Interdisciplinary Visual Arts

Joseph A. Freeman Jr.

A thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington
2014

Committee:
Ellen Garvens
Rebecca Cummins
Dave Kennedy

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
School of Art

UMI Number: 1562837

UMI®

Dissertation Publishing

UMI 1562837

ProQuest®

University of Washington

Abstract

Interdisciplinary Visual Arts

Joseph A. Freeman Jr.

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Chair + Professor Ellen Garvens
Photomedia

This thesis paper explores the dynamics of how matter (artworks) and energy (both labor and emotions) interact within my artistic practice.

I have a memory from when I was very young, when both my father and grandfather were still alive. Whether or not the shades of black and deep maroon in both paisley and striped patterns were present at the time, I don't know, but that visual permeates the beginning of the memory like a mist.

I remember a feeling of waiting, of subtle anticipation tempered by a pleasurable boredom where my consciousness was neither here nor there, like an inactivated magnet sitting on a couch cushion. I felt a quiet, slowly stretching and contracting energy.

Then I remember a rush of chilled air coming from my left, immediately followed by a beam of worried and concerned feminine energy moving from my right toward the direction of the cold air's source. As I became aware of this beam, my attention snapped to it, like the snap that occurs when a piece of steel passes closely over a magnet.

Through my awareness a 'bridge' or 'wormhole' had been created and the energy in the beam mixed with mine. Sensations of confusion replaced my passivity.

This was followed by a thunderously aggressive cracking sound, which peaked then sharply faded away. The energy in the room was left in a frantic state — like static on the radio whose volume was steadily increased. The air felt charged and disorderly.

In this fuzzy static, my confusion turned into feelings of deep abandonment, disappointment, and longing... there was a sense of "wrong". "Right" had gone and static fucking wrongness had replaced it, much like the dramatic shift of cold air replacing warm air in the passing of a storm.

What interests me about this memory is that I don't remember any physical matter other than the couch cushion I was sitting on (I believe it was orange with thin black and white criss crossing lines)... I only remember my sense of the space and the swirls of energy I felt. I'll address the effect of their impressions on me in more detail when I describe my photographs in the *2014 University of Washington MFA + Mdes Thesis Exhibition.*

I don't rely on my intellect to be the foundation which supports the work. Concept and understanding evolve after the work has been made, and the ideas vary with time. Even the constructions I've made (whose measurements can be within tolerances of a 64th of an inch before any film is exposed), are not dependent on 'pre-conception'.   My art is dependent on and is a manifestation of my *working* in response to my feelings. Any pre-thought or pre-planning occurs to provide parameters to work within.

Reaching for perfection, I give myself tasks very similar in nature to the tasks my dad was up against concerning concentration and accuracy and timeliness. I suppose these self-imposed challenges arise from a somewhat sadistic nature. Challenges such as lining up 18 individual

images on a mat board within a given time frame, tonally match the printing of 18 individual negatives within a given time frame… exposing those negatives equally despite the finicky nature of film reciprocity and darkroom chemistry, arranging 20 perspective lines over 8,000 square inches, six times, with wood, paper and staples… within a given time frame… all the while maintaining my sense of visual beauty.

Shortly after my dad had passed, while I was in my early twenties, I was working at a construction company. My job was to help the carpenters on site. I was fired after a month because of my inability to pay attention and because of the slow pace at which I worked; I found it morally difficult to partake in the shortcuts that contractors utilize to save time at the expense of quality. The firing was an enormous blow to my self worth because I suddenly felt I wasn't good enough to participate in the fields that my dad and grandfather supported their families with. I now tend to give myself seemingly Herculean tasks to be completed within unreasonable time frames. They're a kind of penance, with respect to my shortcomings as a young carpenter, but they also provide me with great satisfaction in overcoming situations I once failed at.

The impetus behind the photographs chosen for my thesis show is similar to how I understand poetry and Haikus to function. I'm interested in addressing something that has a specific topic/s (and those topics can be as mercurial as specific energetic impressions) without directly addressing the topics; such as one would typically do through titles or visual illustrations/renderings of the said topic[1]. This allows room for abstract thought, for the viewer to insert their own impressions and interpretations into the work, allowing the work to be meaningful to them in their own personal way.

There are two photographs (the first and last) in the *2014 University of Washington MFA + Mdes Thesis Exhibition* which I consider "book ends". They provide the possibility for a narrative which is then influenced by the pieces in between them. The combination of the disparate experiences depicted is, for me, as ethereal as the memory I used to open this thesis paper up with, because the images in between the first and last are not illustrative in nature. I intend, rather, for them to have an abstract quality that gives off a visual, then subsequently a felt energy.

My dad often encouraged me to "do better and go further" than he ever did. I hope to accomplish this by doing work that incorporates his profession into aspects of mine, which I use to bring emotional energies into objects that potentially resonate with and move others.

