Departures and Junctions

By

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**Introduction:**

Through this report, I hope to make clear my approach and purpose for my pursuit of photography in a general sense through looking at my thesis work as a specific instance. I will compare and contrast this work to my earlier efforts, provide insight into the conceptual foundations upon which the work is based, and relate this to my process and techniques.

**Approaches to art:**

The starting point for my art is often based on experiences. Being open to either the potential or actual experience of engaging with some aspect of life I see as worthy and significant often provides the motivation for my photography. I find my subject through living life, thus the world is my studio. Ideas come from human thought, but are influenced through stimuli provided by nature, life, and God. The saying that reality is far more interesting than anything we can make up really has influenced my photography for quite some time. I feel that the unmediated experience of real time life provides a foundation on which the imagination can function. I let my thoughts be guided as I interact with the world (both physical and ideas) outside my inner psyche. The very reason I see art making as a need in my life is that it allows me to continue to force myself into experience. It is about the occasional and all too rare moments of giddy elation, the euphoric buzz when an effortless connection is made, a touch of brilliance is identified, a sense of wholeness and purposefulness overcomes my inner self. There is a multitude of life to experience and many things to learn, deal with, and explore. I feel
open to freely delve into subjects that lead to satisfying expression. *Departures and Junctions* is no exception to this approach to my photography. Even within *Departures and Junctions* I can see the possibilities for many new ideas that deserve proper articulation.

Overtones of humanism have always been discernible throughout my work. I am interested in speaking to humans about things humans relate to. For me, this is the only natural way to proceed through producing art because the only experience of life I know is through human perception. I strive to use a language that that can reach to as many fellow humans as possible. I see life as a positive endeavor, and hopefully this outlook is evident in my work.

A substantial shift occurred in my photography when I reconsidered the idea of finding an image versus staging an image. I first learned photography in a photojournalism classroom. The first master of photography who made my pulse quicken was Henri Cartier-Bresson. I took his introduction to *The Decisive Moment* as gospel including the part about never staging a photograph. I still believe subject matter is everywhere, and do not feel that I must set up the image in order to be assertive with my control over the outcome of its conceptual content.

One of the first of many valuable lessons I learned in art school, however, was that by taking an active role in the staging of a photographic image I can still make profound statements about very real issues or emotions found in life. Often, the "staged or not" issue is not relevant to the image expressing content. Hopefully my photography will never be solely a critique on the medium in its own right. My responsibilities as an artist are to speak to many more than the academically versed.
An example of this latter approach to precisely control content regardless of the "staged or not" issue is in *Championship Loser* (figure 1) from the series of portraits of YMCA members I executed in my first year at UGA. The young boy actually did just loose the season's championship roller hockey match. Given the nature of the working with the 4x5 camera, I chose to direct the subject to reenact the instant that was the original impetus for the image: The young boy came off the court mixed in with his teammates to face all the parents of the team. There was something about this young guy with his head hung in a manner that was familiar. This was possibly due to my days of youth sports, mixed with my present experience. Also, I began thinking about being a father one day and letting my child learn the life lessons that youth sports have to offer. I immediately recognized and connected to the pureness of his dealing with the complex emotions tied to coping with defeat. I could not have isolated this at its instant in reality, as the boy was one in a crowd. I actually had quite the time getting the proper expression out of him due to his friends trying to make him laugh, which he was doing in the first couple of exposures I made of the scene. I go into such detail about this all to prove a point. My controlling the subject and staging the image actually enhanced its conceptual content. So long as I maintain the integrity to assertively make choices, to employ decisiveness in my approach to dealing with and my feelings toward my subject, the work will remain compelling and convincing and thus more successful. This is now independent of the "staged or not" issue and opens up new worlds of possibilities.
Departures and Junctions:

*Departures and Junctions* deals with the processes and results of human expansion mostly in the south part of our country. This development requires man and nature to share common ground and often manifests visible signs of this integration. The very intersection is both literal and metaphorical. Surveying the roadside land near intersections of highways is the concentration of this work although future development of the series is open to any places where this same concept is present. In fact, one of my first efforts with large format photography led me to look at a landscape that seemed more about people than anything. Some images made in this early effort were of a Christmas tree farm in rural Georgia (figure 2). This work was some of the first successful images I had attempted that were not photographs of people.

