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Where the Rain Goes

Haley Floyd

Clemson University

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WHERE THE RAIN GOES

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
Haley Floyd
December 2016

Accepted by:
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair
Todd McDonald
Todd Anderson
ABSTRACT

In this work, I am expressing a deep compulsion to return home. It elicits a sense of nostalgia to return to what once was. The home described in the series is rooted in the landscape and specifically in the creek where I spent much of my time as a child. The work is a type of self-portraiture through my family and the landscape that speaks to my personal identity. As a child, I thought of the creek as being a natural paradise where I could go to escape people. In my mind, nature was isolated and separate from humans. In returning to this place as a graduate student, I recognized that the mythology I had created in my mind about the creek was unrealistic. By collecting excess rainwater the very function of the creek is to support inhabitability in the surrounding neighborhood. The photographs in the series alternate between constructed narrative and documentary. Similarities in formal arrangement, subject, and scale form image groups within my thesis series. The overarching narrative is supported by images that depict a journey to childhood paradise, reconstruct my memory of this place, and document the place as it exists now. The construction of place is observed in images that reference my fixed memory of the creek. My nephews and my mother are used in the series to signify past and future versions of myself. I am describing a transient landscape through representations of past, present, and future views of the land. By reconstructing my home and casting my family members in the series, I have created an autobiographical series centered on the landscape. Through my personal experience of place, my work reflects the relationship between humans and the environment.
DEDICATION

For the precious children who have felt the familiarity of my childhood home as their own; my niece Brinley and my nephews Ian and Zachary.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of individuals from my personal and professional life that are responsible for my success as a graduate student at Clemson and more generally speaking for my ability to pursue a career as an artist.

First and foremost, I would like to recognize my mentors and dear friends Sandy Shore Singletary and Jon O. Holloway. Without your relentless encouragement, I would never have dreamed of following this path. Thank you both for your spirit.

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To all of the fellow graduates who have shared in this experience with me, through the frustration of long days and late nights, thank you for maintaining a positive, creative atmosphere and your willingness to always help one another. I would like to specifically thank my studio mates Amber Eckersly and Amanda Musick for your enthusiasm, you both brought so much light into G16. Last but certainly not least, my thesis exhibition partner Deighton Abrams who has been through this program with me from start to finish. Thank you for our daily therapy sessions, thank you for all the laughs, and thank you for your precious friendship.
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CHAPTER ONE
RECONSTRUCTING PLACE

Beyond providing subject matter for my work, the environment I grew up in fostered a way of seeing based on the development of a moral code which requires finding beauty in all places, even the most unpleasant. This sense of optimism was born out of coping with a dysfunctional family. I would shift my attention from the volatile arguments that took the place of regular conversations within our household to the dust swirling in the morning light through the back door of the kitchen. Consequently, light is central to my earliest memories. As I developed my own visual sensibility, I became intrigued by the medium of photography. My time in graduate school has been marked by an exploration of the concept of home through multiple modes of photographing. Looking at the physical landscape of home, I took on the role of a cartographer by stitching together images from google maps to create my own map which I used to literally navigate the powerline trail from my home in Central to the Oconee Nuclear Power Station, creating a photographic survey of the land along the way. A separate investigation looked more intimately at my childhood home and my family members within our household to express the emotional landscape of home. In my thesis work, I returned to my first universe so that I may provide insight into the relationship between humans and their environment. As a result of bringing my family together in a place of great personal significance, I created an autobiographical survey of home.

Place, nostalgia, staged narrative, and documentation of a changing landscape are themes that are common in contemporary art. Paired with formal decisions, the
combination of these themes in my series allows the artwork to operate in a specific way that offers a new voice in the conversation of home and personal identity. I am renegotiating the meaning of home by expressing what home specifically means to me. This collection of images as a whole is a form of self-portraiture and by approaching the work in this way I am also renegotiating the meaning of self-portraiture. The result of these renegotiations is a series that describes home as a wooded space on the outskirts of a neighborhood and identifies myself in the role of the child, photographer, and mother as well as a collection of memories and the place itself. I invite the audience to consider the banal reality of this marginal place through documentary-style photographs and to join in its transformation to Paradise through representations of my childhood memory of the creek, calling into question how and why we assign value to certain places.

