

Going Nowhere

By

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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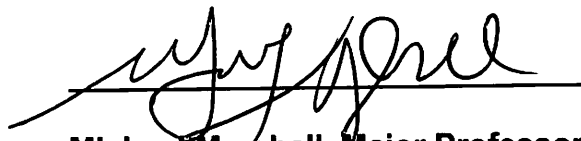
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Approved:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Marshall", is written over a horizontal line.

Michael Marshall, Major Professor

4.28.11

Date

Introduction

Throughout my life I have had an interest in people, the stories they tell, and the places they reside. This has led to my personal interest in my place in this world and the people I have met along the way.

These inquiries began through my upbringing. I was very shy as a child and I spent a lot of time playing outside collecting critters and tending to my rapidly reproducing rabbit collection. Growing up marked many changes in my life. My parent's divorce, my mothers remarriage, adopting two Asian sisters, and moving around the east coast made me contemplate place and how I existed there. I became interested in photography in high school and received my first camera for Christmas. I had no idea how to use it so I learned from the manual and began shooting my friends and family vacations.

My childhood was not extraordinary, sad or hard by any means. To be honest it was pretty normal but with a steady change in scenery from moving quite a bit. The combination of all of these experiences lead me to an art form that is about capturing quick moments and making them tangible. Every photograph has a story, which is either shown or not shown. There is the story of making the photograph and then there is the story that it tells to the viewer. As Susan Sontag wrote in her book *On Photography*, "A photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture taking is an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights- to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on." (Sontag, 11)

The reasons I started making photographs were to collect images of the world around myself and show other people what I have seen. I still feel this way about my work although now it is not so much about my sisters playing dress up or the trip to the Bahamas but about a series of quiet moments captured more fluidly and more frequently. My camera is now with me on most walks, trips, outings, or in my house and I use it to photograph anything I am drawn to. In a strange way I am still that shy girl playing outside catching critters. Except now, instead of bugs and turtles they are brief delicate moments I collect through the use of a camera.

Previous Work

I started my research by photographing the people around me, people I know and am well acquainted with. I used the philosophy “shoot what you know” and began asking my friends to sit for photographs. I approached each photograph differently. Most of them are shot indoors using available light. Each person is either in his or her personal space or in a space I have chosen for the photograph. The light was a very important part of this project and is used dramatically in each image. Usually it is coming through a window or a doorway and is so intense that it eats away at the objects around it. I was greatly influenced by Edward Hopper’s paintings at this time and looked

to them regularly for his use of light and subject matter. He seemed to be a wanderer in his own city, walking around for hours and painting scenes that he happened upon.

Throughout my portrait series I looked for scenes that would lead the viewer into the photograph through context clues about the individuals. The photograph *James* is one of the more successful of the series. In this photograph the viewer is confronted with a bright blue room littered with his band posters and trinkets. The photograph was shot using a 4x5 camera with a wide-angle lens so that one can really take in the fullness of the room. James is sitting on his couch with his head leaning back into the window frame. The light is coming through the window so intensely that he almost looks like he is beheaded. This photograph really spoke to me at this point, and throughout the project I tried to make more images as powerful as it was. I felt that this image did everything to explain who he is as a person as well as a character in a photograph.

Another photograph that met my qualifications was the photograph of *Ryan*. This photograph was shot in his “man room” with him reclining in his papa san. His expression is wistful and his hand is delicately hanging off the edge of the chair. The items around the room are reminiscent of a teenage boy and all of which he has collected and effortlessly placed on bookshelves and cabinets. At this point, I realized that the series was beginning to really describe the people around me, the artistic types, and people holding on to their past with no hurry to grow up.

This photographic series has an innocent sensibility to it even though the people range in age from mid twenties to late thirties. I wanted to show the personalities of my generation but mostly of the people close to me who I have come to know well. Each person is shown in an almost reclining position to portray a sense of apathy, something

I have come to experience often. I was not trying to show these as apathetic people necessarily, but rather comfort in one's own environment. By using light, I created another layer of mystery, maybe even transcendence, to the work. This project opened up many questions for me about why I was drawn to make these portraits and I feel that even though these photographs are of my friends and acquaintances the project ended up being much more about my space in the world and the people I surround myself with. This project loosely became a self-portrait through other people. It became not so much about their apathy or longing or confidence but more about mine.

I started to read more about Paul Klee and found a quote of his: "A human being can only be completely free through swimming or flying." This led me to experiment more with different ways of working so that I could make the work even more personal and more fluid. I began shooting people on trampolines and swimming in rivers. I quickly realized that I needed to be able to shoot more images and make them more frequently so, after these extremely fun experiments I radically changed the way I was making work.

I began taking my camera with me everywhere to shoot anything that I saw. My influences also changed during this time. I began looking at artists who shot more randomly and made more narrative type work. Nan Goldin was one of these influences. I had always been interested in her work but now I became interested in how she made her work. Although her approach and outcome is much different I liked the idea of capturing a personal social narrative. As Elisabeth Sussman writes, "Goldin's world was one of self-definition in a constructed, self-created space, recorded by constant picture taking."(Sussman, 27) This type of working method really interested me because it was

something I had never done before. I had made photographs for a long time that were staged and I wanted to make work based more on intuition and, like Goldin I wanted to capture my life and the things and people I encounter on a daily basis.