The decision to make photographs of the landscape at highway intersections comes from an assortment of experiences and influences. My studies of and intrigue with the terrain that would eventually become *Departures and Junctions* began in childhood. The experience as a youngster of riding as a passenger in a moving vehicle, having a longing to one day operate a real gas powered vehicle often led to daydreaming and imagining the possibilities while staring out the window. A love of ramping bikes, riding off road, and skateboarding mixed with an interest and fascination of motocross influence a popular childhood imagination game. From my inquiry, I’m not the only young boy who gazed out of the moving vehicle window, zooming along at the same speed, imagining riding on a dirt bike or other ATV while taking on the wild and unpredictable roadside terrain. Hours of passing the forever long and boring road trips trying to block out the adult conversation were spent playing this game.
Following this would be my academic upbringing and interest with the occupation of engineering, dealing with the questions of functionality and whether or not these spaces are or have potential to be useful and significant. Looking back over my childhood, I often hear my father’s voice telling me, “Engineering would be a good career.” I did well in math and science, so as I began college, the pre-engineering curriculum made sense. I was interested in the creative design aspects of that career. When I began to photograph at exit ramps, I felt as if I must consider the role of the engineer in what I was doing. Although I accept credit as the artist in control of how the image is constructed, I am openly considerate of the engineer or architect who is responsible for the design, function, and experience of such magnificent spaces. Thus far, the results of my investigations show me that often the people in such roles appreciate regional culture, history, even humor or aesthetic concerns in addition to functional ones.

**Man and Nature**

Although *Departures and Junctions* is landscape, humans have an immense presence throughout the work. This presence is full of information dealing with contemporary society and culture. Through the formal arrangement of content within the images, this information speaks about a multitude of ideas about the interaction of man and nature.

The quiet beauty of spaces where aesthetics are overlooked for the sake of function actually offers much need for consideration. An example of this is *I-459 / 31* (figure 3), where the human influence seems more harmonious or fluid in how it is
integrated into the otherwise natural world. Human contact as an anticipated answer to what we predict nature will need offers a purely natural interaction. This contact and interaction with the land is an act of nature itself on a grand scale, and it is exciting to look at here in its authentic form, not polluted by overt aesthetics in the landscaping or design of the space. The natural occurrence of forms in this landscape, considering man’s intervention as part of nature’s process, lent themselves to an arrangement that in my mind equates to a symphony orchestration. The longevity of its current state is solely dependent on nature. The ideas of the engineer are subject to the same natural processes as everything else.

The notion of the crossroads seems too romantic in contemporary times for today’s busy interstate and highway systems. It is often overburdened with the traffic and mass transit that drives the distribution portion of American capitalism. Only a generation ago some of these very intersections would have been rural enough to carry such a title. The more recent development of land at intersections functions as a cultural and evolutionary marker of sorts. How far has human civilization progressed or how primordial are our attempts in comparison to our capabilities? The function of the roads, the needs of people, must be seen as part of the larger system of nature. I do not try to question this function in my work, but bring to light some interesting considerations. For instance, our need to mark the land with a badge of regional culture is seen in 143 / Airport Connector (figure 4). Acting as a larger-than-life greeting for the air traffic, the design would have not been necessary on such a scale prior to affordable air travel. Does this offer a glimpse of what is to come as air travel developments advance with each generation? Are vehicle grounded passers-by feeling left out or stranded from the
optimal view? In a way, this space visually adds the z-axis to the contemporary
crossroads (figure 5).

A not-so-tranquil eternal resting spot complete with a Krystal’s and a steady flow
of semi traffic is what we preserved for our dead and gone in I-75 / Cleveland Ave.
(figure 6). It almost seems as if the cemetery has adapted quite well to its bustling
environment. As a reference to the pre-interstate history of this area, I was amazed when
I discovered this important space. I had been interested early on in assigning a fictional
function to these exit ramp spaces to question the possibilities of significance and
functionality. This space had its own integrated role providing it with both purpose and
meaning. I was intrigued by the fact that at the very least we show consideration for our
own, however reverent the attempt may be. Part of my interest in choosing to enlarge the
image produced at this site was the ability to read the names on a few of the headstones.
It seemed like a gesture of my respect.

In another image, a sea of kudzu threatens to engulf its entire environs including a
residential dwelling. The local government has intervened just in time to hold back the
tides of green leaves from swallowing up the home as well as the on ramp to the highway
in the foreground (figure 7). A large form looming on the right of the composition
mimics a rabbit, ordinarily seen as one of nature’s cute little furry friends, threatening to
pounce on the poor little house. It seems as if it could be nature kindly telling us to
respect her presence, using awe to remind humankind to be considerate.
Process of Exploring and Experiencing:

In order to discuss my process of how I search for and investigate the contact point of nature that includes man, I would like to expand upon my earlier statement of the important role experience plays in my work. Simply stated, I encounter these spaces in my everyday experiences of driving from place to place. I search for an overall sense of significance in a typically mundane place.

