AMERICAN HISTORIES

by

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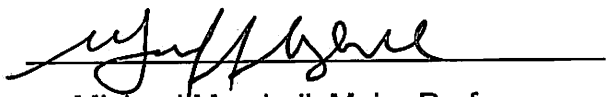

Michael Marshall, Major Professor

4.29.09

Date

The historical periods I like to learn about aren't so much costume dramas as slasher flicks.

- Sarah Vowell, *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*

It was the winter of 2004 and I was living in a small, musty apartment in the middle of Bumfuck, Maine. I had packed my bags after graduation and driven up to the farthest reach of the country to live in isolation and make photographs. I had no friends, no family and no job. This was my romantic fantasy, my Jack London experience - to live in an unfamiliar place with no obligations, distractions or concerns but to explore that which surrounded me. My days were filled with photographic excursions and research of the surrounding areas but just as often the weather would force me to stay trapped in my shitty apartment for what seemed like days on end. As I rifled through my DVD collection and tried to tune out the incessant humming of the dial-up modem, I realized that even my fantasies included those articles of contemporary life from which I was trying to escape.

Really, who was I trying to fool? I couldn't live without these things, without movies or television, Internet porn or a telephone. Why would I want to? These things kept me safe, connected and perpetually in a warmer, funnier and more interesting place. Whatever kind of regressive experience I was looking for in Maine - a communion with nature or some conversation with myself - would have to be shared with those other people in the room: Jerry Seinfeld, Dr. Peter Venkman, Clarice Starling, Maximus Decimus Meridius. So I began to think about making photographs that acknowledged these voices and their impact on my perception of the world.

I was of course familiar with a number of artists who had already been working under the influence of cinema and its special relationship to photography. People like Gregory Crewdson, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca diCorcia formed the core of this group of 20th century artists who sought to imbue the singular image of photography with narrative content and cinematic form. Their range of approaches and styles varied but the consistent thread of a staged tableau was not something that I was terribly interested in pursuing. At the time I was working consistently within a documentary landscape tradition and felt that this arena was where my talent and ambition lay most firmly. However, I had been finding it difficult to rely consistently on the serendipity and autonomy of the landscape as I found it. I wanted to take more ownership, more control over the content and the intention behind my photographs. I was seeking a way to combine the influences of popular culture, narrative and landscape into one strategy that felt not only uniquely personal, but indicative of my generation's experience.

In order to accomplish this I felt I could no longer drive haphazardly around the country with only the hopes of discovery. I needed to develop a more conceptual approach to my work and think more clearly about what it was I wanted to contribute to the history of photography and possibly to the art world at large. I looked at photographers working within the confines of landscape photography who demonstrated this approach and I quickly found models in artists like Richard Misrach and Joel Sternfeld.

In Misrach I saw the astounding presence and power of a finely crafted and fantastically beautiful image. To seduce the viewer, indeed to engage the viewer, with what otherwise might be considered aversive content, through a deceptively engaging visual delight, was an approach that really resonated with me. In his epic series, *Desert Cantos*, I found both the poetry and exploration of near limitless possibilities in a very

simple and grand subject coupled with social, environmental and political underpinnings. His ambitious scope combined with prolific output and work ethic set the standard in my mind for what a single body of work could encompass. While carefully balancing aspects of attraction and repulsion, Misrach managed never to lose sight of the identity and consistency of his own artistic voice.

Despite criticisms of "aestheticizing horror," Misrach has continued to push the aesthetics of his craft arguing that, "beauty, irony, humor are all means to communicate and explore complex political, social and psychological ideas." To me this approach seemed a logical one, after all, this is what much photography has attempted to do throughout its history. It has sought to aestheticize and elevate aspects of existence that most people overlook or avoid - the criminal, the ugly, the marginal, the unremarkable. From Weegee to Arbus, Brady to Witkin, and Goldin to Serrano - this territory has been investigated heavily since the advent of the photographic image; however, it has been visited less frequently by landscape photographers.

