Slightly Bent

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SLIGHTLY BENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
John Charles Sutherland
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Accepted by:
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair
Syd Cross
Mike Vatalaro
ABSTRACT

The work in *Slightly Bent* draws upon my background in straight photography. Straight photography seeks to reproduce reality as closely as possible, as only the camera can. I use its language loosely to create images that are representative of the real, but my focus is on lending an imaginative interpretation of my subjects that exists only within the borders of the print.

I am influenced by the formal style of a group of photographers collectively known as the German School, that includes Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, and Candida Hoffer. The influence of their typographical studies of architecture and the human-industrial landscape can be seen in my work in the rectilinear shapes of my compositions, in repeated compositional motifs that are themselves typographical, and in meditations on order. I have adopted their language as a framework and applied it to banal subject matter of a much smaller scale. This choice of subject is closely related to the works of William Eggleston and Stephen Shore.

Thus the work is a synthesis of highly structured and serious deadpan style of the German School applied to mundane subject matter, elevating the banal object to the status of the heroic. This sets up a humorous irony that is aided by the juxtapositions of disparate elements that often create subtle narratives in their organization.

Through a balance of compositional strategy and transformation of the mundane, *Slightly Bent* exposes the dual nature of the photograph. The camera
accurately transcribes what it depicts, but it is limited to the information contained within its frame. In taking advantage of this fact, my work seeks to, in the words of Emily Dickinson, “tell all the truth but tell it slant.”
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INTRODUCTION

My intentions in attending graduate school were to reposition my work in a contemporary context. My previous photographs were influenced by pure photography as practiced by Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Imogen Cunningham. Pure photography, also known as straight photography, is so named because it emphasizes the literal documentation of a scene with minimal manipulation.

From this background in pure photography, my work has evolved into a meditation on how to use its language to undermine that which it holds most dear: representation of reality with clarity, telling us what is. I am interested in the ability of the photograph to re-imagine that which has been photographed, telling us what might be.

I have always privileged formal qualities in my work and see composition as a conceptual strategy that presents the image both as truth and as a distortion. We rely on the information contained within the photograph to place it in its context-- it is important that the documentary photograph provide information that is factually correct in its description of the world and its events in order for it to be useful. I have chosen to reverse the photograph’s role by selectively leaving crucial elements outside of the frame, or aligning them in just the right manner, in order to create a new context, an imaginative one that exist only in the realm of the image in question.
SLIGHTLY BENT

A straight photograph one in which an event or subject is found (it cannot be constructed or staged), is then recorded, processed, and printed straight through with little manipulation by the photographer. Previously my work emulated a branch of pure photography practiced by the members of the group F/64, who used a large format camera attached to a tripod, and the smallest aperture available in order to achieve maximum depth-of-field. Everything is in focus, so that the photograph most accurately describes its subject. These are patient, considered photographs that take time to set up.

This body of work operates much like street photography, which used the portable thirty-five millimeter camera to capture human events in the city. Prefering to work at a faster pace and more intuitively, I now capture images with a digital slr camera or the camera in my wireless phone, which are then loaded onto a computer for processing. I also forgo the use a tripod. Not everything is in sharp focus, but many of my images would have been impossible to capture with traditional equipment.

I wish to represent a direct experience with what I find interesting in the cultural landscape. With skill, time, and patience one can create any fantasy with image-editing software, but I loosely adhere to a set of imposed limitations that primarily allow for making tonal and saturation adjustments in Photoshop, as well as dodging and burning, with only the occasional manipulation. These techniques are available to the darkroom practitioner, but the simulated
environment allows for a new level of control where the photographer can see how the image is affected in real time. The photographs are then output to a professional inkjet printer, which creates the print using pigment-saturated ink.

In art, every process affects the end product, and I in my work, I choose to allow artifacts of digital processing to show. This is one area where my process differs from the traditional darkroom. While learning the method of digital photography, I discovered that a small amount of over-processing could create interesting effects. I find that sharpening out-of-focus areas and application of a technique called local contrast control to an extent that is more than optimal lends an unnatural quality to the work, a certain vividness, subtly separating the work further from the straight photograph and from reality.