At least at the time of exposing the film, the process I approach my photography with is more in my head now than it was in earlier work. It is a different physical endeavor than my previous hand held camera street photography. Once I locate the correct camera placement, I am there for a while. No longer do I go out with a camera on like an article of clothing and search for something happening near me with this work. The something happening is not so fleeting, although it is certainly happening and the something to see or to understand probably reads more of a present in the work. In my earlier approach, being conscious of what may happen cannot be over thought, but must be anticipated in a short-term, immediate way. Now it must be considered in a slower scale-of-speed, like the human lifespan, which considers long term, broad implications.

Over time, as the project developed and I began to consider how many layers of conceptual interest exist in exit ramp spaces, I eventually gained a familiarity with how to be aware of the land. I must remain open to new ideas and realize potential for the contents of the space, their arrangement, meaning, and its orientation to the greater surrounding environment. Once an exit ramp shows potential, I will often walk through the space in order to evaluate its accessibility and consider light and viewpoint. The amount of time I spend with a site depends on its proximity to my home. Some of the
first sites that I began to investigate that were close to my home. This allowed me to revisit the sites around Athens and Atlanta in different times of the day or different weather condition to observe the effects of changing light on the scene. Some cases even would require waiting for the earth to change its angle to the sun, and I would revisit to study the light on the space in different times of the year. The duration of the overall experience with such sites only served to solidify my feelings toward the site and the overall project. Through this experience I gained sensitivity to the most effective conditions in which to photograph. I also want to get an overall feeling about the space through being in it for a while. I want the work to command a physical presence, and so it seems only fitting that I am personally comfortable with my physical experience in the space. It seems odd and I'm not trying to necessarily change the fact that we only experience these public places through the framing of a car window, but to walk through some of these spaces is an amazing experience. This is most true when it is possible to disappear from the view of traffic and totally isolate myself from any self-conscious tension and feelings of being forbidden to experience these public spaces on foot. I want to show how much these easily overlooked spaces have to offer when perceived in a new way. Through the time I spend on site I raise the level of intimacy of human interaction and can then reflect on my experience to generate an image that is an assertive match of form and content. Again, I want to persuade others to appreciate what I feel are often neglected spaces that actually have an inherent beauty, a harmonious interaction of man with nature on an impressive scale.

This time spent visiting sites near home proved to be a strong training ground. Over the summer of 2003, I drove to Arizona and back, exploring for and surveying
significant exit ramps all the way. Michael J. Marshall studied at Arizona State University and told me of an exit ramp that proved incapable of being passed up. I now know that Phoenix is in the desert and camping there in the summer is not desirable. This lead to a much different experience with the spaces than when closer to home. The increased sensitivity I gained in my experience I had prior to the trip was important on my trip West. I knew what I was after and could make a quick decision on choices of time of day and how that may affect the light. I may decide to hang out and camp to wait for the morning light if necessary. Any road trip I can afford to take will at least turn into a scouting mission for the project. It is only solo missions, however, such as the one over the summer, that allow for the time necessary for proper execution of the work. Exit ramps and highway interchanges are points of transition that often act as landmarks in passing. They are never places chosen to pause for contemplation, much less popular vacation destinations. If they were, I would not have the same interest in them, if any at all.

**Formal Concerns:**

The final form of the work in *Departures and Junctions* is large scale, color, composite photomurals and a panoramic format artist book. The process discussed above must lead to considerations of the proper form in order for the expression to be successful. Each of these decisions was made deliberately, each working together giving life to the overall expression.

The first images I made with the 4x5 camera were of the previously mentioned Christmas Tree Farm (figure 2). They opened my eyes to new capacities of the
photographic language. I immediately fell in love with the sharpness and resolution offered by the large originals. In photographing exit ramp spaces, I use the view camera’s ability to shift the focus allowing for most of the image to be rendered in sharp focus. I employ the use of large format photography’s descriptive power to bring to light the multitude of both formal and conceptual functions that exist at these intersections and to further question the possibilities. This subtlety of the photographic language works along with the scale of the photomurals so that the viewer is drawn in to study the detail and pour over the loads of information. At closer viewing distances one cannot possibly read the entire image at once. I exploit scale through producing large archival pigment prints making the distant or smaller details play a substantial role in the overall content of the whole piece.