Print quality is of the utmost importance for my work. It can be considered the last opportunity to infuse the work with the emotional overtones I'd like the image to convey. I've heard that Ansel Adams (who was formally trained as a pianist) was known to say the print acts as the performance with the negative being the score in respect to symphonic compositions. I strongly agree with his position. For example, I've heard Chopin's Prelude

no. 15 played in a variety of tempos and levels of tonal scale (from recordings with a deep base to more "twangy" renditions) and while they all follow the same sequence of notes, each conveys a *very* different feeling. The same goes for prints; a negative printed high key is extremely different in feeling than were it printed in the lower darker tones.

I usually prefer to print my work within the bottom half of the tonal scale (zones 1-5 or 6); reaching tones so dark at times that I'll have to wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness in order to be able to see detail within the dimmest areas. This is a reward for careful and deliberate looking. In 2007 I saw an exhibition of John Singer Sargent's paintings in Venice, Italy where the blacks in his works moved beyond visual pleasure and into an area of emotional resonance. They transformed my awareness and my standards of how to handle tonal depth. I apologize for the drama, but much in the same way Edward Weston's prints generate a physical sensation of diving into a pool of molten silver; Sargent's blacks are like drinking, deboucharously, from a well of thick tar that the planet had pumped from its bowels. I cannot precisely articulate my response to the tones that oil paint and silver gelatin are capable of, but I do know that for me they're a place where emotional depth very definitely has a strong existence.

Learning how to technically control the depth of black in a print while maintaining highlight separation hasn't been the easiest of roads to travel. I'd spent two years learning a technique of developing film that entails using developer in ways to mitigate and control film's natural tendency to leach out potassium bromide. That chemical acts as a restrainer to the developer, halting development wherever the bromide is present. To put the technique in laymen's terms, I taught myself a method to precisely control contrast and sharpness within the shadows without affecting the highlights. Using this method of developing film set me out on a path toward an understanding of film's many variables and qualities. With unconventional developmental procedures, comes unconventional overall handling of the film. There are no guidelines to follow. Manufacturers do not include directions on how their products should be treated when non-homogenous results are desired.

In essence, once one basic element has been altered (the basic elements include: film type, film speed, film size, temperature of developer, development time or length, dilution of developer, volume of developer, agitation vigorousness, agitation frequency, the type of paper the film will be printed on to, the paper grade or paper contrast, and the paper's developer (which has the same elements to consider and grapple with as the film's developer), all the other elements need modification as well. There is a very fine line between the black appearing weak, having not enough separation of tone and contrast, and looking as though it's a dull dark grey; and having the black be just what its name implies- completely black without any detail, or visual information. When either shortcoming is the case, the soul/performance of the print either suffers or is lost completely. Once the blacks are blocked up without having detail, the illusion of representational three dimensionality is lost- the area of pure black slams against the surface of the print/paper, and flattens out to a two dimensional form. When the blacks are weak, for me, the print becomes disgusting to look

at. Something akin to listening to a song on the radio while going back and forth between losing and gaining reception.

When a print retains detail throughout all areas, it mimics how our eyes function. Our typical experience allows us to see into all areas of light and dark. For example, standing in the shade underneath a forest canopy, we can dig a hole and look into and see the detail of the dark soil. We can then look up to the sky and after a brief period of adjustment of the eyes, we can see detail in sunlit clouds. The soil and the clouds have extremely different levels of illumination and to be able to make a print that conveys a 'real' sense of place, detail is needed in both extremes of luminosity. It is a challenge to get film to record both of those extremes at the same time, but it is not too much of a difficulty if one is fluent in their handling of the relationship between exposure and development.

The real difficulty lies in how the midtones are reproduced in such a scenario. Oftentimes in scenes under these differing levels of illumination, prints will appear dull and lifeless because of the nature of the printing paper's rendering of midtones when used at a grade of contrast necessitated by retaining shadow and highlight separation/detail. Common phrases for this type of suffering print vary from, 'muddy', to 'soot and chalk'.

Once one can control the contrast in how all three degrees of the print reproduce (highlights, midtones, and shadows), one has the ability to deceive the eye, or at least *suspend* its disbelief; into believing it's looking at a real space where the things photographed could exist. Providing the print with this ability gives me the same thing that I find addicting in getting lost in the story line of a movie or book; the same thing that gives goosebumps while listening to compelling music, and the same thing I enjoy while feeling euphoria after consuming mind-altering substances.

Such a print's qualities can be further enhanced by the method of mounting the photograph. Typically, once a gelatin silver print reaches such optical extremes, the medium itself becomes apparent. The print actually looks like it is displaying *silver on paper*, as opposed to providing only light and dark tones. And, it's this scenario where the matting and mounting of the photograph can really help to exaggerate a condition where there is a going back and forth in the mind between image and object.

