, and I might even be able to guess the place. But I am not convinced this image is telling me any kind of truth, even literal kinds of truth, such as the condition of that brown chair, the real color of his jacket, the actual size of those boots. He could be dressed entirely in his mother's clothes and I could never tell. Despite the revealing nature of the stillness of photographs, I realize that were I there I would know much

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7 Commedia dell'Arte, Italian improvisational theater that began in Italy around the 16th Century.
more for certain. I would remember what he was doing, who took his picture, and how he acquired his dress. But here is the mystery. I look back into a past, pleading a good deal of ignorance, and I construct a new. This image tells you what I tell, it remembers what I remember, it looks the way I make it. There are hundreds of pictures of myself I have no memory of; I learned about them sometime in my past. Because I do not remember being where they suggest I was, they do not tell of memory, they tell the stories I have constructed around them. Reading my brother's books before I could read was a favorite pastime of ours, for while he could decipher the words and understand their story, I could only interpret the images to make my own. Without the text to tell the facts, his books took on strange new narratives. *The History of the Revolutionary War* became John Bailey's adventures with a goose and his grandfather. People, like the boy and image in question, are little more than subtly misinterpreted stories. Photographs were intended to serve fact and truth, yet they tell only fictitious and ever malleable lies. And in their fiction lies their amazing capacity for truth.

I once heard that period films tell more about the time they were made than the time they represent, just as my reinterpretations told more about me than about the images, words, or book. It would not be difficult to argue this same idea in reference to my current work.

I found this particular snapshot recently, and it reminded me of the box of our family photos. My first attraction to images was not as a maker, but as a viewer. They challenged my childish reality as they still do, laid bare notions I had yet to consider: my mother was once a little girl, she was once this beautiful teenager brushing her hair. I
always thought these revelations mundane and ordinary, however, a few summers ago I found an old picture of my mother-in-law face down in my in-law's garage. Amused, I showed it to my brother-in-law who pushed it away saying, “that is not my mother.” I was astounded to realize that an adult had not taken the time to notice his mother was not always his mother. The fact that you can look indefinitely at an image and never quite grasp every element in it, both literally and conceptually, drew me to the medium. I realize now my memories are as much preserved in the actual images as in my memory of looking at them. As Picasso said, “art is a lie that tells the truth”.

Growing up in California, where most things are new and strangely storyless, I looked always for the places that were before the places that are. I would wander through my grandparent's house, and ponder the objects my aunts had left behind. Their rooms seemed alive with incidents I could only imagine, creating my own stories out of the random bits of evidence left behind: a doll, a bear, a few pins with strange slogans on them. There was evidence of a past to be found, there were objects and images and
strange artifacts sitting untouched in dusty, unused rooms, but evidence of what? After all the pawing and cherishing and idealizing, I was always left with maddening pieces, fragments of thoughts, snippets of images, no combination of which seemed able to explain the strangeness of my present. Like a disappointed and disillusioned archaeologist, I realized the evidence I collected was compromised. Others, such as my aunts, used these objects to draw conclusions I never could.

While most people seem to feel their own past, their memories and experiences, are subjective, it seems to be the most objective thing we can know. Personal experience is all that is certain in this world, yet its preservation the most uncertain. My brother once told me, indignant and incensed, an amusing story I find quite compelling of an objects frailty. A shawl, our family heirloom worn by an ancestor arriving on the Mayflower, fell into the possession of my mother and her sisters. They agreed to cut it into four pieces, ensuring each could have a share of the object and its history. Instead of having a shawl woven with one story and history, it was now four different pieces of cloth forever altered by sibling scissors. In the wake of a death, mourners as well, scramble and squabble over what little is left. I am astonished to watch people cling to random bits, images, possessions, a “MySpace”, in an effort to show what they have lost.

The motive for my backward glances was suspicion, and my goal proof. It is logical to delve into the past to find explanations for the present—history depends on it. After spending a lifetime idealizing unknown objects and images under the guise of trying to understand them, I realized this proof was inadequate at best. It could offer only snippets and slices of evidence. Only when combined or placed into a context could it

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8 Ironically, my brother made this story up for other facts surrounding this dismantled shawl.
ever tell more. Thinking of Gabriel Orozco's “Breath on Piano”, there is much to be
gained just from breathing on a surface—it serves as a document of fleeting mortality.

My inclination against favoring one faulty bit of proof over another, however, turned my
thoughts, in gradual degrees, away from my own past and toward collective past.

Learned Experience

As a child I was convinced I never belonged in America. In my graduate years this fascination was heavily influenced by my French experience and the realization that I am American, and that I must belong somewhere. I am entranced with a kind of wonder, awe, and horror at what we as Americans have done and where we are going. I remember the first time I heard “America” playing on my parents' turntable, I was confused by the line, "I've come to look for America." How could Paul Simon, an American, be writing and singing about looking for America while in New Jersey? If I look for America the way Wim Wenders (Fig. 4) looks for the West, what would I, a disgruntled American, find? What would I find if I looked for evidence of pasts that have influenced my reality and yet are so mysteriously absent? Where are the small towns, the open prairies, and the pillared plantations of the South? Nothing in my own past, and little in my present, can answer these questions. They are questions with an infinite combination of answers—they are quintessentially American.

I recently discovered Boring Postcards USA, a book that humorously epitomizes my problems with nostalgia. The title describes exactly what the book contains: over one hundred pages of incredibly dull postcards, without dates but with the cast of cheap color photography. The book is divided into categories of boring locations: diners, motels, freeways and turnpikes, shopping centers and trade marts, banks, airports, tract homes and trailer resorts. The explanatory text on the back cover reads, “such American hot spots...may have been boring then—or stranger yet, they may not have been—but they're so cheesy now they're delicious.” What is so compelling about these images is the fact

that they are ugly postcards of ugly places, ugly in an almost unprecedented manner, and yet because they rest about forty years distant from myself they are seductively charming. These places are the predecessor of an America I find tolerable at best, and yet I spend time pondering Greyhound stations, motel parking lots, “modern” military barracks, and unappetizing hamburgers on plastic trays. The great curiosity, or inconsistency, is that were I to see photographs like these representing my own time, those images could never be anything but disgusting. The postcard locations have for me a character, a history, a sense of time and place. It is illogical to imagine that then means more than now, to think that America was more authentic, to believe those people were different. Yet all these thoughts exist in my head as possibilities. The final image of the book is a somewhat elevated shot of an eight lane freeway, captioned with the words “Hollywood Freeway, Los Angeles, California.” I know this freeway. I recognize the plant growth and the drab mountains in the background. These postcards force me to question the images of the past I willfully believe. Are these postcards idealizing everyday American life, showing a particular vision of progress that was exemplified in postwar America, or am I doing that myself?