Another big influence for me is Lee Friedlander. I discovered his work as a freshman in college and have always been drawn to his mysteriously beautiful and intriguing photographs. I enjoy looking through his books and realizing the extent of his work and everything that he has photographed. It seemed to me that he never felt anything was unimportant and everything was interesting. As Peter Galassi writes in *You Have to Change to Stay the Same*, Friedlander “was approaching life not exactly as a fiction but as a perpetually open field of possibility. The chameleon tool of photography was perfect for providing concrete proof of the elusiveness of experience.” (Galassi, 42) This perfectly sums up all the reasons why I am constantly revisiting his work. He was shooting his life and himself. He was showing his human experience to the viewer without hesitation. I find the work bold and unapologetic. Some of his photographs hit you like a ton of bricks while others slowly reveal themselves to you and finally you see what he saw in that moment.

So, I took to the streets and photographed anything I found on walks, bike rides or car trips. I brought my camera along with me to social gatherings and shot the things and people I found. This opened up a whole new way of making photographs and I found that I was shooting more than I ever had before. Instead of one take I got ten. I would also shoot at night using a camera mounted flash. This was an exciting period in my research and something I needed to pursue. Making the work felt open and had endless possibilities. I decided that this work was going to be shown through a loose

narrative or series where each photograph related to the next. I shot for about a month and then started to slowly edit the images. I felt this step was even more important than making the pictures themselves because there is such a fine line between having too few or too many or editing out ones that would fit perfectly within the series. This process became exciting yet tedious and one that required lots of planning. These series became visual short stories that told where I was at the time. While their sequential relations were loosely based on color, I wanted there to be openness to them so that they did not seem too obvious or heavy handed in the narrative sense. This seemed to be where the viewer could step in and enjoy it for themselves. I wanted to guide the viewer through the images but in the most hands-off way possible.

Thesis Work

The title of the series “Going Nowhere” has a lot to do with the way I am making the work. Most of the time I am out walking without a destination in mind and making these pictures essentially going nowhere. There is also a comfort in that phrase that seems lighthearted yet somber. It reminds me of a beautiful Saturday afternoon where one can ease into the day and not have a specific plan. I think that is where it relates to me the most, not having a plan. The less scripted the work, the more personal it becomes.

Throughout this body of work my interest manifested itself in capturing little moments that one might just pass-by. Something that I take for granted like the way the light falls on a curtain in the middle of a cold day in February, or a slight look given to me by a passerby in the night. I wanted these temporal moments to be shown within moments that are more obvious, like a house hiding under a tent or a rose delicately hanging by the front door. These images are essentially my self-portrait throughout the everyday. They are about the people I am around the places I come into contact with. The light also plays a big roll in this body of work and it adds to the temporal nature and enhances the mood of the photographs.

This work is about my life and my feelings about life in general. It has a lot to do with capturing moments where I felt good or was having a great time with people who are close to me, but it also is about slowing down, looking around and noticing the world. Some images are more somber and taken during walks where I was alone contemplating the physical place I am in and also the more metaphorical one. I can look through the images on the wall and recall my state at the time each photograph was taken and I wanted these moods to seep out of the photographs. I also wanted to show the honesty of the everyday and my intuition in picture making. Some of the photographs are more lighthearted while others appear heavier in subject matter. This is how it goes the ebb and flow of the everyday.

For the thesis show I took all of the pictures I had made in the past year and edited them down into a series that has a sense of comfort or quietness throughout the photographs but is still open enough for the viewer to navigate himself or herself through. The span of when the images were made was unimportant and I felt that they

should read like all of them were made yesterday. My intention was for the images to be read as short sentences. Balancing the larger images with the smaller ones also added a sense of contrast to the series so that the viewer might take in the smaller ones all at once then rest on the larger ones.

The images are about my experiences in the world but they are also broad enough for a viewer to put him or herself into the work. The work spanned from portraits to anything from landscapes to the insides of people's homes. I wanted the photographs to seem comfortable and inviting, easy to look at but with an edge to them. I wanted there to be concrete pictures next to more ethereal ones so that the narrative is light and able to be read in different ways.

My practice is now open ended enough so that I can keep making new work that will fit within this series. I enjoy shooting first and editing later because I feel there is a greater intimacy with the work. I am excited by the idea that my photographs are totally interchangeable within the series, and with each edit I could essentially make a new experience for my viewer.

Conclusion

Photography is a way for me to communicate with the world without saying a word and I have always been drawn to the simplicity in this dialogue. I want my work to be viewed with calmness and an understanding that these are about a life narrated through images. I do not intend these to be pompous or intimidating photographs, they are delicate and straightforward by design. They are about the artist but also about the world that she lives in; the world we live in together. They are thoughtful moments that I hope the viewer can not only appreciate but also relate to and connect with on many levels.

