

All's Fair

by

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INTRODUCTION

When I was born, I was given a gift. Not a silver-plated rattle, stuffed animal, or even a trust fund; instead, the irreplaceable prize I was awarded was a family steeped in drama. From my Great Grand Father, who was the richest man in Spartanburg, South Carolina, but fled the state with his mill-worker mistress, to my Moravian relatives, who built missionary settlements in Jamaica, the Allen-Law-Noel clan was bequeathed a Faulkneresque history.

On all sides, my family has won big and lost bigger. Of all the achievers, losers, artists, entrepreneurs and preachers, my Great Aunt Connie and Uncle Frank and the fantastic home they built in Griffin, Georgia, had the greatest direct impact on my life and work.

Great Uncle Frank's wealth (he invented a pneumatic closing device used in elevators) and the fabulous creatures he collected during big game hunting expeditions to Africa and beyond unlocked my imagination.

The "bug" room was especially memorable. It was so named, because one of its long walls was covered with row after row of narrow mahogany drawers holding Uncle Frank's butterfly collection, which numbered in the thousands. The opposite wall was painted with beautiful murals of the jungles where Uncle Frank captured the butterflies. A Polar Bear rug covered a portion of the floor. My siblings, cousins, and I often posed for photographs sitting on its stuffed head. An 18-foot long Anaconda skin and a set of poison blow darts were kept in a closet behind the bar.

But the most fantastical treasure of all was a shrunken head from Africa that we called Susie. Susie had a tiny brown, wizened face and long black hair extending two feet from her head. My father thinks she was a monkey, but in case she really had been the wife of a tribal chieftain, she was kept locked in a drawer, away from the prying and fearful eyes of children.

Years later, after we lost the house and most of its contents, my mother took Susie (Mom had long believed that Susie was satanic) and left her at a construction site in Atlanta late one night. Miraculously, the newspaper made no mention of Susie, so I never knew what became of her.

Great things can be lost to simple mistakes, and that is what happened to my wonderful house of treasures. Great Aunt Connie died and left equal shares of the house to my father and his sister. Around the same time, his sister forgot to mail in her family's insurance policy, and a few weeks later her husband was diagnosed with cancer. The insurance check was still sitting on the desk.

To fund his treatment, everything was sold quickly at auction. Being only 12 at the time, I was unable to salvage more than a few dresses and perfume bottles. The Polar Bear and Anaconda skin were sold. Everything, every magic object went to the auction, except the poison blow darts, which Dad still has, and unlucky Susie, who met her match in my mother.

Ever since this formative loss, I have been trying to crawl backwards into childhood to collect my lost treasures. Photography has been my primary mode of transportation.

INFLUENCES

I often feel the tug of the ever-present fact: life comes to an end. Like innumerable photographers before me, I photograph, in part, for the most obvious of reasons – to preserve little pieces of life that can be printed out on paper and seen again. The past is both a treasure and a burden. William Faulkner famously wrote in his novel, *Requiem for a Nunn*, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

Though I rarely photograph my relatives, family history colors my subject choice. I am always drawn to photographing the exception in the social landscape, rather than the rule. Sometimes the act of photographing is a form of comfort seeking. Photographing a problem is a way of confronting it, of taking action and managing it. There is power in being a participant in the world, of lassoing one of its moving pieces, even though I know time cannot be halted.

Sometimes while photographing, I feel as if I am taking notes or editing the world down into manageable portions. In the field, I collect images and experience, but I am often unsure, at the moment of creation, if these pictures will find a home in a body of work. Out of this wandering I begin to see subjects emerge that I am later able to address directly. I have been drawn to this approach, because of my admiration for the work of Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand, among others, who use the same process.

Friedlander's prolific work provides many examples: his self-portraits and depictions of fences, monuments, graffiti and televisions leap to mind. Several of these topics evolved into single topic books. Gary Winogrand's work in zoos, stockyards, airports and at press conferences was also eventually published in book form.

