Mockingbird

by

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"What makes the first glimpse of a village, a town, in the landscape so incomparable and irretrievable is the rigorous connection between foreground and distance. Habit has not yet done its work. As we begin to find our bearings, the landscape vanishes at a stroke, like the facade of a house as we enter it. It has not yet gained preponderance through a constant exploration that has become habit. Once we begin to find our way about, the earliest picture can never be restored."

Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street.* 62-63

My work in graduate school began with a photographic approach that attempted to engage, on some level or another, the South. I was born in South Carolina, and grew up in and around Nashville, Tennessee, with the exception of a couple of odd years that my family and I like to pretend away. To be brief, I've lived in the South my entire life, was raised in a deeply Protestant community, and when I began to take photos in my early 20s, I was engaged in describing the South's contours, whether directly or through a more roundabout, ambient method. One of the main reasons I chose Georgia for my MFA studies was its location. I was curious what familiarities would re-announce themselves in a new city, and how a new location would compare to the South I'd known.

In my first year or so In Athens, this looked like practicing what Robert Lyons calls the documentary style, a shorthand for a photographic body of work that draws from aspects of documentary photography traditions. This title is, I think, a provisional way of both acknowledging the subjectivities hidden behind the word Documentary, while making reference to the tradition as an aesthetic, or as a creative position that slips back and forth between fact and fiction. On the level of

form and content, my approach in my first year grew into a series of portraits, landscapes, details, and events woven together into a subjective vision of the world.

The documentary style carries with it a bit of the orthodox; the practice requires a great deal of wasted time, boredom, repeating oneself, subjects that don't quite "work," all of which are (hopefully) counterweighted by moments of epiphany and success. This kind of cycle isn't novel to the documentary style, or even photography for that matter; plenty of other artists make a similar statement about their practices.

There's something I find noble, or at least honest, about creative approaches like this and the philosophies that underpin it. I think this process is, at its best, a beautiful mediator between people and the world. Take, for instance, the recent and bluntly titled *To Photograph is to Learn How to Die*, released in early 2023. As photographer and writer Tim Carpenter says explicitly, photographs are useful because of

> the independent authority they possess to both defy and embrace impermanence and to convey to other human beings the essence of a separate self's fleeting and often furtive connections with the obstinateness of it all. In short, that such pictures can get us about as close as our mortal shortcomings will allow. (6)

Again, I'm not sure about photography's *unique* position towards dealing with "the given" in the world, especially in relation to its successor (the moving image), but its mechanical constraints are, to Carpenter and myself, liberatory.

Carpenter is quick to make his metaphysical convictions clear; he does not believe in any religious explanation of things, believes that "nothing is ultimately true or false," (29) , but his position doesn't stop him from drawing guidance from folks like the theologian and poet Christian Wiman, Simone Weil, Wendell Berry and others. Whatever the case may be for Carpenter, his conception of photography as a means of mediating and structuring experience echoes aspects of religious practice, especially some conceptions of prayer. This isn't to speculate about Carpenter; his book clarified commonalities between artists' works and life practices that I'd considered disparate, which then clarified a few things about my own.

It's likely not a coincidence that my practice got serious when I left the church. Throughout my life I heard preachers, family members, co-workers, make the argument that religion (at least, this specific incarnation of religion, The Presbyterian Church of America,) was essential and self-evidently true because it answered the big "what's all this about" question (in theologian lingo, this is called a totalizing metanarrative). The appetite for meaning burns in the body in order to guide us to the ultimate satisfaction:knowledge of the infinite, a place in God, a right ordering of one's days and relationships, and the structuring of other more instances of one's everyday life, hour by hour.

I often think of a period in early 2021 when the poet Ocean Vuong did a series of Q&As on his instagram stories. Lucky for me, he archived them, and lucky for you, I will not resort to paraphrase. He was asked whether an MFA program was essential for an aspiring writer, and after giving his opinion about the purpose of such practices, he said "the main path is you and your paper. you and the questions you make of your living. If your questions are good you will never answer them, but in your search, will build worlds to hold them with." Carpenter has a similar attitude towards the purpose of

practice. In his mind, we deal with the intractability of things "by accepting the fundamental ache" he says, "and employing internal human faculties to create significance and affirm the value of our finite lives." (17) Simply put, my photographic practice is a way to engage with, and to find meaning in the "given," and to square myself against that obstinate material: an attempt to quiet a loud insistent voice that demands hard answers.