Similarities in formal arrangement, subject, and scale form image groups within my thesis series Where the Rain Goes. The overarching narrative is supported by images that depict a journey to childhood paradise, reconstruct my memory of this place, and document the place as it exists now. I employ radial symmetry in four small photographs that show a pathway through the woods. Photographs of the housing development and manholes highlight the subject of the altered landscape. The destination at the heart of the wood is depicted in a group of images of the creek. Compositions are repeated in the series to show conceptual parallels between images that depict a change in time and perspective. This relationship is observed between the photographs of my mother, Reflection I (Fig. 1.1) and of my nephew Reflection II (Fig. 1.2). Though the figures and the scenes are distinct, these two photographs are conceptually connected through their
compositional similarities. The manhole is used as a marker to indicate that the viewer is looking at the same location at different time periods. *End of the Road I (Fig. 1.3)* and *End of the Road II (Fig. 1.4)* also depict the same location which has changed through time. The first photograph represents my first impression of the woods, while the second image shows the same land in its current state. Thus, the construction of these images relies on my memory of this place to create a series that is both allegory and document.
CHAPTER TWO
DEFINING HOME THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE

In order to understand the relationship between humans and place, we must consider the role of the home beginning with its very definition. Barrie Gunter who wrote Psychology of the Home, defines home by its ability to serve basic human needs. It is a place that provides shelter, it is a place where we prepare and eat food, where we procreate and raise our offspring. For the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the chief benefit of the home is to shelter daydreaming. Though their positions on the function of home differ, they both emphasize the significance of the childhood home.

In his book The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard describes the home as a metaphor for the human psyche composed of multiple floors and rooms furnished with drawers filled with secrets that add to the unified whole that makes up our identity. Bachelard draws comparisons between animal habitats such as nests and shells in what he calls “the non-I that protects the I.” This fluctuation between the external and the internal establishes an interdependent connection between inhabited space and the essence of who we are. In my case, I am less connected to the structure of my first house as I am to the land on the outskirts of the neighborhood. At its core, my identity is inextricably connected to the landscape because it is the place where I felt most safe.

The children in the images represent me as a child. I spent much of my time exploring and playing in the woods, building a lifelong bond with the land surrounding my neighborhood, rather than staying in the house occupied by my family. My sister, brother and I spent our days walking and playing in the neighborhood until the street
lights came on, often consuming apples and pears from neighbors’ trees rather than going home for a meal. Most of the houses in the neighborhood were built in the 60’s on what was old swamp land in South Carolina. A section of the subdivision was developed later in the 80’s or 90’s and is still referred to as the New Section. Most of the roads in the neighborhood end with the typical suburban cul-de-sac, but in the New Section the pavement stops abruptly as if the development was never completed. This is represented in *End of the Road I (Fig.1.3)*, and here, the woods began.

Older kids in the neighborhood spoke of an alleged swinging vine at a small stream called Paradise Creek. At age six I found the creek by following a trail of manholes cut through the woods which runs parallel to the storm runoff system that feeds into a creek. By this time, the older kids had deserted the woods in favor of drinking and smoking and going to the mall. I came to recognize this place as a fixture of nature where I could escape from other people. In his book *Psychology of the Home*, Gunter discusses the importance of the childhood bedroom in human development as a private place for building a sense of autonomy. Such a place did not exist at home with my family. Isolated from others by a thick wall of trees, I found that such a place did exist in the creek. I discovered that I had established my own sense of home and personal identity. These were imbedded in the landscape, distinct from my family, and soon I realized that I would be more devastated to lose the creek than to see our house burn to the ground. These photographs define a home that is grounded in the landscape. This perspective of home contradicts certain material expectations of the home. This version of home does not provide shelter from physical threats and it is not a place where family gathers to
have dinner or to celebrate holidays. This image of home is concerned with the emotional, psychological, and philosophical aspects of home. These are the aspects of home that are most intimately connected to how I define myself and consequently see the world.
CHAPTER THREE
THE MOTHER FIGURE, THE CHILD, & THE CREEK

