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THESIS REPORT

by

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Introduction

In 2014, nearly 2 billion images were uploaded to the internet daily. We share our lives online through various image-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, while referring to ourselves as a society of sharing, with the word "sharing" itself reaching saturation. Quite often, with this sharing, though, comes a fair amount of editing. We do not reveal everything about our lives, but rather, we often project an image of ourselves that is of our own creation, a heightened image of who we truly are. I am reminded of the time I listened to Hasan Elahi give a talk on his project, *Tracking Transience*, in which he emphasized how he tells us, "everything and nothing" about himself through his work. We can look at Elahi's website and see a geotag of his exact location in real-time, but we generally have little or no idea who he is with, or what he may be doing (fig. 1). Stating information online such as one's exact physical location may appear revealing on first glance, but what does such information ultimately reveal about an individual?

My introduction to the medium of photography coincided with the rise of online image-sharing. In 2008-2009, when I began posting my images online, the world was seeing an unprecedented increase in online image-sharing, and I was a daily participant in those statistics. For nearly three years, I made a self-portrait every day, and every day I uploaded the image to the internet.

From day one of approximately 900 days of self-portraits, my work has been self-reflective and autobiographical, but also fictional. My willingness to share my work online has brought plenty of internet trolls and harassers my way. Because sharing makes one vulnerable, especially online, I have received threats of physical violence on more

than one occasion. Sharing ones work online, especially if you are a woman who works mainly with self-portraits, can often make one a target for various types of threats. While such threats have never stopped me from making my work, they have affected the way in which I create work. Inserting a heavy-handed amount of fiction into an otherwise autobiographical body of work has, in the past, created a buffer between my emotions and my creative work. Essentially, I have created an alter-ego, an “online” and “fictional” persona. As my work has progressed over the past several years, though, this element of fiction has transformed from being a tool to protect me emotionally as it did in my earliest work, to an essential element of my current studio practice, serving as a means to reach out to the viewer in order to express ideas that are both personal and universal.

During my time at The University of Georgia, I have created a body of work which includes several different series, but each series is encompassed by similar themes. In order to properly address my thesis work, *Sweet Land*, I must also address *Character Study*, which preceded my thesis work. While my work consistently addresses universal themes of loss, isolation and longing, it is also driven by an obsessive desire to self-analyze, reflect, and understand the intricacies of being a woman who was raised in the southern United States. As I mentioned before, I strive to create work that is relatable for the viewer, therefore I make every effort to subtly rather than overtly tell my viewer that my work contains elements of personal narrative. My experiences online, my interests as an adolescent, my relationship with my family and my background in dance and the performing arts are absolutely crucial to my artistic practice, as they are the experiences which have shaped me as an individual, and I repeatedly draw on those aspects of my life

when making new work. The body of work I have created at The University of Georgia is interwoven with the residual effects of these experiences.

Precursors

In the early 1990s, Saturdays were my favorite day of the week, because my father would take me arrowhead hunting in the fields, rivers and streams near our home in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. I would collect as many arrowheads and pieces of pottery as my backpack would carry, spending the coming week cleaning and caring for these precious artifacts in anticipation of the arrival of another weekend where we would repeat our routine.

From an early age, my studies of the indigenous cultures of North America were hands-on, which gave me a sense of connection to the people who had once inhabited the land that I now call home. I did not simply read about their cultures in textbooks, I was privileged to be able to go into my backyard and find tiny relics and pieces of their lives, relics touched by people who existed centuries ago. This interest in native history and the idea of the land holding the secrets of those who have come before us eventually became the basis of my thesis work at The University of Georgia.

In addition to my interest in history, I soon developed a passion for creative expression, primarily in the performing arts. Throughout my adolescence I was involved in theatre, music and dance, eventually obtaining an undergraduate degree in Theatre and Performance studies. In 2007, while visiting Fort Mountain, Georgia to explore the mysterious rock fortress, I suffered a knee injury, which resulted in surgery and a lengthy recovery. One year after injuring my knee, I had given up all hope of ever returning to the dance studio. Visits to the studio had proven so painful that I could not walk after each

rehearsal, and my knee had not healed nearly as well as my surgeon had hoped. I was heartbroken.