...

Oftentimes, Southern artists use the term "sense of place" when speaking about the unique power of the American South. In *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*, Martyn Bone argues that, not only is sense of place ubiquitous in literary discussions about the South, but also that, at least in the literary world, this sense of place carries a specific valence with it. For Bone (and others), the prevailing vision (and the one I'll spend my time addressing) was formulated by the Agrarians, a group of poets who were kicking around my neck of the woods in Nashville in the early-to-mid 20th century. To the Agrarians, the South was a necessarily rural, pre-industrial society, a "site of resistance to capitalism's destruction of 'place' through land speculations, real-estate development, urbanization, and industrialism." (5) [1]

[1] It's worth noting that the vision of the South put forward in the Agrarians' manifesto "I'll Take My Stand," in idealizing a harmonious relationship between man and the landscape, upholds a social order that is, at the core of it, sexist and racist. Brian Casemore, in his book *The Autobiographical Demand of Place: Curriculum Inquiry in the American South* analyzes the Agrarians, especially the writings of Donald Davison, through psychoanalytics and curriculum studies. Building on the work of Patricia Yaeger, he advocates instead for a vision of the South that is forthright about the "violent intermingling of black bodies and the land." (65)

I would wager that the Agrarians were not the first to enshrine this vision of the South, but I want to point out, borrowing from Bone, that "sense of place" is a central concern for Southern artists. He opens his preface by stating:

"It is a truth universally acknowledged among southern literary scholars that 'the South' and 'southern literature' have been characterized by a 'sense of place.' [...] Indeed, 'Place, Sense of' has been deemed so integral to southern literary and cultural discourse that it was deemed worthy of its own entry in the monumental *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (1989)." (I) But all of this is dealing with literature, and though there are many intersections and cross-pollinations between writing and photography, it's worth checking out how the above fixations have shown up in the latter.

Just within the last five years, a number of major exhibitions devoted to Southern Photography have gone up. Two major examples of which are the *Reckonings and Reconstructions* at the Georgia Museum of Art and *A Long Arc: Photography and the American South since 1845*, which was put on by the High Museum in Atlanta and later in 2023 at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Jeffrey Richmond-Mole, curator of Georgia Museum of Art at the time of the *Reckonings* exhibition, writes "what rings ever more clearly at this moment in our nation's history is that we cannot understand the present realities and identities of the American South [...] without a thorough grounding in the region's past, including its photographic traditions." (13-14)

Two years prior to the High's *A Long Arc,* it staged a show marking the 25th anniversary of the Picturing the South Initiative. The show was the first time that the commissioned works had been staged together since the initiative began back in 1996, and it was a heavy room to be certain: Sally Mann, Dawoud Bey, Richard Misrach, Alex Webb, Emmet Gowin, Alec Soth, Martin Parr, Kael

Alford, Shane Lavalette, Abelardo Morell, Debbie Fleming Caffery, Alex Harris, Mark Steinmetz, An-My Lê, Sheila Pree Bright, and Jim Goldberg.

The projects that resulted from this initiative marked major landmarks in the careers of many of the artists: Mann's *Motherland* series, which marked a turn from her family photographs to the history of racism, and its trauma in the land itself; Bey's series of large scale multi-polaroid composite portraits; the industrial landscapes that comprised Misrach's *Petrochemical America*; Soth's earliest photographs for *Broken Manual*, and a long list of others.

Whether the success of these projects (and the initiative) is because of the vibrancy and visual interest of the South's landscape itself, the place it held in the minds of the artists who explored it, a larger public's continued desire to see the interior of this exoticized region, or some range of other factors is beyond me: I'd wager it's a mixture of all of the above.