The first image of the series, Reflection I (Fig 1.1.), shows my mother standing in repose before a changed landscape. This photograph is a metaphor for broader human reflection on the state of our environment, and the development of our world beyond the point of recognition. She is gazing upon a recently cleared and modified swath of land where new sewage lines have replaced old ones. Using a shallow depth of field, the focus highlights the figure. She is turned away from the camera and appears to be searching for and reflecting on something that is lost. She has returned to find her memory of paradise changed. The photograph isolates the moment she accepts that whatever she is searching for is likely gone forever. Despite the drab scene of dead grass and the muddy pathway, my mother exudes optimism in her vibrant colors with patterns of flowers in bloom. And in this optimism, I have cast my mother as a future version of myself.

Using similar compositional elements, Reflection II (Fig1.2) mirrors the opening photograph of my mother. The scale of the child in the scene demonstrates the largeness of the world. In the child’s perception it is an image of his first universe. This contrasts with the scale of my mother’s figure in relation to the landscape suggesting, in this context, that her adult perception reflects a smaller iteration of the world. In the same way that my mother is cast as a projection of my future self, my nephews signify my own childhood and my memory of exploring the creek.

Regrowth (Fig 3.1) shows the same location from the opposite perspective in Reflection I (Fig. 1.1). It is taken from the point of view of the path looking back towards
where my mother was shown standing. Though the tire tracks remain visible in the soft ground, new grass wet with dew is seen growing in the early morning sun to reveal a progression of time. This image denotes what comes after the destruction of a place. The manhole is used as a marker for place in Reflection I & II, and Regrowth. In this photograph, the manhole is of older construction and acts as a marker for time.

End of the Road I (Fig 1.3) documents the end of the road in my childhood neighborhood as it exists now. A line of identical housing units recedes into the background and out of the picture plane. The American flag waves on the front patio of the first house. The occupants have decorated their homes with various items in attempt to express individuality, despite the overwhelming sameness of the homes. End of the Road II (Fig. 1.4) represents my first impression of the end of the road in my childhood neighborhood that marked the way to the creek. Pushing past this boundary as a child, I found a trail cut for the sanitary sewage lines that runs parallel to the storm water runoff system which feeds into the creek. The photographs are taken from different angles in order to accentuate the vast, empty space that was once filled with trees.

In At Home (Fig. 3.7), the high afternoon sun illuminates my nephews who are making themselves comfortable in the heart of the creek, a place that symbolizes home to me. This light casts the background in darkness, as if to suggest that nothing exists beyond the creek. In the shadows (Fig. 3.8) reveals a relatively objective view of the creek from an elevated perspective. Using a small aperture, all of the details of the scene are in focus. Again, the creek bank is illuminated to draw emphasis to this spot. Red Buggy (Fig. 3.9) shows a more subjective perspective than the one before it, using a
shallow depth of field and tilt shift to draw multiple points of focus through a screen of thorny vines. A bright red shopping cart has washed down the creek from a nearby shopping center, reminding the viewer that this paradisiacal landscape is not isolated from our culture. In fact, the shopping cart does not seem necessarily out of place in this photograph.

A journey through the space is implied through the use of radial symmetry which creates the illusion of a tunnel and pulls the viewer in. Repeating this composition enforces a sense of movement. Pathway I (Fig. 3.2) shows a present view of a passageway in an area that is under construction. A literal barrier creates the sense that the viewer is not permitted access to whatever lies beyond. In a past version of this scene, Pathway II (Fig. 3.3), the children are seen entering the passageway. Pathway III (Fig. 3.4) is photographed from within this passageway looking out to depict the children’s perspective. The final photograph of this image group, Pathway IV (Fig. 3.5), does not show an actual pathway. Instead it shows the reflective surface of the creek which becomes a new kind of passageway - it is a portal to the Paradise Creek triptych (Fig. 3.6). The use of light in this sequence implies an unknown journey into darkness that leads to Paradise. This group shows the viewer multiple perspectives of the land as it appeared in my childhood in contrast with what the land looks like now.