My sources of inspiration are also constructed from ambiguously acquired versions of history. Walker Evans' images of rundown houses and churches, of thin, overworked Americans have become inseparable for me from the Great Depression. The textured nature of his black-and-white images somehow mirrors his dust-caked subjects. William Eggleston, decades later, depicts the deterioration of the optimistic world of happy progress represented in Boring Postcards. The poverty of his America is not that
of Evans', but one less sinister and yet more foreboding. The subjects and locations of Eggleston's images have a striking resemblance to *Boring Postcards*. Though hotels, gas stations, and cars parked in front of diners litter his images, Eggleston depicts Americans who are also dimensional and alive. The reality in his images, the dirt, trash, and stains, collectively portrays an America as fragile and unstable as the one I know myself.

These photographers, their images, and the inspiration they evoke, define for me the America that was; they skillfully document the recent past upon which my own time is built. Against Baudrillard's postmodern notion of hyperreality, it is not pop culture that has infiltrated my pictorial history of America; my conception of California is not defined by Disneyland, nor do I subconsciously store away billboards, or remember advertisements for the latest iPod. I conjure instead Evans's, Eggleston's, and even Wender's gas stations, their images of cars parked in front of scrubby lawns cast with yellow sunlight, messy interiors of small, carpeted houses that would not be allowed into the 1990's cleanliness of my own past. I imagine that I can taste the dust, dirt, and brownness of the desert, the Santa Ana's blowing smoggy filth against cheap hotels, tall palm trees, and polished mustangs. The Robert Frank-like images of place I indulge in are close enough to feel real, yet remain distant enough to appear to describe another America—they inform my deepest notions of what has passed.

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Wim Wenders, Club Douglass, Arizona.

Wim Wenders, Lounge Paintings, Gila Bend, Arizona
Pittsburgh, PA. The beautiful new and modern Greyhound Bus Station and Ramp Parking Garage.

Hollywood Freeway, Los Angeles, California.
Big Guy Pop 'n Top Sandwich.
Robert Frank, Covered car - Long Beach, California, 1955/56
The Searches

The photographic series I have worked on over the past two years seeks to address the inherent problems existing between lived, learned, and imagined history: I call this series “the searches.” I began with the notion of looking for icons of Americana that I believed nearly impossible to find today. These first searches ended anticlimactically with strange discoveries. The clichés of the past that had seemed so distant from my own time were in reality absurdly easy to find. I discovered this as I accidentally ran across an enormous quantity of small towns while driving to a wedding in southern Indiana. After these unexpected findings, my expeditions became about testing what could be found in my everyday activities. As I wandered I began looking for objects, places and relics that sparked an image in my mind of a place I had seen before, a time preserved in older images, or a situation I responded to by saying, however illogically, that looks small-townish. I wished to document histories existing only in my head. I was searching for a way to force into representation my fanciful notion of the America in my mind, offering a tantalizing picture of what that might be.

If we must idealize our pasts, and it seems that I must, it is best to know exactly what is being idealized. The photographic processes I intentionally engaged define the look of different decades, and my images, at a glance, seemed to sink visually into inappropriate eras. I created the light-leaked colors and warped perspectives of places and people living happily in 2008. My black and white document of text, “dictations”, has the sensibility of cityscapes from the turn of the 20th century. My Holga's\textsuperscript{11} square

\textsuperscript{11} A plastic 120 camera first made in the 1980's, the Holga became a part of the toy camera cannon and is known for its low-quality aesthetic.
images of over-photographed locations—cemeteries, rail tracks, parks, industrial quarters—take on the appearance of early color photography. My “texture of Richmond” series, documenting decades of painting over, restoring, and rebuilding an old southern city, reminds me of images of the rundown west. Despite these obvious and deeply problematic correlations, elements of contemporary specificity continue to create contradictions. It is these inconsistencies that are most interesting. A black-and-white image of a family resting during a folk festival, father leaning and sons sitting on an old civil war canon, could easily be an image from the past. The portable, plastic toilets in the background, however, give away its time and place. “The searches” are not about recreating a piece of the past, nor about looking for clichéd images to mimic, but about creating a meeting ground for the past to be introduced to my present. These images are an attempt to document what has survived, by whatever means possible, to intrude upon my present. While I have always looked for what was through the mangled veil of what is, the past has always been a dangerous place to linger.
The Searches, Richmond, VA, 2007-08
Images from, *Texture of Richmond*, 2006-07
The Inconsistencies of Place

“The American landscape is strewn with the detritus of unconsidered change and shortsightedness.”

Understanding place and its spaces has always been of interest. Place divides for me into the landscape we are surrounded by, and how we inhabit that landscape. How we interact with our constructed environments, has always been baffling. The way we live provided countless contradictions and an infinite number of disturbing observations throughout childhood. Our suburban housing row oddly dead-ended into a ranch, whose owners once grazed their sheep on the land beneath the street my brother and I roller-bladed on. I passed many afternoons peering at branded cows, stealing pomegranates, jumping battered fences, and sneaking under barbed wire into pastures. All these structures had a purpose, most having to do with keeping people out and animals in, they had textures dictated by function. Leaning wooden fences divided little-respected property lines; five or six dogs guarded them better. The ranch acted as a sort of barrier between the systems of plants and animals I understood as my own, and the surrounding world of cold, cement structures—schools, hospitals, playgrounds, prisons.