After reaching the height of my emotional and physical pain, I picked up my point and shoot camera on a whim one afternoon, got in my car, and began driving around the neighborhood where I was living in Atlanta, photographing aimlessly. I soon began making photographs on a regular basis, though, as I found a freedom in rambling around the state of Georgia, camera in tow, with my desire to educate myself on local and state history being satisfied through these wanderings. The camera now filled the void that had been created by no longer being able to dance.

While the solitary nature of making photographs is one of the characteristics of the medium which attracted me initially and remains a pillar of my studio practice, I soon found within myself a need to share my images with others. I was not ready to show my work to my friends and family, so I began sharing my work online with anonymous strangers. There was something about the anonymity of the internet which put me at ease because, at that time, I was much more open to having my work judged by a stranger than by someone whose opinion mattered to me.

During the most painful of my artistic growing pains, I stepped in front of my camera for a self-portrait. At the time, I had no interest in being in front of the camera, as my main interest had previously been landscape photography. My story is similar to the story of many other artists who have dabbled in self-portraiture early on: I had ideas for images that I wanted to make, and the majority of my ideas involved a person in the frame. Using myself as a model was something I did not over-think at the time, mainly because it was a means to create exactly what I wanted within the frame, without having to rely on

someone else to interpret my directions. Around this time I began to draw on my background in the performing arts as an element of my creative process, albeit subconsciously. In retrospect, I recognize that, from the beginning, my images were highly theatrical in lighting, color and costume, and my facial expressions and gestures in the images were not unlike the gestures and facial expressions I employed as a performer. In order to be a successful performing artist, one must have absolute control over their body, possessing the ability to be larger-than-life in the most believable of ways. This physical control in front of the camera, and the ability to remain genuine while giving a performance, has been one of the most important aspects of my self-portraiture.

Having spent the majority of my life in a dance studio, I am a creature of habit. I thrive on goals and rules, finding growth in repetition and action. I had reached a point where I wanted to immerse myself in photography, both on a technical and a conceptual level, so I came up with a plan to make a self-portrait every day for the next 365 days. The only rules for the project were a) I had to photograph myself daily, b) no arm's length "selfies," and c) I had to upload the image online by 11:59pm, every day for one year.

One year of this project turned into three years, and I found myself in an artistic slump. I came to a decision that attending a graduate program in art would help me address my work in a new and more meaningful way. My self-directed studies of photography, both on a technical and an art historical level, had taken me as far as I felt I could go on my own. I wanted to push myself far away from any preconceived notions I had developed about my work, and I also wanted to break old, destructive habits which were preventing me from taking my work in a new direction.

The most obvious habit that I could define was my use of self-portraiture. Originally, self-portraiture had been a necessity in my work, but after years of self-portraits, I had crossed over from necessity to habit. I was a habitual self-portraitist, which, in my mind, was the most useless thing I could be as an artist. I knew that I needed to reach a point where I could give a well-informed explanation as to why I photographed myself, so I created a self-imposed self-portraiture hiatus during my first semester of graduate school. I had quite a few interests which self-portraiture had been preventing me from exploring as in-depth as I would have liked. I began by pursuing my desire to dissect my observations and concerns about Southern culture and identity.

Sweet Auburn

The first project that I began while attending UGA was short-lived in comparison to the rest of my work, but it remains important because it is the first body of work in which I focused on the landscape of the South: both the physical landscape, as well as the cultural landscape.

My father grew up in Atlanta, and spent many summers riding his bicycle through the Sweet Auburn neighborhood. I have long associated Atlanta with memories of my father, so in the fall of 2012, I began photographing the neighborhoods of Atlanta as a way to feel a connection with my father, who was battling terminal cancer during that time, and to learn more about the history of the city where my family had lived for several generations. This was also the first time that, as an adult, I began to consider my physical and emotional relationship to a specific site as deeply as I have in my thesis work. While visiting Sweet Auburn, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was always at the forefront of my thoughts, as his childhood home sits along Auburn Avenue. I found myself

simultaneously imagining my father riding his bike along Auburn Avenue. Throughout this project, I considered how a location could be significant to me on a personal level, through the thought of my father riding his bike in the 1950's on the exact street where I was standing in 2012, and also on a cultural level, with the knowledge of Dr. King, and the events which transpired in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood during the Civil Rights movement.