In Sternfeld I found a very different approach, particularly in his series *On This Site*. This book was one of many that accompanied me to Maine and more than others, seemed to live perpetually on my sofa rather than tucked away on the bookshelf. In this sober collection of photographs, Sternfeld addresses the landscape that has been marked by violence. Taking a stance that is far more deadpan than romantic, Sternfeld quietly and casually illuminates the presence of violence within every corner of the country. The places that remain are often unremarkable in many respects, but speak to the prevalence of the problem and the ways in which it remains hidden in plain sight of our everyday lives, and perhaps more directly, hidden in the photographs. What was most compelling to me about the series was the reliance on text and its ability to change the perception of the accompanying image and its depicted place. By extension, the series was able to speak directly to the problematic nature of representation within

photography. Sternfeld refers to this as the "question of knowability," something that is linked specifically to photography because of its uniquely indexical relationship to, and reliance on, a depicted subject. He states, "Experience has taught me again and again that you can never know what lies beneath a surface or behind a façade. Our sense of place, our understanding of photographs of the landscape is inevitably limited and fraught with misreading." In many ways, this statement seems opposed to the conventional understanding of photography and its application throughout history. As a culture, we have often looked to photography to show us that which we cannot see - the pyramids in Egypt, Earth from outer space, a deceased relative, a fetus inside a mother's womb. We have also viewed the photograph as a piece of evidence, a fact. Whether it shows us a scene from Gettysburg in 1865 or a white Bronco barreling down the Southern California freeway, the camera doesn't lie, so we are told. But ten years after *On This Site* was made, I found myself immersed in a mainstream culture where a new reception of photography was quickly developing.

Recent advances in digital technology have affected our perceptions about conventional photography as well as mass media, bringing about a renewed discussion of a photographic image's relationship to truth. Where once (perhaps) there was a distinction between a crime scene photograph, a home video and a Hollywood film, today's culture is grappling with those distinctions. Movies show us fantastical tidal waves, 75 year-old babies, living dinosaurs and a retarded ping-pong player talking to dead presidents. True this may have always been the case in Hollywood, but with today's increased precision and realism, these illusions are becoming difficult, if not impossible, to detect. Similarly, Photoshop has entered the mainstream consciousness and become so accessible that any 15-year-old in Omaha can cut and paste the face of Barack Obama onto a photo of Osama Bin Laden. 24-hour cable channels are both ignorantly and blatantly blurring any distinction between news and entertainment media,

while Hollywood films increasingly purport to be *based on a true story* or at the very least, *inspired by real events*. Simplified video technology coupled with global Internet and television transmission has spawned contemporary wonders like reality TV and *YouTube,* where average bimbos can rise to the status of Hollywood starlets and average Joes (plumbers) can become political zealots. In a world where we can watch the White House destroyed by aliens one day, and watch the Twin Towers fall the next, this question of knowability seemed to have a new relevance and complexity that engaged not just landscape photography, but image media in general.

I searched for a way to utilize or manipulate this issue in a manner that drew attention to itself and extended the discussion into a more contemporary engagement. I found a possible direction one night as I was watching Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*. The film follows two young characters as they spend one night walking around Vienna, never to see each other again. The end of the film revisits the now empty places where the characters had developed their relationship - an alleyway, a café, a park. But these places, filmed in the light of a new morning, take on a new significance because the audience has a knowledge and understanding of what has happened at those locations. These lingering associations struck me as being similar to what Sternfeld had accomplished through the use of text, with one significant difference - these were fictional characters participating in fictional events. And yet, the places were real, they were not the result of extensive Hollywood production or CGI, they were actual landscapes and city scenes that exist in Vienna. I came to associate those characters and those events, despite their obvious fabrication, with the actual places shown within the film. I thought this idea of a fictional narrative being linked to the landscape could be an extension of some of the issues that Sternfeld was raising. At the same time, I saw an opportunity to draw upon my interest in cinema, which would serve as a platform for all contemporary media. I began to research locations where popular American films

had been made and in the summer of 2004, I made the first in a series of cross-country trips to photograph a number of these locations.

I traveled to places like Devils Tower, Wyoming where Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was filmed or Dyersville, Iowa where Kevin Costner played baseball with ghosts. My intentions were not fully realized at the time, but I was interested in the association of a film or scene of a film with a particular landscape, one that was recognizable to a certain demographic. I initially concentrated on movies that were popular within my generation - teen comedies, sci-fi fantasies, horror films and the like. Inherent in these films were the places and events that captivated me as a child and formed the deepest impression on my understanding of what the rest of the country looked like and felt like. I was interested in my preconceptions about these places and what it would be like to experience them firsthand; how they may have changed over time and how the reality might differ from the film's representation. I took cues from Mark Klett's *Rephotographic Survey Project* and attempted to photograph the landscape in a manner that evoked the film's portrayal. Despite the strong influence that each film held over my ideas of what a particular place should look like, I stopped short of directly copying the framing and lighting conditions of the landscape as Klett had done. Instead I wanted to make my own picture, one that reflected both my current experience as well as the connotations imparted by the film.