As the boundaries of a mother's protection expanded: the backyard gave way to the front, farm play succumbed to a growing desire to play farther from home. Snugly lining our cement street, the houses were divided into categories that epitomize suburban living: 31303, mother of two, crazy, not allowed in house, policemen take her away with guns: 31305, large unwatched dog has bitten the innocent man watering his roses at 31301: 31310, best friends house, allowed inside but not allowed to drive with mother,

12 Lippard, 202.
who drinks Gin from large beer mugs. The social interiors of the neighborhood were
drenched in dysfunction, and decorated according to the income and profession of the
inhabitants—school teacher, make-up artist, police secretary, several grips and
unemployed housewives. Our tract homes, with their green lawns and uniform ash trees,
held within them the dangers of the outside world. Children have a habit of trespassing
without thought, mostly because they don't realize there is any reason they shouldn't.
Without the contrast of mountains, cougars, and farmers, I might not have noticed the
inconsistencies and contradictions in the way we lived.
The Residential

While most rational people rail against the suburbs as hotbeds of dysfunction and *Stepford*-like living, I find them full of detail. What I refer to as “the residential” has been the setting of my investigations into place. A photographer once said the most personal spaces inside a house are found in hallways and on refrigerators. The only place my mother would hang family photos was in a hallway near the bathroom, and I see the truth in this statement. There are small interior spaces where personal taste, testaments of self, can be found within the socially dictated realm of the middle class house.

I explore residential areas as containers for the residue of human action and activity. Traces of actions are left to rot and stain: they fade slowly from the landscape, presenting fugitive proof of the comings and goings of inhabitants, their hobbies and jobs, their beliefs and worries—human activities that shape the humanity of our landscape and, oddly enough, that we try with varying degrees of success to hide from others. If you look closely enough, you can catch glimpses of hallways and refrigerators elusively represented in straggling trails of detritus.

Being voyeuristic but shy by nature, I am drawn to and repelled by spaces I should not be in. The sidewalk is the perfect vantage point for my Mrs. Cravets-like documentations; it acts as a publicly sanctioned vista or observation point. Few of the typical questions usually aimed at those with cameras drifted my way while I stood on a sidewalks' yard-wide boundary of acceptability. Sidewalks are valuable locations for spying, for like the beggars in *M*¹³ they are constantly overlooked. The sidewalk grants me harmless credibility, yet runs close enough to see through windows into front rooms.

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¹³ Fritz Lang, *M*, 1931
The sidewalk itself is the trail made by residents to their front door. It is not simply a cement walkway going one place, but an infinite number of walkways. J.B. Jackson, a writer and critic of landscape, stated, “roads no longer lead to places, they are places,” and the same can be said of sidewalks. Tracking people as they come and go to invisible destinations, my images act as stationary evidence of their transit.

The Porches

I heard it in a house in San Diego, sitting cautiously next to a large, blue parrot, while talking of lunch and shopping. The radio interview was more ambient noise than a foreshadowing voice, registering somewhere deep within the long tunnels of memory. *The porch is a very important space in southern history, not being inside and yet not outside; it functions as an ambiguous space with its own set rules, codes of behavior.* *Things can happen on a porch that can’t happen anywhere else.*

The southern porch is a unique space. Its posture within southern culture dictates the 'codes of behavior' that can be enacted within its boundaries. These behaviors illustrate the contradictions I find most indicative of an individual’s struggle to assert power over the social structures he is expected to live within. The porches I grew up with functioned less like a porch and more like the necessary holder for the front door. The entrances to the homes I know best have long, winding walkways to the front door, which make a trespasser or solicitor feel exponentially more uncomfortable with each stop towards an intrusion. While in rare cases there might be a chairs or swings waiting by the door, most often there are only potted plants next to a side gate adorned with a “beware of dog” sign behind which the dog barks. In contrast, southern porches speak of use, a use that is not about necessity or grandeur, but conversation. Wandering Richmond, house after house contained a porch that spoke as oddly and frequently as their residents. The drawling *hellos* and *good mornings* were as strange to my ear as the whispered mutterings that came from countless porches at dusk. The doubly intended conversation issuing from residents resting in chairs aimed diagonally toward the street and toward an
adjoining companion, often interrupted my walks.

The space of any porch is the meeting place of interior and exterior, public and private, personal and communal, a point in-between safety and watchfulness. The nature of a porch itself is as contradictory as my own impulses of trespassing to observe it. Growing up in a porchless land of garages, inside of which fathers hide on weekends and children play on weekdays, there was never such a tangle of contradiction. Garages are dirty spaces that belong outside and nowhere else. Nothing contained within a garage should ever enter the house without a specific reason; even children entering from a garage door must wipe their feet, as if to scrape off all traces of the outside. When a garage door is shut there is no suggestion of private games or hidden activities within. It is rather a public declaration of not being home.

Garages follow constructed rules of behavior similar to porches, but they lack the charged energy of contradiction, the possibility of acts happening within them that could not happen inside houses or on public sidewalks. They are bound by set rules of function and practicality, whereas a porch is vague and convoluted by a multitude of possibilities. Porches have the literal appearance of being outside, and yet through consistent care and individual choice feel intimate enough to belong inside. Porches beg to be seen and treated as a public space, and yet they behave like a private one. It would be very awkward to come outside one morning to find a stranger comfortably sitting in your porch chair, leaning on your fish pillow, reading your book. While the private nature of this exterior space would be ruptured, and codes of privacy violated, there would perhaps be no crime. Would even a child come up the front steps to sit on a stranger’s porch?
Porches are delineated from the sidewalk and the street by perspective, and this difference is so unexpectedly drastic it reinforces the private and personal nature of standing on a porch; raised above the sidewalk, their perspective is completely different. I would often, in spite of my instincts, steal up onto porches for the thrill of the view. Instead of looking at individual houses from the front, I could see directly down a street’s worth of porches, over the tops and through the rails of chairs, tables, and swings. Looking back down on the street I felt masterful over it and separated from it. It is an odd feeling of power and comfort, of friendliness and the need for protection. From the top of a porch one can hear the murmurings of those moving within—dogs, children, parents making dinner—as well as the stuttering of those outside, the shuffle of walkers, the clunking of old cars, the screams of cicadas. Standing once again on the sidewalk a pedestrian can feel, like fireflies that sporadically illuminate, the steady penetration of blinking eyes watching from above.