The dominant piece in the series is a large-scale panoramic triptych of Paradise Creek (Fig. 3.6). The pathway images represent the journey while the Paradise Creek images represent the destination. This piece is isolated from the rest of the images, drawing the viewer’s focus into this scene. Taken in the creek at the center of the wood,
these photographs offer the viewer a first person perspective of the creek. Following the shift from third person to first person perspective of the photographs in the Pathway sequence, the *Paradise Creek (Fig. 3.6)* triptych is taken from the same approximate area that the children are seen playing in *At Home (Fig. 3.7)*. When I think of Gaston Bachelard’s metaphor of the body as the house, I think of this specific location in the creek rather than the architecture of our actual childhood home.

The house and my family play a large role in my personal identity, but the creek represents my self-perception. The house is a trap, whereas the creek is liberty. I found great comfort in the presence of the creek during the most difficult times of my youth. This sense of comfort has followed me into adulthood. I believe this internalized location is constructed from the collection of experiences I have had in the safety of the creek from my childhood.

The theme of memory is reflected in the process of making these photographs. I work using large format film, which produces a latent image and must be processed at a lab. I am forced to actively remember the image after photographing while I wait for the film to return from Boston. This is very different from an experience mediated instantly with a digital device. In this slower manner of working there is not yet an image to dictate my memory of creating the photograph. The excitement comes later when the film is developed and I see the image for the first time, ideally, just as I had imagined it. Photographing the landscape in this way demands that I be mentally and physically present in order to be technically proficient. There is more at stake working with large format, as a bad exposure cannot just be deleted and reshot an infinite number of times.
This requires a sort of meditation on the scene and a more methodical preparation of the composition. I prefer to work in this way because I am challenged to get the shot right the first time. There are instances that I did not get the right image the first time and I returned to the creek five times to make the best images for the *Paradise Creek* (Fig. 3.6) triptych. I watched the particular scene in the creek change over the course of a few months as I returned to photograph. When I first returned to the land for the project, the destruction of the pathway of manholes was fresh and the men working on the land were still present. The changes to the land that I recognized were mostly man-made. By the last outing, the black tarp that acted as a partition seen in *Pathway I* (Fig. 3.2) had been removed and the brown pathway was green with new grass. In the final iteration of the *Paradise Creek* (Fig. 3.6) triptych, a large tree has fallen across the creek in the far right image. It is a dramatic change caused by natural elements, rather than human interference.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

The 1975 film *Mirror* by Andrei Tarkovsky is a point of inspiration for me. His visual sensibility and sequence of time have influenced my vision. My artwork shares general thematic similarities with the film. I feel this most strongly in how I have made a visual reconstruction of my childhood home, used my family members to enact and reference my memory of place, and in the autobiographical nature of the series. *Mirror* is set in three time periods during Alexei’s life which are of personal and historical significance: childhood/prewar, adolescence/wartime, and middle-aged/postwar. The film is constructed as non-chronological events, memories, and dreams which do not follow typical narrative conventions. My series is constructed in a similar way, opening with an image of my reflective mother as a projection of myself. *Reflection I (Fig. 1.1)* is reminiscent of many of the shots of Margarita Terekhova as Alexei’s mother. The first of these shots is seen when she is leaning on a fence overlooking the family land waiting hopelessly for her husband’s return. A similar shot occurs later in the film as the camera follows her out into the rain to watch the barn burn to the ground.

The photographs in the series do not play by any specific set of photographic rules. Unlike photographers with manifestos such as Group f/64 who believed that every image should be evenly sharp using the smallest possible aperture, I make stylistic decisions based on the ability of an isolated technique to proficiently convey meaning. Thus, the conceptual aspect of the work takes precedence over technique. For instance, I use a shallow depth of field to visually emphasize a focal point in certain images,
whereas in others I use a small aperture with everything in focus and rely on lighting to
guide the viewer’s attention.