Character Study

During my second year of graduate school, I returned to self-portraiture. In the series *Character Study*, I began an exploration of gender roles, and attempted to challenge my notions of my own gender identity. I began by photographing myself in other people's clothes and living spaces. This body of work shares similarities with the work of Cindy Sherman, however, I feel as though the similarities are only surface. While Sherman uses elaborate costumes and makeup techniques to transform her physical appearance to become another character, or type, in this series, I made very little effort to transform (fig. 2). The images in *Character Study* are about what occurs when we momentarily look at the world from the perspective of another gender or social class, rather than creating a caricature of another gender or social class. My homespun, usually haphazard and always awkward costumes were my way of telling the viewer that this was only a documentation of me attempting to understand someone else while trying to find my own place in society, not an attempt to trick the viewer into thinking that I was actually a male (fig. 3). While I do feel it is necessary to cite Cindy Sherman when referencing this body of work, *Character Study* is, in my mind, in conversation with the work of artists such as Caleb Cole and Kelli Connell (fig. 4). There is a performative and theatrical element in this

series, as there is with the majority of my work, but at its heart, the series is about more than just performing, or astonishing a viewer with physical transformations. Much like the work of Cole and Connell, this work is about a longing for connection with others and a desire to understand, and just as importantly as understanding, to be understood. Even though we share billions of images online daily, we struggle to connect with one another, and our online sharing often seems like nothing but a series of missed connections in 140 characters or less. As I was making this work, I often found myself wondering if this heightened sense of loneliness and isolation that we have come to associate with the digital era is unique to our contemporary society, or has this been a human condition since the origins of humanity?

As the series progressed, I found that the work was becoming stronger when I focused primarily on the topic of femininity, particularly of women from the southeastern region of the U.S., rather than masculinity or androgyny. My work seeks to address issues of Southern culture and identity, and when I began to focus on my own notions of femininity in the South, *Character Study* took on a new meaning (fig. 5)

At this point, I was beginning to work on a much more emotional level when I was in front of the lens, and found myself relying on my training in acting, particularly Stanislavski's "Method" approach, to convey a mood or feeling. Stanislavski's approach aided me in developing characters on a detailed level with names, histories, goals and desires to illustrate within an image. I approached the characters in this series the same way I would have approached playing a part that was written in a script. The characters were each based on traits of the women I have known, both family and friends (and one or two enemies), throughout my life, having grown up in the rural South.

Character Study is, in my mind, one of my most important bodies of work, for several reasons. First, it is the first body of work in which I consciously and deliberately drew on my background in the performing arts to construct fictional realities. Not only did I rely on my training in acting, but also my working knowledge of costume design and stage lighting (fig. 6). Much of what I learned as an undergraduate came back to be highly influential in this body of work. In addition to bringing me to a point where I was consciously drawing on my background in performance, *Character Study* took me to a place where I found myself in conversation with a multitude of artists. I spent a bit of time drifting, attempting to distinguish how my work was different from, and similar to, the work of other artists working in similar ways. Though I hope to make stronger work as my career progresses, I believe I will continue to point to *Character Study* as the moment where my work shifted from what it was before graduate school, to what it is today. That moment took me from making exclusively intuitive work, to work that is not only intuitive, but also deliberate.

While *Character Study* has become an index of women I have known having lived in the South my entire life, the work tends to reveal more about myself than it reveals about the women whom I have portrayed in the series. The characters and scenarios in each image are a reflection of my own gaze on the women I have known over the years. My interpretation of their idiosyncrasies is a reflection of my own biases and beliefs. Much like my early work that I shared online in which I created a larger-than-life online persona, the women I have portrayed in *Character Study* are the buffer I create between the viewer's fact and my own fiction.