Gregory J. Harris, the High Museum's photo curator, when talking about *A Long Arc* in relation to the recent "Picturing the South" initiative, notes that "there remains much for photographers to puzzle over [in] the region. Hence the need for this book [A Long Arc] and its related exhibition to re engage the history of photography with the South at its center and to update the most recent chapter in that history twenty-seven years on." (256)

In his essay "Fables of the Reconstruction" in the *Reckonings and Reconstructions: Southern Photography from the Do Good Fund catalog*, W. Ralph Jenkins says that "with the preponderance of certain visual tropes–particularly the Southern Gothic–it is easy to forget that the South's visual narrative is varied." Though he wasn't at the helm of a major exhibition, Jenkins complicates the vision of the South through his own form of curation: he contextualizes images alongside/against one

another in the format of his image-text essay. He even points out how some images within the *Reckonings and Reconstructions* show operate as examples of industrialization's fatal blow against the South's pristine, distinct landscape, specifically the work by Alex Christopher Williams, Jeff Rich, and Mark Steinmetz. Here, Jenkins briefly references the 1958 essay "The Search for Southern Identity," written by historian C. Vann Woodward, who felt that development in the South, or what he called a "Bulldozer Revolution" was already destroying "the very consciousness of a distinctive tradition along with the will to sustain it." (22)

If you look around a bit, you'll find that this is a common refrain, and unbounded from specific eras or locales in the region. Jenkins references in his essay the work of Edward L. Ayers who argues, "from the very beginning, people have believed that the South, defined against an earlier South that was somehow more authentic, more real, more unified and distinct, was not only disappearing but also declining." (69)

I love this line of thought: Southern cultural discourse, in literature, photography, and otherwise has been so fixated on the erasure of its distinctive features, that we can consider images that bear no resemblance to those distinctive features as being Southern, in that they are revelations come to bear; that industrialization and suburbanization and a general sense of placelessness, in a photograph, can be read paradoxically through a Southern lens. Whether this sense of place (or placelessness) emanates from the earth itself, or from the Southerner who is attuned to the landscape, or from the outsider who searches the landscape for confirmations to their imagination is beyond me, but I love the friction between those different possibilities. But maybe friction is the wrong word here; though the conditions of authenticity in each of the above configurations conflict with one another, their results

sit next to one another in the exhibition catalogues and gallery walls of the aforementioned exhibitions and publications.

At first, I didn't realize the connections between the work that appears herein and the ongoing conversation about "sense of place" in the South. Or, I'd burned out on the project of hunting for moments that, it seemed, would do little more than re-hash obvious visions of the region. It seemed I would be telling you a story you'd already heard before, though maybe if I was lucky, I would do so with a distinctive voice. This was essentially a genre artist's problem. It was also a problem I was no longer interested in.

Discernible and Indiscernible Figures

Previous to the series of photographs that comprise my thesis work, I made a series of handmade books by following predetermined features in the landscape (pictured right).

Constraining the photographic approach to a bootleg dirt trail that encircled a town, for example, made creation straightforward. Creating work by executing a figure also offered legibility, in that whatever photographs appeared shared the context of a measurable stretch of space.

Many artists have dealt with land in their work in similar ways. Ian Sinclair's *London Orbital*, Richard Long's walked lines, and, of course, Marina Abramovich and Ulay's *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walks* are immediate conceptual parallels. Departing from this method, in addition to shifting my subject of focus, also meant abandoning the legibility of its creation. What remained was the approach, what remained was walking.

(Top right: *The Rail,* artist book, 2023. Inkjet on Gampi, 8"x9."
Bottom right: *The Ring,* artist book, 2023. Stab bound inkjet prints, 8.5"x11.")

Without the benefit of a structured method, I made most of the early photographs in this series from a state of complete confusion. The urge towards creation remained; I felt a panic to go out into the world, to walk for miles without a sense of what I was seeking, at least at the point of embarkment.