While architects seem to engage a limited number of porch designs, mostly rectangular patios with uniformly placed pillars, each individual porch looks and feels different from any other near it. Many porches have been restored and appear to look something like sets from Gone with the Wind. Most porches have slanted and tilted as the houses themselves settled. Pillars differ from house to house, ranging from bright white with florally decorated capitals to plain designs covered garishly in bright paint. The care put into the space through restoration, fresh paint, or sweeping, usually determines the type of furniture placed upon the their floors, and this in turn dictates how the porch is
used. The different styles of chairs, swings, tables, benches, and floral embellishments, prove how central the tradition is. Restored porches become candidates for ornate iron benches coupled with round tables boasting curly feet, all having the air of never being used but consistently cleaned. Moderately cared for houses might have two comfortable looking chairs with oddly patterned cushions. Soon-to-be-condemned houses means plastic lawn furniture, camping chairs with empty beer bottles, and what often look to be second-hand couches of questionable origin. My images became formally and literally strung together: wrought iron, swings on chains, fenced porches, deteriorating overhangs, all grouped by paint color or a likeness in pillar style. The images show a repetition that demonstrates the effort taken to obtain similarity.

Despite the social function and formality of decoration, the contradiction I found was how the little porches seemed to be used. Day after day I walked Richmond, shooting and re-shooting porches as the seasons changed, every week adding new streets to my careful pool of locations, and yet the objects of decoration never seemed to move or change. Certain days I would find chairs had shifted slightly, just enough to suggest that residents were out on their porches the previous night. At one point while making this piece it was suggested that I create a work to illustrate how the same porches changed over time. There were certain houses I watched for this purpose. Month after month tables and chairs remained unmoved, scattered with glasses collecting grime. While change over time seemed illusory within the same porch, I was fascinated by the notion that porches are a relentless element of the culture, even when that culture has altered and no longer has time for porch-located leisure.
After all my pondering over the “real” use of the space, literal or metaphorical, this element of uselessness caused me to see these particular southern porches as an homage to a time gone-by. People did at one time sit out after work, gather there in the afternoon heat, and swing gently in the sticky night air: they did watch and chat with and muse on their neighbors. Ten feet from their comfortable chairs, however, now sit parked SUVs and homes with central air. The function of the porch belongs to a different time, and what I am left documenting is on par with the green lawns of the suburbs—social protocol and little else. How much of their appearance of personality and intention, was a foreigner’s imagination and speculation about a fictive past?

My documentations came to an end when I had covered the breadth of my residential area, when objects had ceased to move or change. I presented them as only slices of the images, taking the most important piece of each, and focusing on the most personal or used object on a given porch, combining them together to create a new image of not one porch but five. The fact that one image was made up of many, captured the sheer multitude of these spaces and how they could be perceived while walking slowly by. In seeming to show quantity and repetition what I intended to show was the variety of the spaces grouped under the notion of “the porch.” By showing similarity in style I could highlight the differences between the images. Five pillars, one after another, and none look the same. As Charlotte Cotton stated in *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*:

“The repetition of observation of human behavior makes it a visual commentary on culture rather than a depiction of a solitary, idiosyncratic gesture.”\(^{15}\) Through these images I was trying to capture the culture that built this space, the people who use it.

Listening to the whispers and murmurs, I created the words they might be saying. What the porch meant to southern writers such as Harper Lee\textsuperscript{16} and what it inevitably came to mean to me, were two very different things. On Lee's porch anything could happen, and on my porch not much did happen. Her porches were steeped in meaning and culture, and my images are an observation of the loss of that culture.

\textsuperscript{16} Thinking of Lee's use of the porch as a central setting in \textit{To Kill a Mockingbird}. 
The Porch, digital prints on Rives, 2006-07
The Porch, digital prints on Rives, 2006-07
The Walks

“The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion.”-Heraclitus

Seeking to understand the contradictions of place reminds me of the Charles and Ray Eames film “Powers of Ten.” The film shows how a single scene in a specific location, a couple in a park with a picnic basket, can be seen from countless perspectives, ranging from macro to micro. They are filmed from far away and above, showing the mass of painful absurdities that is our world, and from a perspective so close it renders the specific couple and place unidentifiable. It is this latter perspective that I favor, pushing my lens often closer than it would like to go towards specific contradictions. As the porches turned from charged spaces worthy of inspection and documentation, to locations of settled stagnation, I turned towards photographing scenes I had been observing but not documenting.

With photography I find when I am looking hard and close at one particular place, what occurs in my peripheral vision often holds my eye. “The walks” shifted away from the idea of dealing with a recognizable place—such as the southern porch—and drifted instead toward the notion of an unidentifiable space. The scenes photographed are framed by the anonymity of sidewalk cement, therefore eliminating the recognizable architecture we use to locate a place. The walk images focus tightly and uncompromisingly on moments of human carelessness. Acting more as a copy-stand than a photographer, I frame these scenes directly from above, isolating beautifully mundane objects. There can be little mistake when viewing that the importance of the walks lies with the objects themselves in the scenes captured. It is the guesswork needed to recreate these moments

that I find most compelling in the scenes.

Walking endless stretches of sidewalk, wondering how a person drops their kiss-embellished sock, or why a child might misplace a pair of glittery sunglasses, or how a dead rat could become so strangely flat, I often feel more like a misguided detective than an artist or photographer. The absurdity of the scenes that catch my attention has produced a vast collection of lost objects and forgotten moments that seem to question notions of trash and intention. In my mind I steadily maintain that what I document is not trash, because the objects I am drawn to are the evidence of an action or gesture. In a discussion around a fellow student's images of neighborhood trash, my professor noted the difference between finding cigarettes, and finding underwear decomposing under a tree—how could someone take off their underwear and not notice? Concerns such as these, though I steer away from “trash,” remain ever present in my mind. While the fractured and impermanent remains of a variety of different gestures are the literal subjects I capture, the stark presentation of objects in the images begs for further interpretation. The real subject is the missed moment that produces what we observe.

Through exploring what the sidewalk could tell about the people who leave litter on its surface, I found myself reacting to the individual scenes. Each became loaded with the potential for a variety of emotions, making my judgment a part of the action itself. Wandering, I have found, quickly leads to the losses that seem so innate and embedded within our surroundings. Many whys and hows erupt from the scenes I find. How could that shoelace have fallen in such a beautiful, snakelike gesture? Why (and when) did someone create a bonfire on Floyd St. and carefully burn the edges of so many pieces of
newspaper? How has one black glove moved three times in the past three days? How does a person feel when, walking up a street that has just been cleaned by a street sweeper, (a street that is usually filled with cars, leaves, and gutter trash that is now clean, wet, and empty) she finds an isolated and unappetizing, battered, red apple? The metaphorical value of such a scene is endless, and can reach into such a variety of emotions that I am inclined to laugh. Speaking to these scenes, I silently shout out: “you dropped your keys, socks, hat, shoe, Valentine's Day card, flower, plate!” Often I replace “dropped” with other words such as “forgot”, “left” or “missed.”