Friedlander and Winogrand heavily influenced my series *Love and Rockets*. For many years, in between jobs, editorial assignments or semesters, I roamed the country with a camera, sometimes with no agenda. Increasingly in the last year, I have focused on finding symbols of love and violence and photographing the interaction of these symbols within the social landscape.

To use the same working process as two of the great masters of the medium is not unusual. What has shaped my work even more is the idea of the photographer as a stranger, at once part of the world, but also separate from it. Curator Rod Slemmons describes Friedlander's method in his essay, *A Precise Search for the Elusive*, which was published in the monograph, *Lee Friedlander, Like A One-Eyed Cat, Photographs 1956 - 1987*, "...he continues to build on his initial feelings and discoveries made in the street, where he was the confident stranger juggling observation and participation, diffidence and intrusion. He acquired subsequent generations of admirers – not all of them artist-photographers, as was initially the case – who have followed his search for the elusive visual metaphors that may at first seem confusing and intentionally difficult but that in fact clarify his and our position in the social landscape."

Here I digress somewhat from Friedlander, because I am more interested in questions that could perhaps be answered literally in the photograph, but also beg for a deeper mystery. "Why" is the question that most interests me and is at the same time the most unanswerable. Though often tempted, I don't seek a

literal answer – I am more interested in the possibilities. A stranger may think he or she knows the passersby, but really doesn't. As a stranger, I am able to see things more clearly than the locals because my eyes are fresh. Conversely, my vision may have no basis in fact, because I am not 'in the know,' as a local would be.

Filmmaker Stanley Kubrick warned against too much literalness. "How could we possibly appreciate the Mona Lisa if Leonardo [Da Vinci] had written at the bottom of the canvas, 'The lady is smiling because she is hiding a secret from her lover'? This would shackle the viewer to reality, and I don't want this to happen to 2001 [*A Space Odyssey*, his 1968 film]."

All over America I see graffiti, signs and objects that cry out for explanation. What is it the motivation that drives a member of a South Georgia Rotary Club to buy a decommissioned Titan Missile from the federal government and haul it several thousand miles from its home in Tucson, Arizona, and plant it by the interstate in his small town? If I knew the answer, I would not need to wonder.

Perhaps it is a need to borrow strength from a powerful object. Again and again, I see military hardware fronting offices, parks and playgrounds. My photograph of this subject, *Rotary Club Rocket, 2008* takes this idea further, as I have included the crass consumer culture that has grown up around this Titan Missile. The power of commerce run amuck has surpassed even the strength of a nuclear missile.

Ironically, these objects of power almost always lose their strength when placed in mundane settings, though they gain a sense of forlorn mystery. Placing an object out of context confuses its meaning, unmoors it from its power sources. It is this unmooring that adds new meaning.

In an essay titled, *The Plot Thickens Everything, Photography and the Need for Narrative*, David Travis states that the true value of narrative is not plot oriented story telling. "What narrative does better than any other medium of expression is to directly address the question of what we think we know – not about being particles of the matter-of-fact world or elements of a logical puzzle, but rather about being human." Travis believes Winogrand's work and his refusal to describe specific pictures to an audience reinforce these ideas about narrative, "...the Winogrand stories do not try to form themselves into completed stories. His photographs are somewhere in between the matter-of-fact world and the narrative world. Sometimes they

are mere sight gags: at other times they are extraordinary scenes that the most gifted film director could hardly have imagined on his own. The world for Winogrand was too chaotic to comprehend fully, but too rich to reinvent as small, dumb staged events.”

Travis continues, “Although to some he seemed evasive, he felt it was not his job to hold the viewer’s hand or to supply a kind of existential story problem and then shortcut to a neat, calculated answer. He wanted his photographs to have no ‘answers’ and leave their characters and events hanging in them forever.”