You can look for, recognize, and talk about something without realizing that you were working through any of those processes, and walking is a method of letting in, through encounter, what is shrouded from the mind. Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Wanderlust, a History of Walking*, characterizes walking as an embodied form of processing, and the mind as a space that isn't exhaustively, immediately accessible:

> The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. (6)

I found myself alone close to sundown, inches away from a wall of those hyper-reflective windows installed in every building in every business park across America. The windows, installed along a circular section, were at slight off-angles to one another. If I stood close enough to the seam between the two panels, I would disappear completely, leaving a landscape with a fractured hill-line. A blind spot at the center of the eye. I took a photograph. I began to notice topiaries in industrial spaces, detritus that, from a certain angle, resembled organic shapes. I took a photograph, then another. Though this approach was similar to how I'd approached earlier series, the strategies for encounters felt uncertain, and the subjects were elusive, tucked away behind buildings or so ordinary that I'd pass

them by numerous times before I caught them. This approach shares some common ground with that of the Situationists, especially in their Dérives, in that the navigation of the landscape was determined by a what the group called the psychogeography of the city, as well as by a looser set of rules and whims, or as Guy Debord said, by following“the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the contour of the ground)”. (Solnit 229)

My series of photographs, also like the work of the Situationists, takes the city as its subject and on some level, is determined by the pedestrian constraints of the city itself; the photographs are largely made on sidewalks and the side of the road. As a result, the subjects are, fittingly, pedestrian; ordinary scenes, materials, and fragments, the kind of stuff you might find in Tennessee, Missouri, Washington, wherever. The accumulation, and ubiquity, are the points.



(photographs from *Mockingbird,* Silver Gelatin, 10”x10”, 2024-25.)

In Solnit's consideration of the relationship between artistic practice and the city, she turns over a swath of lives and careers, including the poems of Frank O'Hara. Within O'Hara's walking poems, Solnit notes that "the texture is that of everyday life and of a connoisseur's eye settling on small things, small epiphanies, but the same kind of inventory that studs Whitman's and Ginsberg's poems recurs in O'Hara's." I don't mean to equate my vision or connoisseurship to these poets, but to borrow how Solnit frames the relationship between the artist and an urban space: "cities are forever spawning lists". (208)

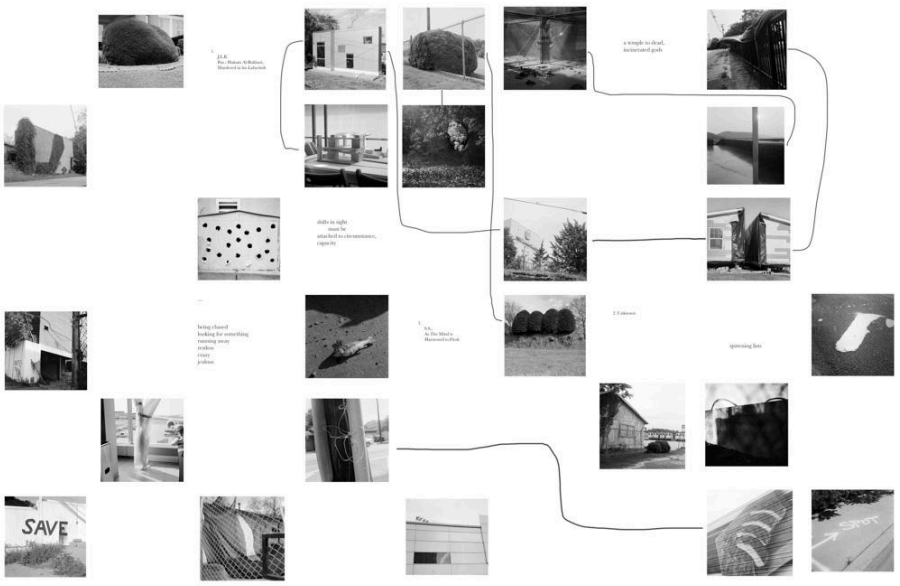
Installation and Agency

In previous projects, the format of presentation, a photo book or wall installation, echoed the act of creation, and the narrative movement of the work itself. For example, in a series of photographs made along a railroad track, the photobook's sequence of "one photograph, then another, then another" worked fine. In *Syntax as Photowork,* theorist and photographer David Bate posits

> The common issues and questions to different forms of presentation mean that we need a more general consideration of the structure and organization at work in photographic projects [...] the sequencing of pictures, if not seen all simultaneously on the same page, begs the question: how are they organized spatially to construct meanings? (214)

Given that my work wasn't linear in the traditional sense, a photo book or wall installation would be poorly suited to describe it. I wanted to create an associative installation, wherein the viewer could

move freely from photograph to photograph, echoing the spatial and temporal experience of the creation, of drifting through a built environment.