Sweet Land

I began my thesis work last summer when I was traveling throughout the state of Georgia to photograph locations with historical significance. I was traveling to Civil War battlefields, native earthen mounds, the thousands of unmarked graves at Central State Hospital, a riverbank where de Soto crossed the Oconee, and prison grounds where 15,000 men died during the Civil War. I found myself coming full-circle to my childhood interests, and memories of arrowhead hunting with my father. These interests had sparked my imagination as a child – the thought of people living in this land we now call Georgia, thousands of years before my existence, and thinking of the land as a treasure trove, a keeper of secrets – and now, twenty years later, these interests were fueling my work as an artist.

In order to begin making images for this series, I needed to first define my own relationship to the land around me, and as a result, have come to divide this relationship into two categories. First, there is my physical relationship: as physical matter, I have weight and I am occupying space when I am present at a site. My physical actions at a site fall into this category, as well, because they make an impact on the site, even if that impact is merely leaving behind a footprint. Second, there is the non-physical, emotional or intuitive category, which encompasses my feelings regarding a site. The feelings I experience at a site can range anywhere from sadness and regret, to inspiration and pride, belief and doubt. These two categories are representative of my ongoing internal struggle, the struggle between the side of me which relies on facts and reason, and the side of me which believes there are things which cannot be explained by logic and reason.

For every site I photograph where a known historical event has occurred, there are countless more sites where events occurred which are unknown, and will most likely remain that way. My interest in the unknown and untold stories is just as strong as my interest in the stories that are widely known and told, because the untold stories are what give way to fiction, and fiction often leads to legend.

I live in Milledgeville, Georgia, which is the location of Central State Hospital. It was, at its height, the largest mental health facility in the U.S., even rivaling New York's Pilgrim State Hospital at one point, and as a result, many people died there in horrible conditions, completely forgotten by society. They are still forgotten, seeing as how nearly 30,000 former patients are buried in mostly unmarked graves only a few miles from where I sleep soundly every night. On walks, I will often come across yet another hidden burial site for hospital patients, with only a handful of iron markers bearing a 4 digit number remaining. The impressions in the ground, though, reveal that there are many graves at each site, not just one or two (fig. 7). They are individuals who lived and died not that long ago, and they are all but forgotten, even in death. When I walk through the woods here in Milledgeville, I cannot help but wonder if I am walking over the grave of yet another forgotten individual. There is a very good chance that I am, and this thought constantly haunts me. This haunting is what spurs me to keep creating images for this series.

While I consider the images to be landscape photographs, they are also self-portraits. In my previous work, I have been prominent in the frame, but in *Sweet Land*, the viewer never sees my face. This work is about my own relationship to the land and the feelings the land elicits in me, but I also want the viewer, especially those who live in Georgia and

often pass by the sites I have referenced in this work, to think about their relationship to the land, therefore, I have chosen to remain as anonymous as possible in the images in the hopes that the viewer will contemplate our relationship to the land through history and culture, rather than contemplating a portrait of me or of a character I am portraying (fig. 8).

Sweet Land is the visual representation of the conflict I mentioned previously, the conflict between reason and emotion, logic and intuition. The locations in the images represent the logical side of how I approach these sites. History gives us information such as where an event occurred, who was there, and what transpired. These are generally documented historical facts. Science can tell us approximately when an event occurred. The figure in the images, though, represents the intuitive side of how I feel about these locations. The figure is usually small or blurred, obscured, and always anonymous, which is an acknowledgement of the people who have existed on the sites I have photographed. I know that they were significant as human beings and that they existed at some point, but that is all I may ever know. They are now only a vague imprint on the time-space continuum, blurry and anonymous (fig. 9).

The landscape of Georgia, the earth itself – the rocks, trees and kudzu vines – becomes a metaphor for the passage of time. Kudzu vines spread at rapid rates, consuming and ultimately destroying anything in their path. River waters recede, revealing traces of people who lived long ago. In this way, the land has a memory that is much longer than our society's collective memory.