I use the camera as a tool for curiosity or as my guard against loneliness, and in these works it functions as both. My interests draw me to the residue of these actions, and my documents create a constant conversation for my solitary walks. Asking the sidewalk what it can tell about my culture, the places we inhabit, the landscapes we embellish, I have found answers of an unexpectedly honest nature from actions of forgetfulness, habit, and careless consumption. These small actions unite culturally separated individuals, creating a conglomerate 'person' to embody our whims, careless actions, and beautiful oversights. I always thought of culture as an overbearing law imposed upon people, yet compiling together these events seems to show how, in insignificant ways, people have made the cultural landscape their own.
The Walks, archival pigment print, 2008
The Walks, archival pigment print, 2008
The Walks, archival pigment print, 2008
Method of Documentation

Working in a certain place over a long period of time grants a familiarity and a predictability to the location. Streets become notorious for containing a certain kind of object and action, and noticing these patterns is the key to belonging to a place. Lippard states in *Lure of the Local*, “Perhaps the only people who are really able to interpret social landscapes are locals—those who can recognize subtleties of change within a place over time, who know what the lumps and bumps once were and what has replaced them.” Like Lippard’s “locals”, I want to know a single place well, watch subtle shifts and changes: a new paint job, the demolition of a condemned building, the construction of a modern condominium in the midst of an old, southern street. The better I know of a certain place, the less distant, literally and metaphorically, my images are. While many of the photographers I admire are categorized as “deadpan”, objective image makers detached from the subjects they photograph, I can only capture aspects of a place with which I am engaged. Engagement and familiarity both depend on time spent with an idea or location. When too many days are missed, too much changes in a place. Discarded objects and documentations seem to exist in their own time. If my purpose is to document fugitive gestures, it seems necessary to remember that these gestures are the losses of the everyday. They cannot be seen at a glance or documented well by days of separation. When only seconds, minutes, or hours have gone by objects cannot change that quickly, so remnants and explanatory traces remain as proof of how or why they have altered. Paint takes time to dry, discarded objects take days to be noticed and picked up, dead rats

18 Lippard, 55.
19 Referencing Cotton, 81.
or birds need weeks to decompose. Like José Buendía in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who repeatedly created Daguerreotypes in an effort to photographically capture an evasive God, I persist in trying to capture the elusive traces of change.

Working with fractions of change in a particular place requires a specific way of making the images themselves. *Image Makers/Image Takers* 20, by Anne-Celine Jaeger, distinguishes between the people who press a button, the takers, and image makers, photographers who create their images. This distinction feels like a defensive justification, rather like the distinction between artists and craftspeople. I have found with my own images that the difference in appearance between looking for, and finding images is great. Looking for an image without a notion of what I am looking for, as happens when I am in a new place, seems to produce images that adhere to a pre-conceived notion of what a “good” photograph is. Give me a camera and a strange place, and what invariably results are images produced by my personally learned aesthetic. Walking with the intention of “making” photographs often stifles the wander itself, and forces into existence a good number of incompatible images. Instead of giving myself set times to make images, I give myself set destinations and leave open all possible routes to arrive there. I involve myself in the process by deciding how fast or slow I get to my destination by choice of route, and I allot however much time I might have for the walk, thereby limiting the number of stops and consequently the number of images taken. There is little pressure to take a set number of images during each walk; there will always be the trip back. I have a conceptual structure surrounding what I am looking for, yet I can never predict what I will find.

Habitual Collection

Human actions are unique in as many ways as they are collective, as collecting a collection of anything proves. The cicadas on my studio wall are different shapes and sizes and in various conditions, some have been smashed, others only mangled. What comes of documenting scenes of human activity over a period of time is a collection not unlike my bugs: similarities of gesture and object can be grouped together when enough situations have been photographed. I am a collector by nature. Though I pretend that my collections have little to do with my art, my images themselves are collections, though they have proved infinitely problematic in my work. What to do with quantity? The art world seems to favor large images in small quantities, and professors often talk of the “perfect” image. The idea of singular perfection is quite absurd. It depends on preconceived notions of value which should not apply to art. How would I go about
choosing the “perfect” cicada from my collection? Just as I am most interested in
exploring a place over a period of time, I am interested in presenting multiple images in
order to explore how they relate to each other, reflecting my interest in people and how
we relate to each other and our landscapes. What would be the perfect gesture? The task
of reducing a world of unknowable complexity to a single image, offering only one
perspective, would be against all I presume to understand of it.

The value of such oversimplification, and its great temptation for me, is, however, its tidiness. As a professor recently told me, “give in to the muddle, clarity is the
illusion.” And yet what seems most desirable in this world of muddle, is a kind of clarity,
a reliable way of seeing and understanding, a need for proof regardless of what it might
be proving. Collections, no matter how one categorizes, subcategorizes, or organizes them, are messy and overwhelming both for the viewer and the maker. Collection itself is
a slow process, the act of gathering one new image a day is so satisfying because the size
of a given set does not increase rapidly. One week there are perhaps thirty images in the
pool, the next forty, some of the old give way to the new and the number might drop
down to twenty, and then suddenly there are fifty. My collections, dictated by what I am
collecting and the rules by which I add and subtract, never have a fixed ending. The
documentations wane when I cease to be surprised by what I find. In some ways it is the
prospect of new scenes, another day of collecting that I find most satisfying. The
collection itself appears at times to be a easy solution to a devastating problem. Like
wanting to have a baby with a dying man, it is not the baby I wanted but the man to never
die. It is not the collection of events that I wish to preserve, but the events themselves.
Images, like all of culture's solutions, are just another way to preserve what is already lost, to slow what is passing steadily. My documents, however, show a small bit of life that is missed, ignored, or walked upon by others. I might be able to convince my viewers that these disregarded moments of our collective everyday are as important as any other. As Robert Frank stated of his images, “it is important to see what is invisible to others.”

