"Through a Glass Darkly"

By

Clay Jordan

B.A. University of Vanderbilt, 1998

An Applied Project Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
Of U.G.A. in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements For The Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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Approved:

[Signature]

Michael Marshall

4.26.13

Date
Every photo taken freezes a moment in time that is never to be repeated and that has passed forever - regardless of whether the event occurred last week or one hundred years ago. Sometimes, time collapses entirely and a photo of oneself as a child feels like it was taken yesterday. A photo, like a memory, can feel alive and obliterate the time between the present and when that memory was created. The multiple parallels between photography, time, and memory are the primary themes of my MFA Thesis, specifically how these themes relate to nostalgia and childhood. How do photos encourage the idealization of childhood? What's the difference between a memory of an event versus a photo of the same event? Can one ever truly go back to an earlier, more "innocent" form of perception once he/she has gained knowledge of the world? I hope my work evokes memories of childhood and of a more innocent time, while simultaneously questioning the accuracy and meaning of these memories. Thru my photography, I explore these questions and present photos that juxtapose and highlight the tension and differences between a child's and adult's view of the world.

I was born in Augusta, Georgia in 1975, spent my entire childhood in the same house that my parents still currently reside, and had, by all accounts, an ideal childhood. My mother stayed at home to raise me and my brother; my father, a lawyer, worked long hours and weekends, but treated the responsibilities of fatherhood with as much dedication and attention as his vocation - providing guidance, support, and love. Summers we vacationed at the beach and occasionally ventured to destinations further afield; school years passed in a pleasant blur with extracurricular activities (Cub Scouts, sports, etc.) planned to keep us engaged, entertained, and content. My brother and I were never lacking: Our teeth were askew? Braces were applied. We failed to enunciate correctly? Visits to the speech pathologist were scheduled. My dad was a meticulous planner and made sure both me and my brother had everything we would need to insure our success as adults.

I look back on my childhood with fondness and am very grateful for parents who ensured I was raised in a nurturing, safe environment. However, I am also reminded Picasso's saying: "There's nothing worse than a brilliant beginning." Of course, Picasso was referring to creating art, but I believe it applies to other aspects of life as well. Moving from the warmth, innocence, and protection of childhood to the harsh realities, responsibilities, and difficulties of adulthood can be an arduous transition that entails accepting the ideas of death, impermanence, and personal responsibility. It is often difficult to reconcile the innocence and purity of a child's vision with the sometimes
cynical views that those older may adopt. To be sure, children are far from "innocent" and can be as cruel and cynical as adults, but compare the average child to the average adult and one will see, on the whole, more optimism, imagination, and wonder displayed by the former. I use my photography practice as a way to come to terms with a past I am probably idealizing and as a way to bridge this chasm between my adult and childhood identities.

The word "nostalgia" derives from the Greek words "nostos" meaning "homecoming" and "algos" meaning "pain, ache" and was coined in the 17th century by a medical student to describe anxieties displayed by Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home. Implicit in the etymology is the contradictory feelings often engendered when returning home or when thinking about the past: one often feels a fondness for childhood/the past but this is usually tempered by the knowledge that these events and experiences are now nothing more than memories which grow hazier as time passes. In my photography, I refer to this tension by capturing images that are whimsical/magical, but showing them from the detached view of an adult. I hope to elicit feelings of childlike wonder in the viewer while simultaneously making the viewer aware that this wonder and innocence of perception is fleeting and can never be fully regained once one has entered adulthood. We can remember, perhaps vividly, what it was like to be a child, but we can never go back to that time and experience it firsthand again.

Before discussing my exhibition and recent work, it is important to briefly examine my influences and how they inform my present output. Most importantly is the work of William Eggleston, considered by many to be the most influential color photographer of the past 40 years and whose influence extends far beyond the rarefied confines of the fine art world. Eggleston oeuvre has had an enormous influence on filmmakers (most notably in the work of David Lynch, Gus Van Zant, and Sofia Coppola) and popular culture in general (many advertising campaigns have adopted Eggleston's aesthetic and several prominent bands have used Eggleston's photos for their record covers). His work is beguiling and enigmatic in equal measure: through the heightened use of color saturation, Eggleston's quotient subject matter (the front door of a suburban home, the inside of a refrigerator, underneath a bed) achieves a menacing, other worldly quality at odds with the "everydayness" of the object itself. Eggleston glorifies the mundane, granting a gravity to and demanding a reevaluation of objects that may normally be taken for granted.