There are a few altered images in my current body of work. In They’ve Come A Long Way To Tell Us... Something (illustration 1) one seagull of fourteen is pecking at the ground, completely out of sync with the rest of the flock, and it was removed. From the strict point of view of the straight photograph, removing the seagull is heresy-- the image is a lie because it does not accurately reflect the reality of the moment of exposure, but I am far more concerned with presenting a more compelling image and a final print that reflects my vision. While there is a documentary component to this photograph, I am interested in suggesting a concept that goes further than a literal read allows; in this case that there could possibly be a higher order in the universe than is immediately obvious.
On one level this body of work is a formalistic exercise. This is another framework within which I work that is influenced by a group of photographers known as the German School, and includes Andreas Gursky, Candida Hoffer, and Lewis Baltz. So named because many were educated at the Dusseldorf Academy under Bernd Becher, the title has become synonymous with photographers whose work takes the language of pure landscape photography (large, technically perfect, and highly formal photographs with crisply focus details) and applies it in a typographical and deadpan fashion to human-industrial landscapes such as man-altered landscapes, urban landscapes, offices, factories, along with any place upon which man has had an effect.

I have assimilated the Germanic style into my work. The influence on my compositions can be seen in the rectilinear shapes, the meditations on order, and the typographical compositional motifs, but is applied to subject matter found in the cultural landscape that is more akin to the photographs of William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, and contemporary object photography as practiced by Richard Wentworth, Peter Fischli and David Weiss. These photographers take advantage of the photograph’s ability to point to something ordinary and designate it as significant.

Typically, to photograph an object is to elevate its status; it is singled out as a point of interest. When this is applied to the banal, what was once mundane becomes heroic— the center of attention. Much of the humor in this work comes from the irony of using the Germanic language, which is very serious and formal,
to capture the everyday, that which is easily dismissed. This presents the subject matter in a new way, separating it from its typical context by raising the level of its significance, and also giving the object an additional meaning as a formal element that exists only within the frame of the image.

In the first photographs in which I began to apply a strict formal style, I was interested in dividing the image into horizontal sections, where an element stretches across the print from the left side to the right. I wanted to crop out contextual information such as the size of a building and its relationship to what is around it, creating an image that is simple and formal. With so little information given the photograph becomes a little abstract. I noticed that from a distance the images looked flat as if I were photographing things stacked atop one another, like sedimentary layers, falsely denying perspective.

At this point I began thinking about how a viewer could potentially experience one of these photographs. First, the image is seen from far away, and it is the composition that is apparent. Next, as the viewer moves closer the details of the photograph reveal themselves, perspective is restored, and the charade ends. The image functions normally as a document. Thus, tension is created between two dimensions and three, the physical print and what the photograph represents.

*Post-Rational* (illustration 2) illustrates how these photographs operate. From a distance we see that the image plane is distinctly divided in half with the bottom section divided in half again by a thin rectangle. Moving a little closer we
see that it is a fence post placed carefully so that it meets the horizon of a pasture. The post appears to be supporting the sky so that even at normal viewing distances, perspective is still subverted by the perception that the sky is a physical object, a thing of mass, normally thought of as existing far away at the boundary between Earth and space. What is confounding is that the field is receding into the distance, as it should, while the sky appears supported by the object closest to the camera in the foreground. Looking even closer, tiny clones of the fence post are repeated symmetrically along the horizon, with the middle background post sitting dead center on top of the one in the foreground.

A surprising final element such as the smaller fence posts, has become characteristic to these photographs. In *Nude Beach* (illustration 3) it is a sign that operates as a crude joke. Not legible from a distance, the sign reads “Warning: Submerged Groin,” going on to detail its length in feet. In *Action Jackson is More Than a Little Heroic*, (illustration 4) it is a tiny action figure that occupies a window and humorously sits in stark contrast to the subtle compositional play of shadow and texture. These are straight photographs in a strict sense, but are not meant to be read as such. As a document they do not readily describe anything. The image’s concept, the formal pitted against the object, exists only within the space of the print, informed by a compositional archetype, the “flat” image, that exists only within the dimension of this body of work.

Humor functions elsewhere in this work, except that instead of being the last part of the experience, the photograph’s finale, it often tied to the way objects
relate. Photographs rely on visual information to create context. Photographing an object brings us into contact with its language, what it means to us. Putting two or more visual elements together begins a dialog of association between them. When the right elements are compared in the limited frame of the picture, a narrative is begun.

In *Balancing the Real with the Imagined* (illustration 5) the main subject, a small trailer advertising Heartland Baptist Church, is located centrally within the image and is small in relation to the overall proportions of the photograph, like a bull’s-eye. This is another compositional motif used in several of the photographs such as *The Savior Bestows Heavenly Symmetry* and *The Healer* (illustration 6). Placing the subject in this manner calls the focus of the viewer immediately to that point in the photograph. Using subjects with text makes the pull even stronger, as our natural inclination is to read it.