Hungarian-born photographer Sylvia Plachy has had the most personal impact on my picture making. A mentor introduced me to Plachy’s work while I was still an undergraduate at Duke in the late 1980s, and I have continued to follow her career. We had a two-person exhibition together at the now defunct Backdrop Gallery in Atlanta in 1997. Plachy asked the gallery director if she could stay at my home because there was always more to photograph in a home than in a hotel. Thus, I am lucky enough to have my dogs immortalized by Plachy. During this time, I was able to observe Plachy’s openness to life, as an artist and as a human being. She was the quintessential bossy mother figure – given unasked for advice with absolute certainty.

More than Friedlander and Winogrand, Plachy is a true stranger. At the age of 13, she was forced to flee Hungary during the Soviet occupation of 1956. Fearing discovery, her parents gave her only one day’s notice before they fled over the border to Austria in a horse drawn cart covered in corn. Plachy has said she became a photographer as a result of her family’s abrupt and silent departure. On the single day she had to say wordless goodbyes, Plachy went around Budapest mentally trying to memorize the city and the friends she was losing.

Plachy writes in the introduction to her first book, *The Unguided Tour*, “Which is worse the sadness of a loss or the emptiness of not remembering? Losses and gains, like waves, toss you until a big one comes along with the power to stun, to leave you speechless and driven to find a voice that will release the pain.”

What appeals to me most about Plachy’s work is how personal and lyrical it seems, even though she is a photojournalist. She brings her history along to assignments, which are almost always generated by editors.

Mark Singer, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, says, "In Sylvia's case she approaches her subjects with a peculiar mixture of doggedness and dreaminess, calculation combined with faith in the unforeseen." Plachy said in a 2006 interview in *Creative Loafing* that her images "have to do with what memory looks like."

EARLY WORK

In my previous projects, I explored how people try to maintain their individuality in an increasingly homogeneous world by altering their environments in major and minor ways. As a natural outgrowth of this idea, I decided to create a portrait series, called *Deliver Me*, on an unappealing group of people – smokers – who out of addiction or defiance won't join most of society in rejecting this widely reviled habit.

In an interesting twist, the habit of smoking has turned smokers into strangers in their own communities. Physically, they must leave the indoors, or stay 25 feet away from the entrances to buildings, or leave the premises entirely. Emotionally, there is sometimes great animosity towards smokers for either endangering others through second hand smoke or adding to the health care costs of society at large. Arguments separate people, and smokers are in an argument with the world. In a sense their exile is voluntary, but this habit keeps them at arms length from family and society.

I was gratified that this work found success in the larger photographic community. Selections from *Deliver Me* were featured in the Photography Now 2007 issue of *Photography Quarterly*, which is published by The Center for Photography at Woodstock. One of the images, *Whitney, 2006*, was awarded second place in the *Photo Review's* annual contest issue in 2007 out of over four thousand other entries.

Images from the work have also been exhibited at The Spruill Center in Atlanta, The Houston Center for Photography, The Griffin Museum of Photography outside of Boston, Gallery 1401 at the

University of the Arts, in Philadelphia, and at The Southeastern Photography Triennial Exhibition, organized by the Gregg Museum of Art and Design in Raleigh, NC.

Concurrent to *Deliver Me*, I photographed a small series called *The Space Between*, which chronicled the aftermath of my divorce, when the marital home was divided and later sold. I was interested in how a house acts as a repository for not only belongings, but for emotions and feelings that are tied to a place. Though my own home lacked the vivid eccentricity of Great Aunt Connie's home, this experience was a parallel to the loss of my childhood home.

After taking a Medieval art history course, I became interested in the idea behind the Twelfth Century scholar Peter Abelard's book, *Sic et Non*, in which he tries to explain the contradictions in the writings of the early church fathers. Sic et Non means that something can be so and not so at the same time. Playing on this idea, I began to photograph situations that seemed to mean one thing but really meant another – photographs that internalized contradictions. The thoughts that a stranger brings to a situation can be so and not so. As a photographer, I think I know something about what I am photographing because I am present on the scene, but in many cases it is not so, because as an outsider, I am only guessing.