When I began mounting my work in 1999, I would cut a window to a size that would crop into the image. Then, in 2002 I saw photographs dry mounted with a window cut about ¼ of an inch wider than the photograph's boarders. I didn't know why, but I felt better about that presentation, so I adopted it. Then in 2012 I saw photographs on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art where the prints were presented in same manner I had previously adopted, but with the exception of having the print appear as though it was hovering about a 1/16 of an inch above the surface of the mat board. I've since adopted this as my 'standard' for presenting photographs, as it further encourages the "objectness" and spatial precariousness of the photograph. More importantly (in the time since this has become my latest standard of presentation) is the *notion* of my awareness; that seemingly

insignificant variations in the handling of the print in its display can bring forth monumental changes of where the print occupies the mind between image and object. I look forward to serious experimentation with presentation. Until now it has acted as the boarders of where my responsibility as an artist taper off into the space of others.

Formal composition is also an extremely important concern of mine. There are four major tendencies in how I treat composition that I've noticed to be recurring at either the same time or separately within my photographs (my 'smartest' work entails having all the formal compositional aspects present at once and balanced in measure[4]):

1-Collapsing the represented space then re-expanding and/or warping it into and onto illusionary planes that appear to hover in front of and/or behind the actual surface of the print.
      By choosing a specific focal length of lens and then its position along lines of perspective and scaling, line and scale can be used to counter one's typical experience of spatial relationships. This spatial countering expands upon the effects of the printing and presentation techniques I mentioned above; thus providing the viewer with an even stronger image vs. object tension.

2-Rendering the image with an extremely high degree of clear and dense visual information/details.
      By combining contact printing with an appropriate f/stop to facilitate a large depth of field, film can be given an amount of visual information that is beyond what the human eye is capable of resolving. This "information reserve"[6] attracts me for two reasons:
      Firstly, with so much data packed into such a relatively small area, the transition of tone from light to dark is uninterrupted by the grains of silver salts which comprise the image. Under this circumstance the medium can be considered invisible. Unlike paintings (brush strokes) and photographic enlargements (grain), the viewer is only presented with *image* regardless of their proximity to the piece. This too serves me in two ways: very close inspection of the print is encouraged and rewarded by an unrelenting 'giving' of information, only limited by the ability of the eye. And, the surface of the print appears as though it is an uninterrupted solid material, just as if one were looking at a bar of silver.
      Secondly, by packing a lot of details to look at into the image, the eye stays active; at times, exhaustingly so. Something I've noticed is that with a lot of eye movement comes a lot of excitement and a lot of things to discover. I live for discovery and excitement. Period.

3-Managing the subject/s in a way where there is no one specific subject, but instead having the harmony or relationship of all the things imaged become the 'subject'. Positioning the subjects within the frame so that there is no central or prominent focal point further enhances the 'all over' eye movement.

4-Making a distinction between my notions of 'place vs. space'[5] and then employing their characteristics in an appropriate way for how I'd like the image to read.

It is more or less the degree to which my 3rd point is employed that one is able to massage a sense of place or a sense of space out of the composition. The more non-specific, with respect to social understandings and narrative-type elements[7] the image is, the further it tips the scale toward *space*.

When elements are arranged to highlight their social meanings, they're being presented in the ways we typically experience things. Being amongst surroundings and orientations of space that I'm familiar with, I have a seemingly immediate understanding of the place, taking it for granted.

It's when I find myself in places where I'm unfamiliar with the objects and spaces that things seem more abstract and 'fundamental' to me…
I'm grasping for understanding and making leaps in connecting the place I'm in to other places I've been, and I'm doing this by paying attention to the specific characteristics of the new place, such as smells, textures, temperature, etc.

Because of the unfamiliarity, I'm in a state of hyper-awareness and the sense of space is able to occupy prominent areas of my consciousness; it's not competing against my narrower innate response to the familiar.

In my work I am trying to achieve a rapture, through this carefully controlled, perfected and detailed process, and share that with my audience.

----

[1]For example, the similar looking photographs titled *Cycle, Transit,* and *Twilight* have nothing to do directly with the waxed paper that comprises the image. Rather, and to put it colloquially and explicitly; the pictures aren't about the waxed paper; they're about the way the light is reflected off the paper. And, how that quality of light is mixed with the perspective lines the paper is arranged along, and how each element mentioned combines with the titles. ….and then how all of that combines with every other photograph.
It's the rhythm of the combinations of energies I'm orchestrating which are in large part the subject of the work.

²Take the number 4 for example. Sometimes 4-1=3. Other times 4-1=loss and hurt.

³Qualities such as employment of my understanding of photographic chemistry and film to a degree where I can predictably manipulate formulas to produce desired tones and hues whose characteristics are currently unobtainable in other mediums… and whose subtleties are unobtainable by most others working in the same medium.

⁴As of yet, I know no way to actually measure the degrees of the characteristics. I'm referring more to my feeling of the prominence of any one of the characteristics with respect to the others.

⁵Or maybe the dynamic could also be phrased as, 'my sense of abstraction'.

⁶I use the term 'reserve' because I don't make enlargements, therefore the details in the negative are never unpacked and allowed to occupy and thus reveal themselves over larger surface area.

⁷Such as the difference between photographing rain in a way which utilizes our experience of it feeling 'gloomy', and using that gloom to flavor the overall mood of the image, as opposed to photographing the rain in a way which it is used purely as a graphic tool- where it would be used to obscure and dematerialize forms.