The trailer appears to be sitting precariously on an incline, creating tension in the image, potential energy waiting to be released. The arrow below can have many interpretations. It could be primed to give the trailer a push or it could beg the viewer to do so. The arrow could also function quite differently as a pointer that evokes a religious interpretation. Regardless, it completes a quirky, imaginative narrative through its location in relation to the subject.

I first began using signs, such as the one advertising for Heartland Baptist Church, as an element of distraction, competing for attention in some scenic vista. Since my use of them has evolved into the subject of many of the works.
Humans have constructed signs as a measure of guidance as well as authority, and their assertiveness is ingrained in our psyche. Using a written and symbolic language, they do not read as photographic; image and text/symbol make use of different intellectual faculties. The arrows are symbols and are read in much the same way as text, although they also function as a strong leading line. In *Balancing the Real with The Imagined* the arrow refers the viewer's gaze back to the subject, or maybe “points” to its significance, or could also imply an action.

Like the repeated compositional styles, the signs and arrows are repeated motifs in this body of work, along with other forms such as cows and birds. Using the forms in this manner further removes them from their reference, and creates a network of symbols autonomous to this work. The photograph becomes less about the reality of what is in front of the camera, and more about a typography that unifies *Slightly Bent*.

Objects are also photographed in such a way that they take on human qualities. The seagulls in *Beach Bird vs. Beach Ball* (illustration 8) and *They’ve Come A Long Way To Tell Us... Something* stand stiocy, an emotionless human state similar to the look of subjects in contemporary deadpan portraiture. The cow in *The Savior Bestows Heavenly Symmetry*, a caricature, is photographed in such a manner that it looks saintly statuesque (especially when a reference to the holy trinity is made with the juxtaposition of the lamp posts), while the cows in the smaller photograph (illustration 37) next to it carry the duplicity of the seagulls
They’ve Come A Long Way To Tell Us... Something except that they appear to be more threatening and mob-like.

I chose the sizes of the photographs in this exhibition carefully, in order to aid the audience’s experience in the gallery. With the “flat” photographs the print could not be so big that one could not take the whole print in at once, seeing the overall composition. Also in many of those photographs, there is some small object that I wish to remain unnoticed until the viewer gets up close. These prints could also not be too small that these important details, often the photograph’s punch line, could be lost.

Interspersed throughout the large prints are much smaller ones (illustrations 17 and 18). There are several reasons I chose to design the show like this. In order to see that I have been working with repeated elements and compositions, it is necessary to see more photographs than the space would allow.

Some of the small photographs were made with the low-resolution camera in my wireless phone, and are therefore necessarily small. These images were often taken when I was not actively hunting for photographs. They appear when I am outside, smoking a cigarette, or while I am at a festival. Because of the small size and low quality, these images are less complex and function as sketches.

Installing the exhibition this way creates a visual hierarchy. Like the repeating elements in my images the relatively tiny photographs are intended to
exist as support for the larger photographs in that they share the same compositional stylizations and subjects that make up the various typologies. This is important in communicating this aspect of a formal motif to the viewer. They also function similarly to the secondary elements in the images, like the buggy and minivan in *They Have Come From Far Away to Tell Us... Something* I envision the gallery patron standing far away from a large print, moving in closer to see the details, and then having a more intimate experience with the smaller prints.

The placement of the small photographs between the large ones is a compositional exercise. In some cases large and small share a visual element. In others there are formal qualities like implied line that exist between the two. Additionally, attention is paid to the number and spacing of the photographs between each print. Designing the exhibition in this manner is an attempt to create structural unity. The individual print has repeating elements, and there are repeating elements that exist between prints, such as composition or subject matter. Likewise the compositional style is repeated in the installation. It is remarkable that such complexity can be achieved through the simple, straight photograph.
CONCLUSION

We may well realize that the eye is there not only to
furnish us with images of things present outside ourselves, but
that with the act of perception, something emerges within
ourselves which is capable of independent development by
ourselves.

Konrad Feidler

Despite all of the technological wizardry contained in today's
cameras, it remains a passive instrument designed to record whatever is
placed in front of the lens, to create a document of the real. But, because
of the limitations of the frame, only being able slice out a small fraction of
reality, documentary context is at the mercy of what lies within the
photograph.

I have taken advantage of this fact in order to make images that are
simultaneously truth and fiction, what is present outside ourselves, as well
as what lives within ourselves, to suggest that reality is perception, and to
show the world through my filter.
1. *They've Come A Long Way To Tell Us... Something*, Archival Inkjet Print, 2007

23” x 34.5”

2. *Post-Rational*, Archival Inkjet Print, 2006, 23” x 34.5
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