Sic et Non eventually gave way to a newer series, *Love and Rockets*. Like *Sic et Non*, *Love and Rockets* began as a phrase. My photographic subjects are sometimes inspired by phrases from literature or pop culture that make their way into my head like persistent song lyrics and stir my thought process. Love and rockets is a phrase I've been thinking about off and on for years. During a search through my old negatives, I was surprised to find how many images I had amassed on this topic. This topic interests me because the urge to love and the urge to either avoid or commit violence are two of the most powerful pulls in the human psyche. The way the public use these symbols in private homes, in commerce and in the public space says much about what is valued in America – power, strength, destiny, youth, and the importance of the frontier.

THESIS EXHIBITION

For my thesis exhibition, I participated in the *Master of Fine Arts* exhibition at the University of Georgia, and I also mounted a solo show, called *Stranger*, in the Hunt Gallery at Oxford College. The Oxford show more directly explores the idea of the photographer as an outsider, making discoveries on the street that comment on the social landscape. *Stranger* included large portions of *Love and Rockets*, combined with other street-based projects, such as *Sic et Non*. Because the gallery is shaped like an octagon, with small jointed walls, the images were grouped in sets of three loosely related images.

Though my work acknowledges that much of the construction in America since the 1950s has been bland, my pictures mainly celebrate the incredible and often unintentional creativity of this country. Examples included rainbow tunnels carved into granite hillsides, trees with fire alarms mounted to their trunks, and a truck sized diamond that lights up at night. More than pointing out scenes and relationships others might have missed, my work seeks to elevate these commercial creations to the level of poetry.

The University of Georgia exhibition was a lyrical exploration of how love and death are manifested in the social landscape. I called this work, *All's Fair*, as a nod to my belief that I can include a variety of tangentially related images in the exhibition, because the cohesiveness of the work stems from my worldview. I have 'eyes to see' and this is what I saw. My over all body of work is somewhat like an amoeba. It is large and fluid; portions of it can pinch apart to form individual groups and later roll back into the mass to be reincorporated or reformed.

The title also alludes to the folk saying, all's fair in love and war. The viewer will mentally complete the phrase when reading the title. This is my intention, because the pictures concern lost love, uncertain relationships, undercurrents of violence and more. Leaving the second half of the

phrase unsaid, allows the viewer to bring his or her own connections to the work. This idea was reinforced in the sequencing of the photographs, which avoided making easy connections between images.

The value of an examined life is another theme that unites my thesis work. I selected these particular images because they reflect what I am feeling now: a great uncertainty about life, but also an appreciation for the beautiful strangeness of the world. These pictures depict social landscapes that are strewn with icons of lost love, commerce run amuck, violence and more. By seeking out situations and scenes that manifest my concerns, I am examining my life as part of the larger world.

CONCLUSIONS

After I've left the earth, I'd like to think that some yet-to-be-born niece will open a box of prints and think they know me, even though I am a stranger to them. That the past will be present again when she sees a ladder resting against a tree shorn of every branch or a deer stand that looms over a small town bank or a wedding dress tethered to the ground. My wish is that these images be a catalyst for imagination and curiosity -- the beginning of another story.

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MFA Exhibition



Pruned, East Providence, RI, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24



Tethered, New York, NY, 2009
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24



Road to Oracle, AZ, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24



Elect Hurt, Cordele, GA, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24

MFA Exhibition



Resuscitated, Asheboro, NC, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24



Night Stand, Providence, RI, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24



Picnic, Huntsville, AL, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24



Sheer Curtains, Boston, MA, 2006
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24

MFA Exhibition

Artist Statement: All's Fair

I am troubled by the transient nature of life.

Experience is fleeting and changing;
memory alone is not enough.
All these passing sights cry out for examination.