(A document from summer 2024, showing early ideas about interrelations and movement through the series.)

My final installation is titled *Mockingbird,* in reference to the state bird of my home, Tennessee. The Northern Mockingbird is also the state bird for four other states in the South: Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Florida. I found the image of this bird curious and delightful, especially in this context: it serves as a regionally specific representative for many states in the South but its essential character is complicated. The Northern Mockingbird has no song of its own, and can only mimic the voices of others, it is characterized by its simultaneous voicelessness and multivocality. The relationship between these aspects is thematically central to my work.

Mockingbird takes the form of black and white photographs placed on top of a collection of MDF boxes which have been arranged into a fragmentary grid. The installation functions on a few different levels: the arrangement of the boxes, when taken in at once, resembles an abstracted city in

miniature; the empty spaces in the grid underline the subjectivity of the vision. The installation also flags the centrifugal interpretation of the grid in modern art, as postulated by Rosalind Krauss: “the given work of art is a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fragment [...] compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame.” (60)

The silver gelatin photographs installed on top of the boxes are the culmination of my darkroom practice over the last three years. Often, I hear analog practice spoken about with words like control and mastery. This seems backwards to me. The material, the chemicals, the machines each have their own lively characteristics: printing in the darkroom is about understanding and responding to those characteristics, and working within their limitations. It’s also a process that allows me to engage my body in the creation of my photographs, especially in contrast to a digital workflow. This isn’t to dunk on inkjet, only to remark on my short attention span.

I chose to construct the boxes out of MDF because it is essentially a grainless material, which allows the installation to sit between different suggestions of scale: both that of the installation in the room itself, and that of a larger, other space which is being referenced by this miniaturization. I also chose MDF because of its material connotations: it is often used in industrial applications like construction, especially as a provisional material. MDF is usually painted over, or is used as a sub-layer for another material (like veneer flooring, for example). Leaving the surface of the boxes unpainted points to the idea of flux or change in the built environment, especially as it relates to commercial development. What is memorialized here may soon disappear.

(Above: an installation of my work alongside the works of Eleanor Foy and Landon McKinley. February 2025)

Because of the diffuse arrangement of the boxes, and because the photographs are largely free of horizon lines, the installation both denies a secure sense of perspective and allows the viewers the agency to drift, to form their own paths through the installation. The photographs themselves depict anonymous spaces, intersections between and mixtures of the built and the natural, but otherwise withhold or distort regional markers. You might consider these photographs as a culmination of the "Bulldozer Revolution"–if Southern, then only so because they describe a changed, almost faceless

place. I'd wager that many, if not most folks in the South, spend a great deal of their waking hours in areas that do little to announce their "Southerness". What possibilities of encounter are available to us, when the results of that encounter are not a regionally distinct and secure relationship to the landscape?

Alternative Visions

Britt Salvesen, in her foreword for *Reframing the New Topographics*, says that the crew of photographers included in the 1975 show were responding to the f64/Sierra Club's vision of "nature." They "assembled their photographs for inwardly directed motives, to offer a low key alternative to the grandiose visions of their immediate photographic predecessors: Ansel Adams and Minor White." (XXIII)

While it's difficult to talk about the New Topographics as a monolith, generally speaking, the group shared a deadpan aesthetic and focused on points of intersection between the built and the natural landscape, whereas Ansel Adams and Co. were concerned with showing nature in its untouched state. I appreciate the counter-argument poised by the show, but it does little to dispose of the "nature as purity" conception. Instead, it tells the same story, but we are too late to save it.