In Eggleston's hands, the banal is often a stand in or representation of something
much larger. An example of this would his photo of the dinner table:

At first glance, this appears to be a well composed, but fairly innocuous scene; however, there is a menacing quality lurking underneath due to the fact that the table set for two is vacant and that the elaborately prepared meal has not been enjoyed. One wonders where the two diners are - it's as if they have disappeared. Eggleston has taken the notion of the home as a place of safety and domesticity and imbued it with a solitary, deserted ambience and forces the viewer to reexamine his/her notion of "home". I hope to do the same with my photographs: by focusing on and asking the the viewer to contemplate hackneyed scenes that he/she would normally not look twice at, I want them to reconsider how these everyday objects relate to memory, nostalgia, and childhood. I learned from Eggleston that a banal scene properly depicted can have as much power as a dramatic photo and can prove unexpectedly effective in calling fourth the uncanny or foreboding.

I also strive to emulate Eggleston's saturated color pallet. His very skillful prints, coupled with the dye transfer process which produces super saturated colors, produces images in which often normal scenes seem slightly fantastical; the intensity of the color transforms the banal into the extraordinary. Eggleston's famous photo of the red ceiling
is an example of this:

The subject matter is quite ordinary, but the color intensity makes the scene unsettling—as if there were a supernatural element or malignant force responsible for the blood red color of the ceiling. Like a painter, Eggleston manipulates color to produce an emotional effect. I also occasionally increase the saturation of my photos to further enhance the photo's emotional impact.

William Christenbury is another Southern photographer who has influenced my work. Christenbury's preoccupation is with the passing of time. Returning year after year to his hometown of Hale County, Alabama, Christenbury documents the same buildings on each visit and presents them as a series to show how these structures change and decay over time:

His art speaks to the ravages of time and to the tension that arises between photography and memory: it is difficult to maintain an ideal version of structures from
one's childhood when one is faced with the pictorial evidence of the decay of these structures. Our memory often enshrines and fixes a static image in our minds, while photography neither sentimentalizes nor idealizes these structures, but rather presents them as they appear the moment the shutter is pressed. Like Christenbury, I am obsessed with the passage of time and its effects, but I show this through depicting objects that are weathered or faded rather than showing the same object at different points in time. As Roland Barthes suggested, all photography is about death because it captures a moment that no longer exists, that is "dead". Photography itself, therefore, is the ideal medium in which to discuss the passage of time and death.

The third photographer who greatly influenced my work is Stephen Shore who came to prominence in the 1970's both for his 35mm series "American Surfaces" and later with his large format work "Uncommon Places." Shore at heart is a formalist who meticulously uses light to eloquently describe texture, color, and surface. Shore's work often feels less about the subject matter but rather with how that subject matter looks and the emotional impact it produces in the viewer. Does every photograph have to "mean" something or is it enough that a beautiful scene is skillfully captured and eloquently described? I hope that my photographs create a visceral emotional response in my viewer in part because of the intensity of colors and light. Like Shore, I want to capture scenes of beauty that transport the viewer into an ideal landscape parallel to the pristine landscape many of us may enter into in our minds when recollecting the past/childhood.
The final two influences on my work are not photographers, but rather a painter, George Condo, and the recent trend of creating photo books via on demand printing. I mention these two influences together because they both influenced how I choose to display my work. Although I was aware of the hanging works of art "salon style", I never experienced this method first hand until I visited the Condo exhibit at the New Museum in New York several years ago:

![Image of a gallery with hanging artworks]

The idea of hanging works of varying sizes and themes next to each other was a revelation, and allowed me to consider alternatives to the more traditional method of placing all the works in a horizontal line across the wall. I enjoy the visceral impact this method can have on the viewer and hope the overwhelming visual stimuli parallels the idea of feeling overwhelmed by a flood of memories that can often overtake someone when he/she is thinking about the past. Furthermore, I have always thought of my work as a series - rarely does a single photo of mine work most effectively when shown alone. Displaying the works salon style allows me to emphasize the interconnectivity of all of the photos and suggest a complex narrative unfolding in front of the viewer.