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A Specificity of Loss

Two phone calls, some years apart, both coming at inopportune times, interrupt the specific and obligatory activities of each day—work, then school. The first communicated the wildly unexpected, and the second, the impossible. Overtaken by change while the rest of the day went just as it ought, reality seemed confirmed only in numbers; can something be true if no one else knows?

The specificity of this last body of work causes me to question general notions of loss and death. Every death acts like a ball striking an initial surface, and bouncing up and away, against another wall perhaps, and so on until its momentum has dissipated into its surroundings. Then the ball then rolls away and lies waiting for a hand, leg, or arm to toss it into motion again. Though the events setting a death in motion are completely indifferent to the preferences of the griever, the death itself behaves in a similar manner. The bodies of work I made in response to this event seem, in hindsight, to divide themselves into categories defined by time, distance, and emotional proximity to the ball or event. It took months to digest the reality that this death had actually happened, the confirmation arriving in the form of a funeral tauntingly referred to as his “celebration.”

The first works I produced were rooted in lasts; the last time I saw him, the last images I took, the last dinner, the last conversation, the last laugh. Following these works, separated by further distance, were pieces inspired by the event's consequences, by all that would never come to be. These were a poor attempt at acceptance, “nevers” that seemed to extend distantly into the past and far into the future; the nevers covered time and geography in one glance of understanding. Nipping angrily at the heals of
nevers came a need for facts, figures, times, dates—the need for proof. MRI scans were rescued from the trash and transformed into images of grotesque beauty, emails and letters were dismantled, printed, and reconstructed, forming a new narrative telling a different story. Proof was found in the evidence of his remaining possessions: a worn guitar, a piano still silently playing his songs, an album of images that were taken in an effort to “outlive death.” Of all the work I have produced, of all the concepts I have mulled over, this work has been the most elusive, the most liquid, and the least fixed. Its malleable nature is ironically amusing since, death is perceived as the definitive moment when all that could have been won't be. Through my personal investigation I have discovered that death branches off, quicker than human reflexes react, into different beginnings—mourning, grief, denial, anger, acceptance, resignation. It poses questions without answers, provokes wandering in the realm of imagination, devours the possibilities of the unknown, and requires speculation without the comfort of confirmation.

It is not reactions and emotions I have managed to capture, but death itself as it intruded upon my understanding. As divorce exists only as a word, as an abstract event for a child who's parents are still happily married, so death did not live in a my reality. The snatching of a most beloved childhood friend a few months after his twenty-seventh birthday, forced death's immediate inclusion into my unfinished notions of life, changing death from a fear into a lived experience.

Like learning to ride a bicycle or swim in the deep end of a pool, death has its own laws, its own objective properties. There are many different ways to learn to ride a
bicycle, some more effective than others; training wheels only prolong the inevitable realization that bicycles tilt with gravity, falling is more than likely, and asphalt is hard and uncompromising toward fits of bravery. Accepting death as a reality means understanding practical consequences like those of riding a bicycle, facts that don't seem possible at first. We thought, *he can't die, no one can die so young, the tumor must be stopped, he will get better.* Until it happens death is not a reality, a possibility, it is not even an option. In a recent article in the *New Yorker* magazine on death and illness, Michael Kinsley wrote, “we are all born thinking that we'll live forever. Then death becomes an intermittent reality, as grandparents and parents die, and tragedy of some kind removes one or two from our own age cohort. And then, at some point, death becomes a normal part of life...at that point, any given death can still be a terrible and unexpected blow, but the fact that people your age die is no longer a legitimate surprise.”

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22 Michael Kinsley, “Mine is Longer than Ours” in *The New Yorker* (The New Yorker, April 7th 2008), 40.
260 E Palo Verde

A year since he left at dawn,
an empty house between hands,
one twenty in the desert shade.
I found a vagrant sleeping pale
and naked on the cold
tile floor of his room.

In appearance this piece, 260 E Palo Verde, is not about death or loss, but about a house. If my first real memory of this house is of him walking through the front door, arms filled with brown grocery bags, a welcoming smile to long parted friends on his face, what could be the last? Whichever memory I select to pretend was the beginning or end, it rests snugly in one of this house's rooms. Three children and a sea of friends passed between its walls over the years as rooms rotated by whim and necessity. The desert sun of Palm Springs burned into our minds memories of stifling cars, untouchable steering wheels, steaming asphalt, and the sweating rooms of that flat-roofed house. The long drive from our home to this place felt like a pilgrimage. The younger I was the farther it seemed, the older I became the more the distance morphed into the emotional frustration of separation. E Palo Verde watched children play ridiculous games in its street, teenagers strut down it with cigarettes and a need to be cool, adults with young, confident swaggers ready to challenge the world. All of our faces, his siblings and mine, acted those roles at different times in front of this house. We could have been characters from Our Town\textsuperscript{23}, posing and playing at life, completely ignorant of its limited allowance of time, unsuspecting of its unpredictability, and unappreciative of its passing moments.

After he died within the walls of 260, it was sold, by practicality and necessity. I

\textsuperscript{23} see Thornton Wilder's 1930's play, Our Town.
was there to pack up the remains, to help sort out and organize the chaos of distress, to
watch as a place filled with wear—indentations in the carpet where an age old couch had
settled, rings of dirt under potted plants, squares free of dust where knickknacks had
stood—was vacuumed, dusted, and dismantled. As his life proved to be unbelievably
finite, so the life of 260 passed quickly out of our hands, becoming again just any home
in Palm Springs. I had never previously understood, or considered, what gave the house
its life. Everything from the driveway to the pictures in the master bedroom seemed to be
a part of it, objects inseparable from one another; it was the combination of people,
objects, and architecture that gave the house its tangible presence. As familiarity was
slowly removed from the house, its parts separated and driven away, I wondered if its
walls, rooms, and familiar backyard meant anything to me now, or if they could ever be
more than a backdrop for passing years of memory. And if not, how it was possible a
place filled with so many bad jokes, sibling squabbles, and stray cats, a house so
saturated with decomposing dog feces and rotting grapefruits, ever could be just a house.

My brightly cool document of 260 E Palo Verde was taken during a sporadic return trip,
a pilgrimage made this time from across the country, and depicts a house presently empty
as it awaits new owners, a silent house permeated by the memories of the documenter.