Color is a choice for defining the man made elements and quickly differentiating from the natural elements. A brightly colored road sign or a concrete ditch emphasizes the interaction of man and nature. The vibrant green is a direct reference to life however strong or pathetic it may be.

The constructed natural world that incorporates man’s influence depicted in this work is represented by an overtly constructed composite photograph. Driving is part of everyday experience for me as a middle class American. I perceive the world through an automobile window. The act of looking is a huge influence on my decision to loosely recreate this method of experience and idea through use of composite images that progress through time and space. Focus, scale and color combine with the progression through time and space to keep the viewer occupied and relate to a familiar perceptual experience, to put the viewer in the space.
When possible, I strive to make most individual frames of the composite whole have a formal interest in their own right. Not that each and every one could be, or even should be able to stand alone as a single image. That would leave no tension for the viewer to rely on the whole to tie the separate parts together. The use of composite photographs not only adds the progression of time as an element, relating to the typical experience of riding in a moving vehicle as previously discussed, but it also allows for a better overall "instant" that is read into the whole piece. Time seems to be both at a standstill, the instant of the photographic image, and also in constant flux, speaking to the progression of time through depicting traffic in motion and through the series of individual instances that comprise the composite photograph as a whole. This technique of composing from individual frames strengthens the final outcome of the entire piece by offering multiple choices for each frame. It helps me achieve further control over the "theater" of motion, to borrow a term from Professor Stephen Scheer, which is occurring in the street. The fleeting traffic and commotion is managed through the fabrication of many distinct instances into the most successful or interesting whole, a result that would be much more difficult to obtain all at the same instant. The subtle manipulation in composing the final work is akin to putting together a puzzle of the most effective individual frames, and I can exert more authority, both formally and conceptually, through such means.

In addition to figures 3 and 6 printed as large-scale composite photomurals, the form of the majority of the images in my thesis exhibition is an over-sided, panoramic format artist book. The attention required for the mural sized prints is hopefully complemented by the delicacy of the artist book, which requires a precious handling due
to its unconventional size. This notion is taken further through the use of a fine art paper. I relinquish some valuable information and details in such a small-scale image, but the composite photograph can be more ideally accessed and read as a whole. Given the space constraints of my allotted space in the exhibition, I had to show more of the body of work than rely solely on two images to represent the work to date. I agree with Mark Klett, who recently looked at my portfolio at the 2004 National SPE Conference, when he said that graduate school is a good time to start on something. I feel the book was necessary to show that I have made a concentrated start to some work.

**Summary:**

It is my intention for this work to speak to all levels of people from laymen to the academics, artist or otherwise. Hopefully, it functions on many conceptual levels to allow for a broad audience. I was thrilled at the sight of a couple of physical plant maintenance men pouring over three full scale pieces produced for my thirty-hour review on exhibit in the Hallway Gallery of the main Visual Arts Building. So far as dealing with issues the work may point to, I do not intend to dwell on any one point during conceiving, shooting, or producing the work. I thrive on a bit of intuition and a spirit of exploration with my ideas and techniques. Overall, the work is positive in tone, all but celebratory of our relationship and oneness with nature. Also, this is not any reaction to the more typically dismal undercurrents of some work dealing with the “managed landscape” topic. Like an anthropologist investigating the engineering of exit ramps, I try to appear unbiased to any environmental or social issues, although I realize that objectivity is not possible with any individually formed representation. I essentially see
man's role with the land as optimistic, that we do not hold the land, and thus nature, in
contempt but work with it. This is how I respect it.

*Departures and Junctions* is to make you think about the human involvement in the
land. Whether kids at play or adults at work, we change the environment alongside all of
nature's forces. The next frontier is already over familiar to most middle class folks.

Within the threshold of this developed "frontier" lays a margin of accepted landscape that
challenges man's demarcation and distinction of himself against nature.
figure 1. *Championship Loser*, 20" x 16" silver print © 2001 Chuck Hemard

figure 2. *Christmas Tree Farm #1*, 4" x 5" Van Dyke Contact Print © 2001 Chuck Hemard
figure 3. I-459 / 31, 200" x 52" composite photograph, archival pigment prints ©2004 Chuck Hemard

figure 4. 143 / Airport Connector, 30" x 12" archival pigment print from artist book © 2004 Chuck Hemard

figure 5. detail from 143 / Airport Connector
© 2004 Chuck Hemard
figure 6. I-75 / Cleveland Ave, 155" x 40" composite photograph, archival pigment prints © 2004 Chuck Hemard

figure 7. 10 loop / Macon Hwy, 30" x 12" archival pigment print from artist book © 2004 Chuck Hemard