When I first returned home and shared my photographs, I discovered that the associations I had with particular places were lost on most people outside of my generation. Many of the locations I had visited were connected to minor filmic events of a humorous or otherwise inconsequential nature and these images were ultimately not very effective in communicating the potentially powerful relationship between event and place or truth and fiction. The pictures that seemed to resonate with a larger audience were those that dealt with something more affecting than the kind of light-hearted 80's

culture to which I was initially drawn. One such picture was made on Alcatraz Island, based on the 1979 film *Escape from Alcatraz*. This picture marked an early turning point in the project. Up until that photograph I had only been concerned with fictional, film narratives, but *Escape from Alcatraz* was largely faithful to the true story of Frank Morris and his escape attempt in 1962. Given that the movie was filmed inside the original prison on the island where the events took place, I found myself dealing with the actual, historical event as much as I was dealing with a Hollywood film. I saw potential in this to complicate the distinction between truth and fiction in a way that emphasized photography's roles in both history and film. I researched more film locations where this correlation was present and made plans for another cross country trip. Because I saw my interest in this project as a response to a national condition and culture, it was important for me to encompass the entire country and to create a body of work that functioned as a survey of the American landscape.

Being on the road is an important part of how I experience the landscape and, in turn, how I make my photographs. There is a kind of meditation that takes place when I drive for hours and hours on end, a clarification of my thoughts, and it seems, my abilities as a photographer. Perhaps not surprisingly though, I'm also constantly watching movies on my portable DVD player as I tear down the road. Quite literally, there is this doubling of the landscape that takes place - one real landscape just outside my car, and one representational landscape inside my car. As I visited film sites, my bugged-up windshield begins to function a lot like a movie theatre screen. In a way, this is part of the contemporary phenomenon that I'm seeking to address and in relationship to landscape photography - this lack of distinction or separation between real, lived experience and the fictional, representational experience of the cinema.

I'm looking specifically for places where there is this overlap of truth and fiction that stems from a film's representation of a particular place. I became very interested in

places and events that were associated with American history and the ways in which those associations had become distorted or complicated by film. One such place was the infamous staircase in Chicago's Union Station. This location plays a key role Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables,* which deals with Eliot Ness and his attempts to bring down Al Capone during Prohibition. While certain elements of the film are accurate, the average viewer doesn't know enough about that era or specific history to determine which elements are being fictionalized and which ones hold true to the real events. Ultimately it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to make a clear distinction between fact and fiction. We are essentially an ignorant audience. With this in mind, it is understandable to believe that Ness and his men were involved in a shootout on these stairs and that a woman pushing her newborn child in a baby carriage was caught in the crossfire. In reality, this scene was actually based on Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *The Battleship Potemkin*, specifically a scene known as the Odessa Steps sequence. In the montage, based on an actual workers' uprising in the Ukraine in 1905, a baby carriage tumbles down a series of stairs amidst gunshots and massive panic. De Palma essentially copied this sequence into his film and in so doing, he absorbed a fictionalized element from one historical and cultural context and applied it to a new one. Because that scene from *The Untouchables* is so memorable, I wondered how many people associated those steps in Union Station with Eliot Ness and Al Capone.

I sought other sites within the American landscape that held similar associations related to cinema and history. Sites such as Dealey Plaza where JFK was killed and also where *JFK* was shot; a depression era bank in Pilot Point, Texas, where Bonnie and Clyde supposedly made one of their infamous heists, and the Last Resort Bar in Port Orange, Florida where Aileen Wuornos and Charlize Theron were both arrested. The work became more and more about the violence that our culture seems collectively fascinated by and the strong impact this has on our perception of place. I decided that

text would be most effective in communicating the entanglement of history and fantasy by detailing the events associated with each site in a manner that invoked reportage and the objective tone of historical analysis. I would make no effort to distinguish fact from fiction and, in that way, mirror much of Hollywood's practice. The resultant combination of text and image would be presented in a classical, documentary format that recalled an academic framework that was being increasingly marginalized by our technologically driven visual culture. My photographic approach was perhaps a classical one where the careful craft and seduction of the image rewarded a slow and engaging experience that would quietly reveal its strength. This is in stark contrast to the saturated, hyperbolic images employed in the fast paced, MTV media culture that we consume on a daily basis through television, film, advertisements and the Internet.