Being in the house again, camera in hand, vagrants in the garage, felt like being
where I wasn't or shouldn't be—new residents rarely welcome strange gawkers into their
house. Empty rooms begged for the cinematic projection of memory. They were like
dismantled sets of old and popular shows. I saw myself playing in that room at twelve,
pinning in this hallway at thirteen, standing still outside his room listening as he
melodically coaxed “The Boxer” out of his guitar. I was more aware of walls, windows, doors, cabinets and fixtures than I had ever been before, aware of my body moving unconsciously through distantly familiar hallways, doors, and gates. Outside, curtainless windows streamed the bright yellow glare of July in the desert; inside, a lack of artificial light cast blue shade-like shadows. The house was the setting where memory collided with an empty reality, where the past trailed too closely on the heels of the present.

Thinking of what was, I awkwardly documented this now unfamiliar place.

Images captured feelings of being out of place while in a place where I had always belonged. The solid architecture of the house had never seemed so concrete, yet my images appear to be globs of malleable ink forming or dissolving. The perspectives within the images are disorienting, shot through multiple doors and windows, into the empty rooms beyond. Without tables and chairs, couches and a television, the rooms are harder to divide into the living areas we carefully define through use. Without furniture to distinguish scale and size, the spaces of the house could be massive or claustrophobic. It is easy to say these images are about past memories, but they are rooted in the present. They are a documentation of the literal consequences of his death, and they tell the story, at least in part, of why the house was sold. Who could live there after? These images are not about what passed here in memory, they depict what is passing now; this empty place falling quickly into desiccated ruin. 260 E Palo Verde it is not about his death, but our loss.
260 E Palo Verde, giclée print, 2008
260 E Palo Verde, giclée print, 2008
260 E Palo Verde, giclée print, 2008
Questioning the “universality” of Death

When I tell people, in explanation of the specific recent works discussed above, that my best friend died last year they have a variety of reactions, but I can count upon receiving self-assured commiseration. There seems to be a prevalent attitude from such sympathizers that, while they may not understand the particulars they can understand the devastation. This seemed reasonable at first, but when considered seriously it shows how meaningless death can become when it is not in any way related to ourselves. Answering such questions as could this work be seen as therapy forced me to seriously reconsider given sympathies, and question the extent to which a person can allow himself to grasp an unpleasant situation when the shattering nature of it has not been directly felt. Whether it is a hard-worked-at selfishness or an innate limitation of the human capacity to “feel”, there seems to be a clear border defining of how much we can comprehend of such situations. Watching the French film Joyeux Noel24 I cringed the moment the opposing forces entered the battlefield made neutral by the appearance of Christmas. Knowing nothing of warfare and disregarding notions about the film's “accuracy” I guessed or felt this holiday from war was going to make it nearly impossible for them to kill each other the following morning. Is it this zone of personal interaction that is lacking in discussions around and reactions to work dealing with the death and loss of someone other than a grandparent? I wonder about our “natural” limitations, for if they are in truth a part of human nature, why is there such a predilection toward false emotion and deference? Is it simply the upholding of a cultural custom, similar to the question “how are you?” that is asked without the slightest fear of it being answered honestly?

24 Christian Carion, Joyeux Noel, 2005.
This questioning of supposed universal feeling leads me to question the real consequences of death, which seem to have very little to do with the actual act of dying. In an incredibly poignant scene at the end of Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, the young heroine dies, yet it is not the death that is seen as tragic. “This was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe....As he saw the passage outside the room, and the table with the cups and plates, it suddenly came over him that here was a world in which he would never see Rachel again.”

Following this idea of a changed reality, the specificity of my work does not necessarily lie in the sole fact that “he died”, but in the ripple effect one person's life has. It seems that for the people who must live after, death becomes simply a moment, or rather the moment, when much was lost but all is changed.

It is not a funerary reaction of condolence that is expected of my viewers, but a more complex look at the non-linear nature of our linear stories. My two recent pieces in particular deal less with grief and loss, and more with disillusionment. I never realized how romanticized our notions are of how events should be ordered, how relationships ought to progress, when and where they must end. I am still childishly appalled at the messiness of real life events.

If I could represent my memory accurately, it might look like a badly exposed roll of film, where not only light and exposure were a problem but something mechanical. It could begin in that house, and it could end in that house the night of his birthday, with a table filled with burned chicken. And all the rest—with the exception of a few random spots where all the mechanisms miraculously worked correctly—could be black with unfocused streaks of gray, much like my weavings. The cheerful notion of happy ever

after is always in my mind juxtaposed with those brilliant moments of light and color, moments when life worked in a manner that is rare and perfect in its disproportionate excess. The story becomes not about neat endings and happy beginnings, but the in-between that literature, film, and, yes, even images fail to properly capture. These pieces are also about a calamity, and the slow fading of childish dreams; death has greater implications than we give it credit for. People have said, “but it's over now”, as though death is an ending rather than a beginning. It is aggravating to be misunderstood by sympathetic attempts to understand, and if people are going to live up to their firm expressions of the sympathetic “universality” of death, they must then acknowledge this work is not just for the one who died young, but is dedicated to all who have died, and for the infinite number of people left behind.
Alternative Materiality

My material interests are entirely bound to the conceptual outcomes I evoke, and it is through my materiality that I imbue my works with their metaphorical power. I am interested in shifting processes away from what we expect, in disguising how something was made, not out of cleverness or a desire for novelty, but rather to leave my viewers ungrounded and curious. There are as many unspoken rules of making and presenting art as there are ways to view and understand it, and our experiences with the visual vocabulary of certain media informs how we interpret the information presented; photographs that behave as photographs should, according to prior experience, are interpreted and responded to within the boundaries of photography. It is precisely these reactions I hope to subvert by altering the appearance of my images, giving photographs the look of prints, or digital images embedded within a fabric the appearance of Ikat.26 By avoiding firm categories, I hope to create a new relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

What sort of exchange can be opened through uncertainty? Adam Gopnik, writing on the artistry of magicians stated: “magic is possible because magicians are smart. And what they're smart about is mainly how dumb we are, how limited in vision, how narrow in imagination, how resourceless in conjecture, how routinized in our theories of the world, how deadened to possibility.”27

The two processes that I have perfected over the years, weaving and photographic transfers, seem to have overcome the problem of forcing materials to do what they don't