During the process of creating this body of work, I found that if I put too much thought into the complexity of the concept of the land holding secrets I became

overwhelmed, because pondering the number of events that have occurred in this region since the Paleolithic era is on par with contemplating outer space – both are such complex ideas that, for those of us who are not scientists or mathematicians, our minds can only take us so far with such a concept. For that reason, I often needed to give myself a motive for creating work for this series, not unlike Stanislavski’s Method which requires actors to define a motive for their character in each scene. Giving myself a motive, or a smaller idea to ponder within a larger and more complex idea, not only gave me mental clarity, but also aided me in generating images which were more specific to what I was hoping to express with this series. With every piece of fired pottery, shards of arrowheads, broken glass and abandoned homestead I find, I touch something that was made by someone years ago. These items and structures represent a remnant of someone else, someone forgotten to the ages. Visiting these sites and locations, and holding artifacts and traces of another individual, is, in my mind, an act of remembrance. Though I have little idea as to exactly who I am remembering, by acknowledging that they existed, I am paying them a remembrance in a way that is not unlike remembering my own father when I visit his final resting place. By remembering others, I hope that, one day, someone may do the same for me, but for now, I am the one who is charged with the act of remembering. This is my motivation when creating the images for this series, to acknowledge the existence of the forgotten, to remember.

I tend to work on a project for an extended period of time before I move on to new work. My self-portrait projects prior to graduate school took me about three years of daily work, *Character Study* took around two years to complete, and I have been working on *Sweet Land* for nine months, though I feel I have, at the very least, another year of

work, possibly more, before the series reaches the level that I have envisioned. For the MFA Thesis Exhibition at The Georgia Museum of Art, my images were displayed on the wall in a traditional format: four images of varying sizes, framed. However, since its inception, I have envisioned this work in book form rather than each image printed individually and placed on a gallery wall. Text has recently become a vital component of my work, and I have relied upon text to fill in some of the details that a still image may lack. Text allows me to give the viewer additional information regarding the sites I have chosen to highlight in this body of work. Since I do not yet have the work in book form, the work on display at The Georgia Museum relies on an artist statement and wall labels to function in much the same way as text in a book.

This series continues to evolve, and I have recently begun to include landscape photographs without a figure, as evidenced in the work on display for the exhibition. I feel as though the images which include a figure in the frame are more impactful when interspersed with images which do not contain a figure, but rely entirely on the landscape, both natural and altered by human hands, to carry the image.

Though *Sweet Land* varies visually from *Character Study*, the issues addressed and the questions posed are similar in both bodies of work, and I continue to examine Southern identity, and how that identity relates back to the land. Where *Character Study* relied on gender and class to raise questions which explore Southern identity, *Sweet Land* relies on local history as starting point for a deeper discussion of our cultural and personal relationships to a site, and what these sites can tell us about history as well as our contemporary culture.

Conclusion

With my time as a graduate student coming to a close, I have come to understand that, while I do employ self-portraits quite often, self-portraiture is a small component of a large agenda. I believe that most artists work from a place of personal narrative, but what I have come to understand about my own process is that my work is absolutely dependent on my past experiences. Without the desire and the ability to share my work online, I would have never embarked on the three year self-portrait project which eventually lead me to graduate school. Without my background in performance, *Character Study* would have probably never come to fruition, and without my father to spark my interest in history, I would have never even dreamed *Sweet Land*. Going forward, my work will continue to evolve from personal narrative, though I will always strive to occupy the ever-so-small space between personal and universal narrative.

Figure Index

Figure 1: Hasan Elahi, screen shot of website for *Tracking Transience v2.0*, <http://elahi.umd.edu/track/>, April 18th, 2015.



Figure 2: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #466*, Chromogenic color print, 8' 1 1/8 x 63 15/16" (246.7 x 162.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 3: Anna Gay Leavitt, *Untitled*, 2013, inkjet print, 20" x 30".



Figure 4: Caleb Cole, *The Hunter*, 2010.



Figure 5: Anna Gay Leavitt, *Role Models*, 2014, inkjet print, 13" x 19".



Figure 6: Anna Gay Leavitt, *Center Point*, 2013, digital c-type print, 16" x 20".



Figure 7: Anna Gay Leavitt, *Thousands of Unmarked Graves*, 2014, inkjet print, 8" x 16".



Figure 8: Anna Gay Leavitt, *People Would Have a Fit If They Knew What Was Buried Out There*, 2015, inkjet print, 9" x 12".



Figure 9: Anna Gay Leavitt, *A Route of Trade for Centuries*, 2015, inkjet print, 12" x 12".