As I worked through this project over the next few years, I recognized my audience's reluctance to accept the legitimacy in any of the narratives once they learned that the stories and locations were culled entirely from cinema. In so doing, they might be less inclined to engage the complicated predicament posed by cinema's role in representing our history. In an effort to combat this problem and to further reinforce the problematic nature of photographic representation, I decided to take a step back towards Sternfeld and include events which figured prominently in our nation's history but which had no direct relationship to film. I traveled to places like Three Mile Island and Shanksville, Pennsylvania - places commonly associated with events of historical importance. I also began to visit the crime scenes from more notorious or scandalous events in recent history that have become ingrained in popular culture. Events related to the BTK serial killer, Susan Smith and John Wayne Bobbitt played an important role in drawing parallels between the fiction of the cinema and the strange truth of our reality. The inclusion of these non-filmic pictures helped to establish a certain legitimacy and

historical discourse in the series, one that the viewer would have to contend with when examining each individual picture and its accompanying narrative.

The final series, *American Histories*, combined elements of mythology, fiction and entertainment with notions of truth, historical record and the illusion of reality. Within this format, I was free to examine relationships between the reality of our history and the fantasies and fears that emerged from that same culture. I mixed dark humor with graphic, senseless violence and pop culture references to create a tone that I felt was emblematic of the current culture and climate. And yet my photographs of these now-empty sites concealed all of this content and in its place was a stillness and ignorant beauty to the landscape that was left behind. This presentation encourages the viewer to use their imagination in making a connection between place and event and perhaps question the importance of the landscape that exists all around them. Additionally, the combination of text and image allowed me to impart narrative content onto conventions of landscape photography in a way that highlighted the contemporary predicament between reality and representation, specifically as it applies to cinematic conventions.

American Histories has sustained my interests both intellectually and photographically for nearly five years now. Its combination of academic research and practical exploration has made it both challenging and rewarding in a way that few approaches have offered. It has given me the opportunity to conceptualize and to work with intention and purpose in a manner where I can respond to the shifting cultural climate and refer directly or indirectly to those artists, works and movements that have figured most heavily in my practice. The work has revealed to me my own interest in history and redefined my understanding of its definition. Perhaps most importantly, the project has increased my comprehension of photography and its wide-ranging roles within our history and culture.

On the morning of June 12, 1962, guards at Alcatraz Federal Prison discovered three men missing from their cells. Frank Morris, along with brothers John and Clarence Anglin, had made realistic dummy heads complete with human hair and placed them in their beds so they would not be missed during nighttime counts. The three men exited through vent holes located in the rear walls of their cells which they had enlarged and built false wall segments to conceal. A utility corridor led them to pipes which they climbed to the top of the cellblock and eventually gained access to the roof of the prison. They then climbed down a drainpipe on the northern end of the cellhouse and made their way down to the water. Using prison-issued raincoats, they crafted life vests and a pontoon-style raft to aid them in the long and dangerous swim to shore.

After an exhaustive search of the bay, letters and photographs in watertight wrappings were found along with oars and two life vests. No bodies were ever recovered and the three prisoners were never heard from again. The FBI kept the investigation open until 1980 and the three men are officially listed as missing and presumed drowned. To this day, officials deny there has ever been a successful attempt to escape the prison at Alcatraz.

Alcatraz Federal Prison, Alcatraz Island, San Francisco, California, 2004

During Prohibition, the city of Chicago was overrun by violence due to the illegal sale and distribution of alcohol. In 1930, special agent Eliot Ness of the Department of the Treasury was appointed to spearhead a joint campaign with the Chicago Police Department to deal with the growing problem. Finding corruption within the police force, Ness assembled a small team of men to work outside the law in order to bring down reputed mob boss Al Capone.

On these stairs at Union Station, Ness and an accomplice initiated a gunfight with several of Capone's men as they were exiting a train. Innocent bystanders were caught in the crossfire, including a woman trying to push her newborn child up the stairs in a baby carriage. Despite the danger, Ness and his partner managed to protect the baby while killing all five of Capone's men.