I am most interested in the sideways glance –
things seen out of the corner of a curious eye.



Making art is often like waking up in the middle of the night
from a fantastical dream and trying to write it all down before the experience fades –
the complexity and beauty of the dream diminishing as the words hit the pages of the little notebook on the nightstand.

I am motivated by the inherent failure in this task. The glances keep coming and there is always more to get down
on paper before the light slips away.

The images chosen for this exhibition come from a large and changing body of work.
I selected these particular pictures because they reflect what I am feeling now:
a great sense of uncertainty about life, but also an appreciation for the beautiful strangeness of the world.

These photographs depict a cultural landscape that is strewn with icons of lost love, commerce run amuck, violence, and more.

Taking pictures is my nod to time's supremacy and also a peace offering that I might elude its ravages.

* Love Warehouse, Jonesboro, GA, 2008
Chromogenic Print
20 x 24

**Selelctions from the Stranger Exhibition
Hunt Gallery, Oxford College
March 19 - April 23, 2009**



Rainbow Tunnel, Chattanooga, TN, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Beauty Shop, Asheboro, NC, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Cliff Walk, Newport, RI, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Rotary Club Rocket, Cordele, GA, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Money Grab, Lawrenceville, GA, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Mona Lisa Estates, Marietta, GA, 2007
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



The Green Ball, Washington, DC, 2009
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Alarmed, Atlanta, GA, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20



Photographers at a Tableau Vivant,
Atlanta, GA, 2008
Chromogenic Print
16 x 20

Selected Examples of Early Work



Kate, 2006, From *Deliver Me*, 20 x 24 Chromogenic Print

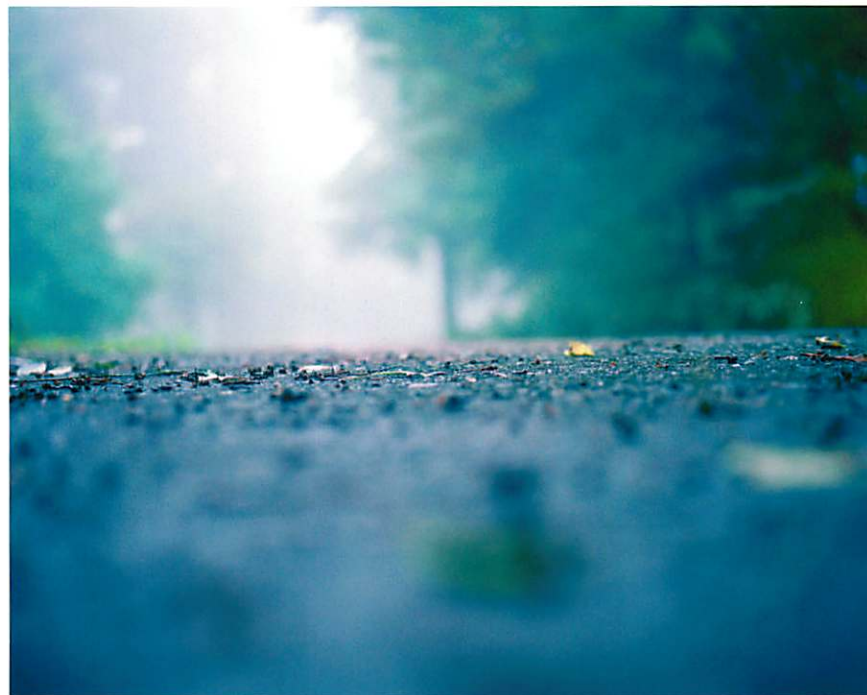


Tina, 2007, From *Deliver Me*, 20 x 24 Chromogenic Print

Selected Early Work



Broken Book Spine, From The Space Between, 2006, 16 x 20 Chromogenic Print



Driveway, From The Space Between, 2006, 16 x 20 Chromogenic Print