Photo books have become an affordable way for many photographers to get their work into the word today due to on demand printing. After looking at and studying numerous photo books, I started to realize the importance of sequencing and wanted to incorporate this lesson into how I displayed my work on the wall. Photo books made me acutely aware that how one sequences photos next to one another can convey significant information and associations and is a powerful tool for the artist to communicate with his/her audience.
As for more contemporary artists with whom my work may be in dialog with, the one that comes to mind most immediately is Jeff Koons who often explores clichéd cultural images, but without irony or sarcasm. Koons will often take kitsch cultural objects or icons (balloon animals, Michael Jackson and his pet chimp Bubbles, The Pink Panther) and, sparing no expense with materials or preparation, render them lovingly and, thru his decontextualizing by showing them in a museum setting, offers insight into why these objects or individuals became cultural icons and are embedded into our cultural consciousness.

In front of Koon's work, one is forced to reconsider the cliché and reassess what belongs in high versus low culture. I hope to photograph certain things that are perhaps at this point photographic clichés (abandoned houses, cemeteries, flowers) and, without irony, represent these to the viewer as not kitsch objects that one should consider from a detached perspective, but rather as beautiful, monumental objects that, if described well and studied closely, can shed insight into one's past and into a culture that has overused these images. I hope to transcend the cliché connotations some of these images may have, and allow the viewer to see them from a fresh prospective.

In discussing my exhibition, it is best to begin by writing about the overall layout and how the individual pieces function as a whole, then analyzing individual photos. Humans often understand the world and their place in it through stories: from creation myths to Greek mythology to the long tradition of oral story telling, stories are an ancient art form that explain and allow the viewer to make sense of a seemingly random world. Like stories that are used to explain how or why something happened, we selectively choose certain memories as stand-ins for our entire childhood or as symbols to explain our "story" or how we became who we are in the present. I hoped to allude to this parallel between memory and story telling by placing the photos as a group on the wall in a way that suggested a very loose narrative about childhood and nostalgia. I want the viewer to make connections between the photos and perhaps imagine a narrative for this story while simultaneously reflecting back on their own childhood and memories from that period. The themes of loss, regret, and death (adult themes) are suggested by some of these photos but are tempered with the childhood themes of hope, magic, and innocence. Mixed together, it is my intention to foster a dialog in the viewer between his/her present, adult self and his/her former, childhood self.

Death and decay is one thematic concern that both the abandoned house and the cemetery picture fit under. As discussed earlier, the transition from childhood to
adulthood involves the realization of one's mortality and, on a more general level, that nothing (people, buildings, feelings) lasts forever. The cemetery picture is a direct reference to this idea. However, through the subtle use of saturation and soft lighting, I hope to present the cemetery not just as a foreboding, but alluring as well:

As a child, the wide open spaces of a cemetery coupled with the meticulously manicured ground and gardens seemed magical and inviting and I hope to emulate this feeling in the adult viewer. For the child, the cemetery does not represent death, but rather a place to play. I want to produce in the viewer sensations akin to those of nostalgia in which fondness and wonder of childhood memories are intermingled with regret and loss found in an adult's perspective. It is my hope that if this dual perspective (adult vs. child) can be elicited from the adult viewer, it will enable him/her to think more closely about the nature of nostalgia and reconcile his/her yearning for the past with his/her present situation.

The abandoned/overgrown house is another reference to death, however, again I hope this picture is simultaneously sad, but also enigmatic and inviting. As a child, abandoned houses were menacing, but also exciting and mysterious. In this photo the shrubbery covers up the majority of the house:
My goal is for this picture to be general enough to serve as an archetype/symbol for the passing of time. Because there are few specific details about the house to focus on in order to locate it in a specific place and time, it is my hope that the viewer will think of his/her own childhood home when looking at this photo.

The "Welcome" and "I Love You" photos could also be seen as photos about decay and the passing of time. As we enter adulthood and romantic relationships are entered into and broken off, one learns the painful lesson that no love - not the unconditional love of a parent for a child nor the love of the romantic variety - is permanent. The "I Love You" sign is tattered and falling apart, indicating that it will not last forever:
The "Santa Frosty" picture deals with the stripping away of illusions and erroneous beliefs as we grow older:

At one time, most U.S. children believed in the myth of Santa Claus, but at various ages, we learned the truth. The Frosty sign is completely blank, however these indelible myths from childhood have permanently etched their way into most adults' psyches so that this image, despite being just a shape, is immediately recognizable. I hope the viewer recognizes how deeply embedded these cultural myths from our childhood are, and reconsider these symbols from an adult perspective. Again, I hope to create a tension in the photograph caused by forcing the viewer to interpret this photo simultaneously from a child's and adult's perspective. The adult viewer will perhaps look on this photo with a detachment, knowing that these cultural myths are just that, fantasies, but also with a certain fondness when one remembers the excitement and fervent anticipation that a child greets each holiday season.
The "Prayer Box" could be seen as a companion piece to the "Santa Frosty" picture, only this time it addresses another myth many were taught to believe in childhood, that of religion:

![Image of Prayer Box and Santa Frosty](image)

Both Santa and God are larger than life mythical beings we make requests of - we ask Santa for presents/the fulfillment of wishes and God for favors and miracles. By juxtaposing these pictures on the wall, I want the viewer to confront what he/she was taught to believe and ask questions regarding these beliefs such as: Are the teaching of religion and other cultural myths such as the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus analogous? Is religion any less ridiculous than the idea of Santa Claus? Why does everyone at some point abandon the belief in Santa Claus, but some still hold adamantly to the belief of an omniscient God? Rather than offer a definitive answer to these questions, I want the viewer to come to his/her own decisions.
The "Wooden Room" could also be viewed as either menacing because of the confined space, or as a comforting almost womblike environment:

![Wooden Room Image]

Again I hope to achieve this dual perspective in the viewer of being able to see this both through an adult's and child's eyes simultaneously. As children, our rooms often became worlds into themselves: we hide in them, construct forts and play for hours contentedly. However, these same rooms were also the places that became menacing at bedtime and where one was sent when punished.
As a child, nature took on a presence of its own and often seemed supernatural or otherworldly. As we grow older, these magical elements of nature are demystified and all events that might be attributed to magic (the Northern Lights, thunder and lightning, etc.) are given rational explanations. This is a necessary part of getting older and separating fact from fiction; however, adopting a completely rational mindset is often at the expense of keeping one's imagination/sense of wonder in adulthood. In my picture of the tropical bush against the wall and the foliage at night, I am attempting to imbue nature with a mystical element that we often lose as adults:

While natural phenomenon may be explained through science, the nature of reality is still a fundamental mystery. Human vision encompasses a very small part of the light spectrum - how we see colors and light - basically our vision - is severely limited. The subtle tweaks in color and saturation of these two landscapes serve as a gentle reminder to the adult viewer to try and maintain his/her sense of wonder despite growing older and reinforce the idea that are many other ways to view the world rather than always through the rational adult lens.
Perhaps the two photos that are most notable when one enters the space are the satellite and wallpaper pictures, both printed larger and backlit. The satellite photo is centered at the bottom of the group of photos and serves as the centerpiece of the exhibit:

A primary theme of these photos is reassessing the past and trying to reconcile one's adult self with his/her childhood self. Using a satellite to symbolize this process seemed apt as a satellite often projects signals into space in the hopes of commencing communication with something unknown and far away or, more commonly, serves to disseminate and collect information. As adults, reconnecting with our past and distant memories can be a difficult process akin to a satellite trying to glean information from very far away. As grown ups, we often become disconnected from our past. The satellite pictured is pointing upwards, ready to send and receive information, however; the satellite is outdated with weeds growing up around it- it is difficult, to communicate with a past that has vanished. As children, satellites such as the one depicted seemed modern, sleek, and mysterious, but most adults viewing the satellite would see it as old and useless- again I trying to reference this discrepancy and disconnect between an adults
and child's perceptions.

I chose to have the satellite light box slowly flashing to further emphasize the idea of sending and transmitting signals. This slow flashing could also be interpreted as brain synapses firing— the mind working to recollect the past.

The peeling wallpaper picture is also printed larger and backlit, though it is positioned on the adjoining wall and is by itself with a record player placed on top of the light box.

The wallpaper depicted is dirty, stained, and ripped, but pristinely displayed and cleanly illuminated thereby creating a tension between the subject matter and display. This juxtaposition is meant to mirror the discrepancy that often occurs between the memory of something versus how it actually appears. If one recollects his/her childhood home lived in years ago, he/she will imagine it as it existed then: clean and functional, but this may contradict its present state if the home has been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. I wanted to visually express this contradiction between the memory of something and how it actually appears. The infinitely skipping record player placed on top of this light box, is meant to evoke a sense of loss and abandonment: the music, the revelry has stopped and childhood games must be put aside now that one is older.
Functioning as a whole, I hope my Thesis Exhibit is a testament to the power of childhood and memory. We can perhaps never return to the place or time or even feelings we have as children, but through remembering these things we reconcile the adults we are now with the children we once were. I hope my images evoke the bittersweet emotions that nostalgia produces and causes each viewer to look more closely at the past and specifically his/her childhood.