References

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Levin, Gail. *Edward Hopper the Art and the Artist*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc: New York, 1980.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Picador: New York, 11

Sussman, Elisabeth. "In/Of Her Time: Nan Goldin's Photographs." *I'll Be Your Mirror*. Whitney Museum of American Art: New York, 1996. 26-27.

Previous Work



James, Chromogenic Print, 2008



Ryan, Chromogenic Print, 2008

Previous Work



Adam , Chromogenic Print, 2008



Lisa, Chromogenic Print, 2009

Previous Work



Emily, Chromogenic Print, 2009



Stairs, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Jon Lynn, Archival Pigment Print, 2010

Previous Work



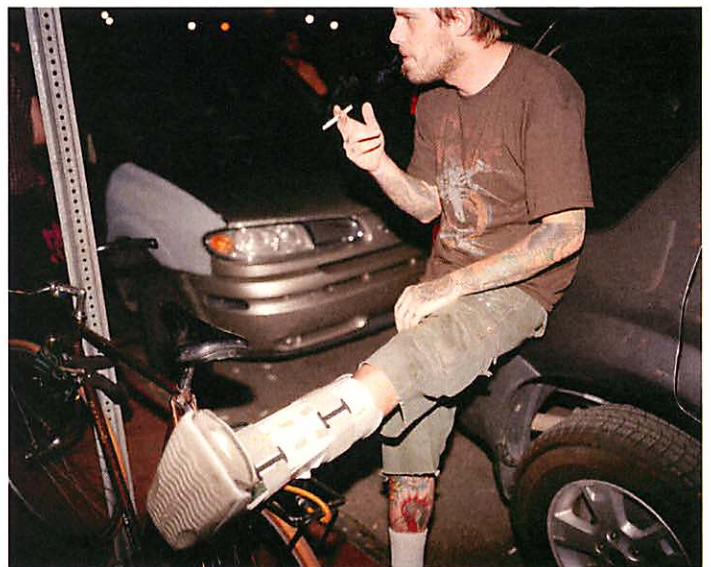
Deville, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Jen, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



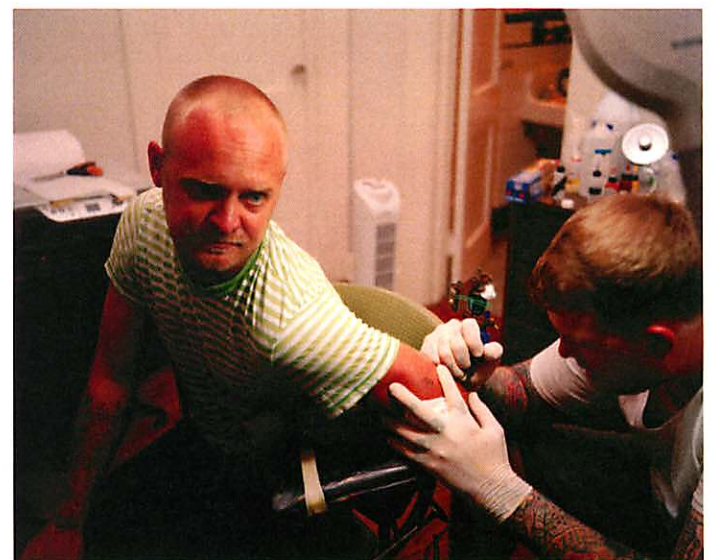
Rocks, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Broke Leg, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Kitty, Archival Pigment Print, 2011

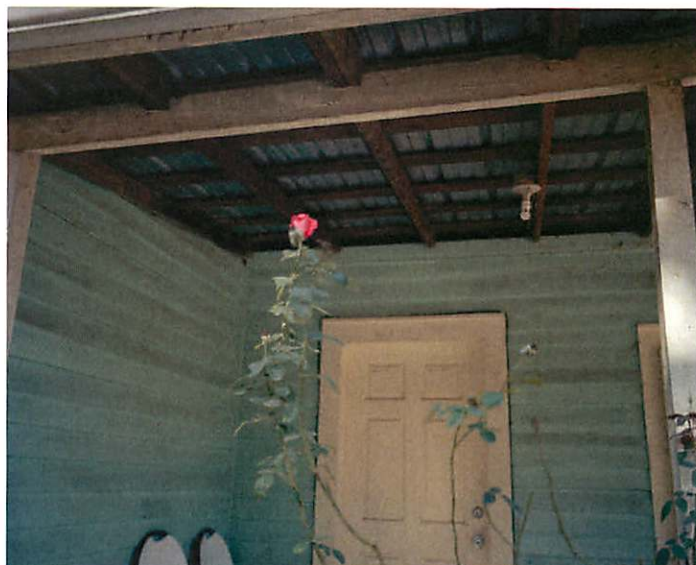


Jere, Archival Pigment Print, 2010

Thesis Work



Andrew, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Rose, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Curtain, Archival Pigment Print, 2011



House, Archival Pigment Print, 2010



Shower, Archival Pigment Print, 2011



Tybee, Archival Pigment Print, 2010