26 Ikat, a resist weaving technique used to create images or patterns in cloth.
do naturally. There are many different ways to transfer photographs, most of which
damage the image in transition, the details smearing in the move, and many final images
are less interesting than in their original form. It is a struggle to find different ways in
which to print, embed, and transfer images on a surface other than photographic or inkjet
paper, while at the same time retaining the integrity of the image. Being an image maker I
am wary of layering or distorting my photographs—even in the darkroom I am loath to
crop. What interests me about transfers is the mobility they provide to images so often
fixed, quite literally, to their chemical surface. The first time I saw a demo for Inkjet
Transfers was in a photography class that specialized in nonsilver processes. The
demonstrator printed his image on a piece of label backing, and then rolled and scraped
the image onto a damp sheet of paper. As he lifted away the waxed paper, I saw for the
first time a process that was a perfect way to render qualities of abstraction and distortion.
His image was still recognizable yet its photographic appearance, the smooth surface, the
correct undulation of highlights and shadows, no longer looked photographic. The
process left instead a brightly colored image of a woman resting on a couch in an
uncertain material context, her edges slightly blurring and running, her colors blending
into each other. It has taken years to perfect this process—its unpredictability can be
annoying or completely ruinous—and this type of transfer has remained a large part of
my visual vocabulary because of its versatility. Almost any surface will accept ink and
water, and a calculated mixture of each can produce a new type of image.

The other process that has endured the test of time and use is weaving. In the
beginning of my relationship with looms, I treated fabric as though it were another sheet
of paper, a different type with a different set of material properties. Cloth, however, shows traces of how it is made and by whom. Handwoven fabric has the personality of its maker, it retains the gesture of having been touched and manipulated. Handwoven textiles look as different from a bought piece of fabric as handmade books look from the hardbacks we purchase in bookstores. No matter how seamless the craftsmanship, hands and the processes of making always leave behind evidence of their effort, and in my textiles I work to enhance that. While I use simple weave structures and patterns, I have the option to create specific flaws, mistakes, or characteristics.

Though I originally learned photographic transfers and weaving separately, I now use them in tandem—all of my graduate textiles have been soaked with water, ink, and images. Yet my textiles are not simply the container for my images, a new surface to place photographs on. I create and see them as images themselves, though abstractly formed through decisions alien to those of a camera. My woven cloth acts as the first image upon which I place the second. In my latest textiles I have created image and cloth simultaneously, transferring images before, during, and after I weave, but always while the cloth is still stretched across the loom, and before it has become an independent piece of fabric. This new technique has successfully reduced the battle between dominant images to the recessive traits of my woven structures. It has also allowed for a process where I can work with both image and cloth at once, creating not two pieces to be forced together, but rather one composite piece. The final result is a piece of cloth saturated with images that cannot be washed away.
A Time Line

“Ghosts sit on their front porches late at night drinking coffee and making small helpless conversation.” Jon Storm

It is quite fitting that my textiles are the final works discussed here. They are, visually and conceptually, a summation of all that has passed since his death. If our conception of time was not organized into containable pieces, I would call these textiles _The Time Line_. Despite their film-like appearance, they skip around events and through time, cataloging a life twisted and distorted by memory. I generically refer to these textiles as _Des Perdues_—lost things.

When I first began what became a long line of ten inch wide strips of fabric, I was using snapshots secretly stolen from his funeral, creating faces embedded in cloth that were faintly reminiscent of Lia Cook's haunting jacquard textiles. Through the repetitive process of weaving, the strips of fabric, filled top to bottom with images, lost their specificity, and gained instead the blurred, chopped, and faded appearance of passing time and forgotten thoughts. Though I doubt memory fades, it changes color, shifts in intensity, and takes on a dull haze of having been placed underneath new thoughts. The vivid colors of pain becomes soft blues and yellows, images of a dismantled past become images of the future. Beginning with what was, the textiles look forward into what will be. Images of disturbed domesticity are placed between his blurred and frozen face, chairs fallen and left unrighted are not images of memory but of people who have left the scene. The setting of his life has not changed, but ours has. In a typically narcissistic manner I have, using images of him, morphed them into my own story dealing with his death, my loss, countless realizations of love, and burdens to be carried forward.
detail from *des Perdues*, handwoven textile, inkjet transfer, 2008
detail from *des Perdues*, handwoven textile, inkjet transfer, 2008
detail from *des Perdues*, handwoven textile, giclée print, 2008
detail from *des Perdus*, handwoven textile, giclée print, 2008
Conclusion

“They call this progress, but they don’t tell us where it is going” - Faulkner 28

In a recent trip to the Jamestown settlement, I found the site very different from what I expected. As I gazed out over the James River, expanded to a width that was breathtaking, I could understand the need to wander and the excitement of settling into the unknown that seems to define American history. As I climbed down the cement wall that guides the river and watched the water lap aggressively at its barrier, I imaged all I could ever know about this place. It had the look and feel of possibility, unobstructed by markers of history and plaques telling “the story”. Catching up to the rest of my party, I found them hiding from the bitter wind in a museum of carefully selected artifacts. Lies, or more generously misinterpretations, trickled happily off pictures of heroism and American hardship. This place, like all of the others we inhabit, is caught in contradictions between the past and the present. As my research has proved, places are a complex mixture of history, landscape, and mobility. I am questioning the American habit of living incongruously, carelessly, and inconsistently with the landscape we have taken to be ours. It is the smallest gestures of our society, I find, that are the answers to the problems inherent to our way of life.

This thesis began by looking backward into history and personal memory, and it fittingly concludes by looking forward into both. When I said “roughly at best” in my introduction concerning leaving this institution, it seems that artists fitting into the fabric of society is never as comfortable as I might hope. My own foreboding thoughts toward the future are reflected subtly around me, from passing comments from professors who

28 William Faulkner from Lure of the Local, 228.
say, “you are coming of age in a strange time”, to young artists who confirm “impressions of a new, gray mood.”29 The future of my generation seems precariously balanced between the life we know and an unimaginable future. My indulgence in investigating loss has lead to the general acknowledgment that the world cannot be controlled like the artworks I create, it cannot be collected or preserved, it can only be experienced. An acceptance of loss is an acceptance that the world itself is precarious.

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Bibliography


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Collections

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