Where exactly does the "man-altered landscape" begin? If you consider climate change or invasive species, for example, it becomes difficult to point out exactly what part of nature hasn't been "altered," intentions aside. That said, there are a series of approaches common to the group that I employ in this series. First, the New Topographics were focused on unspectacular, everyday features in the landscape. The second, as I mentioned above, was the group's deadpan affect. The final method,

while not common to all of the New Topographics, might be the most conceptually useful to my work. In the photobook *The Pond* by John Gossage, Gossage moves the viewers through a landscape that is both accessible and anonymous, and though the viewer's experience of the journey is straightforward, they aren't shown features that determinately "place" the landscape in a specific region. The connective tissue between the photographs, especially in the opening sequence, is the repeated figure of a path receding into the distance. The spatial gap between each photograph is seemingly slight, and the subjects described are banal: trees, scrub brush, detritus, concrete. It seems plausible that all of these photographs were taken in a single afternoon, especially because the book's title refers to one site. This attachment to location is complicated by what we know about the realities of the book's creation: although everything seems to fit together, Gossage freely admits that the photographs were made in a variety of locations. In a public interview with Toby Jurovics, Gossage says that "three [photographs] were made in Berlin, one was made in Long Island," and the rest made in Maryland. Gossage says it plainly, "it's the world in between the covers that matters." But this is larger than Gossage merely stating a preference for his personal practice, and for the continuity of *The Pond*, he also points out that at least one of the photographs in Walker Evans' *American Pictures* was made in Cuba. In short, not only is Gossage's pond a fictitious place, the lineage of documentary photography contains similar instances. The narrative momentum of a seemingly regional body of work can persuade an audience to swallow photographs that were sourced from another region altogether. But it would be shallow to read Gossage's work as one long gotcha, in the sequence of *The Pond,* another sense of the landscape arises, one not fixed to the regionally distinct, but to particular relationships between objects, organisms, and the theater of light and weather that relates them to one another.

Ordinary Objects

Jane Bennett opens her book *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things* by describing a moment when she was struck by a sense of "energetic vitality" in a set of material objects. Elsewhere in the book, she speaks at length of the implications of the North American blackout, stem cell research, theories of humanity in relation to matter, so one might expect an anecdote of proportionate heft. The objects are as follows:

> "one large men's black plastic work glove
> one dense mat of oak pollen
> one unblemished dead rat
> one white plastic bottle cap
> one smooth stick of wood." (4)



(Above: photographs from *Mockingbird,* Silver Gelatin, 10"x10", 2024-25.)

For Bennett, the meagerness of the objects is part of the point, but so is the invisible and complex web of systems and interactions that brought the objects to be there in relationship with one another: “when the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, is was in part because of the contingent tableau they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, and me.” (5) The final word is crucial here, it is not only the objects themselves but crucially, the viewer’s encounter that animates things: “at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as *presence*: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire.” (5) (emphasis mine)

The importance of the objects, for Bennett and myself, is linked to their everydayness, their availability: the fifteen steps between a car and a gas station could, given the right conditions of mind, weather, result in a moment of epiphany (here used in the secular sense: “an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking.”

In relation to my work, it’s tempting to come down on one side of the argument or another, to suggest whether this work should be read as Southern or not, and when considering this, arguments for and against crowd up among each other. Yes, the contents of the photographs don’t shore up a historial vision of a specific region; yes, this exact anonymity could be read as the result of a regional fear realized; yes, these photographs are the result of a regional emplacement that suggests intimate, lived knowledge; no, there is nothing specifically pre-industrial or rural, or even regional about them; yes, this work prizes the fragmentary, which is to say that it dips towards the romantic. The simultaneousness and the contradiction point to a facet of the genre. The South is a plastic idea, so much so that it can be, depending on who’s wielding it, internally contradictory. That in mind, many

subjects could simultaneously be considered within and outside of its domain, depending on who was making the call. But this is not to eliminate it as an idea, or to say that a corner of landscape must be mimetic to the visual histories attached to it to be worthy of contemplation; this is to say that even where the South, or any region for that matter, does not “resemble itself”, its landscape is filled with opportunity for reflection, for enchantment, and for action.

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