Union Station, Chicago, Illinois, 2005

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed during a parade through Dealey Plaza in the city of Dallas, Texas. Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested just hours later and charged with the assassination. Authorities suggested that Oswald acted alone, firing three shots from the sixth floor of the Texas Schoolbook Depository, which overlooked the parade route on Elm Street. Fifty-one eyewitnesses, who were present at the time of the shooting, reported hearing additional shots coming from behind this fence.

Dealey Plaza, Elm Street, Dallas, Texas, 2005

On Wednesday March 28, 1979, Reactor II of this nuclear power plant suffered a partial meltdown resulting in the most significant nuclear accident on American soil. No citizens were harmed in the accident and no illnesses or deaths have been attributed to the exposure of radioactive waste in the neighboring communities. The accident came at a crucial time of public opinion regarding the safety and efficiency of nuclear power followed by the disaster at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union in 1986. While much of the world continues its research and development of new sites, the production of new reactors has been halted dramatically in the United States.

Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station, Near Middleton, Pennsylvania, 2007

Bonnie Parker first saw Clyde Barrow as he was attempting to steal her mother's car in 1930. That same day, Bonnie watched as Clyde robbed a general store and the two drove off together. The duo soon teamed up with Clyde's brother Buck and a number of other accomplices to form the Barrow Gang. Over the next four years, the gang robbed numerous establishments in Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Iowa, including this bank.

In 1934, Bonnie and Clyde were ambushed by Louisiana police officers who were tipped off by an accomplice's father. Without warning or any attempt to make an arrest, four police officers fired approximately 130 rounds into the fugitives' car, killing both instantly. Bonnie Parker was 23 years old, Clyde Barrow was 25.

Farmers and Merchants Bank Building, Pilot Point, Texas, 2007

In 1998, a pickup basketball game on these courts turned into a competition between a group of neo-Nazis and African Americans. Derek Vinyard, a young skinhead leader, stepped into the game and led his team to victory, taunting his opponents with a swastika tattoo on his chest. The black men were told to leave and never come back.

Later that night, a number of black players attempted to steal Vinyard's truck outside his home. Vinyard drew his pistol, shooting and killing one man while injuring a second. Wounded and bleeding, the young man tried to crawl away but Vinyard forced him to open his mouth onto a concrete curb where he kicked in the back of his head, killing him instantly. Derek Vinyard was sentenced to just three years in prison for voluntary manslaughter.

Venice Beach, California, 2008

On June 17, 1972, five men were arrested inside the offices of the Democratic National Committee on the sixth floor of the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. The burglary aroused suspicion and media attention because of the unusual circumstances of the crime. The men were found with $2,300 in sequential hundred-dollar bills, walkie-talkies, lock picks, door-jimmys, a police scanner, two cameras along with 40 rolls of unused film and sophisticated recording devices. One of the men was a former CIA agent and current security guard for President Nixon's Committee to Re-elect the President. Notebooks found on two of the men contained a phone number followed by the inscription 'W House'.

Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein researched the case and wrote coverage of the story over a period of two years eventually uncovering evidence that implicated members of the Nixon administration. Woodward's secret source for much of the information was a highly placed official within the Executive Branch, code name Deep Throat. Only Woodward knew of the man's identity and the two would meet in this parking garage to relay information.

Century Plaza Towers, 2040 Avenue of the Stars, Century City, California, 2008

On the night of June 23, 1993, John Wayne Bobbitt came home late after a night of drinking. John's wife Lorena was awoken by his attempts to initiate sexual intercourse, but she complained about John's unwillingness to allow her to orgasm and refused his advances. Falling in and out of consciousness, John then allegedly forced her to have sex. Afterwards, John passed out on the bed while Lorena went to the kitchen to get a drink of water. She noticed a large kitchen knife on the counter and with thoughts of previous abuses in her head, Lorena grabbed the knife and proceeded to the bedroom where she violently cut off more than half of John's penis.

Lorena immediately drove off with John's penis, which she threw out of her car window into this grassy area less than a mile from their home. She later gathered herself and called 911, informing authorities of the situation and the location of the penis. John, who was severely injured and bleeding, was helped by a friend to a nearby hospital. Teams of police and fire department personnel were dispatched to the scene to recover the penis and after a nine-hour surgery, John's penis was successfully reattached.

Lorena Bobbitt was tried for malicious wounding in 1994 but was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. After his surgery, John Wayne Bobbitt made a brief living as a porn star, appearing in such films as *Frankenpenis* and *John Wayne Bobbitt - Uncut*.

Maplewood Drive and Old Centreville Rd, Manassas, Virginia, 2008