Though my own work functions quite differently from the incredibly detailed
New Pictures of Paradise series by Thomas Struth, the formal sensitivity of his dense
jungle scenes have challenged and influenced the way I visualize wooded spaces. The
technical quality and physical scale of his work produces an immersive viewing
experience. He describes the images as representing “unconscious places” that
“emphasize the self.” By using a small aperture and deep depth of field, he brings
everything into focus, the viewer is offered a seemingly endless amount of detail to focus
on in Struth’s work. In contrast, the majority of my images use a shallow depth of field to
draw the viewers’ attention to a specific location in the frame, furthering a rhetoric which
emphasizes my own subjectivity in the work. Each of Struth’s images are shown from an
elevated perspective. The photographs in my series differ as they fluctuate between third
person views of the figure in the landscape to first person perspective, revealing my own
position in the landscape. Of the work in my series, In the Shadows (Fig. 4.1) visually
references Struth’s work the most. The perspective is elevated above the creek scene. A
small aperture is used to bring things in focus from foreground to background. Unlike
Struth’s work, details of the scene are obscured in the shadows due to the high, afternoon
sun that illuminates the creek. The lighting in this photograph causes emphasis on a
specific detail in the creek which is antithetical to Struth’s work.

Jasper Walter Bastian and Susan Worsham are both photographers who deal with
the relationship between place and identity in their work. Jasper Walter Bastian creates a
nostalgic sense of place and understanding of identity through a political framework that relies on the history of the place he is photographing. In his series *A Road Not Taken*, Bastian photographs the now separated border towns of Belarus and Lithuania due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This information helps the viewers understand the identity of the people and the place in his photographs, though the images elicit a sense of nostalgia that is easily understood without that information. Similarly, the work in my series literally shows a specific place as it exists now while referencing my personal history and memory of place. *By the Grace of God* and *Bittersweet on Bostwick Lane* are both projects in which photographer Susan Worsham returns to her southern home in an act of mourning. Of the work she says “Kudzu is now making its way over my childhood home, covering the past like a blanket, and putting it to rest, as I look for the intimacy of "home" in other places. Following the road with the slow pace of a funeral march, this series takes me beyond the backyards and trails of my youth.” As mentioned earlier when describing *Reflection I (Fig 1.1)*, a sense of loss exists in my series, though it is more subtext in my work than in Worshams’.

Work by Larry Sultan and Alexander Gronsky describes related types of paradisiacal places on the outskirts of neighborhoods and cities. Larry Sultan explored marginal spaces in his photographic series Homeland of which he says: “These places represented a small and vanishing patch of paradise that existed just outside of the boundaries of property and ownership; a free zone that eased my (adolescent) uncertainty and provided a safe place away from the judgments of others.” Alexander Gronsky’s Pastoral landscapes are “taken along the outlying areas of Moscow where the human
need to find solace away from the city collides with urban sprawl, and the fragility of nature.” Each of these artists’ works are significant positioning points that allow me to understand how I am portraying place and identity in my work regarding changes to the landscape over time.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In this series, I am reenacting my childhood exploration of place. I am literally pushing beyond the boundaries of home, beyond the confines of the house, beyond the edge of the neighborhood to find what secret paradise may be hidden outside the borders of the places we know so well. It is a type of self-portraiture through my family and the landscape that speaks to my personal identity. As a child, I thought of the creek as being a natural paradise where I could go to escape people. In my mind, nature was isolated and separate from humans. In returning to this place as a graduate student, I recognized that the mythology I had created in my mind about the creek was unrealistic. The very function of the creek is to collect excess rainwater to support inhabitability in the surrounding neighborhood.

Through my personal experience of place, my work highlights the relationship between humans and the environment to reflect issues of our current culture. The most direct human to environment relationship observed is my fondness of the land, particularly as it existed before it was developed. This relationship extends to the exploitation of the land for human needs, specifically housing in this case. An American flag waves as a minuscule symbol on a porch, which reminds me of our long and problematic history of staking claim on place. Rows of identical houses are lined up expressing the pursuit of sameness. The consumerist residue of a shopping cart is washed up in a creek. These subtle cues gently tease bits and pieces of our culture while maintaining focus on childhood Paradise. By framing the work in this way I ask the
viewer to consider how we assign value to place. What makes a place ordinary and conversely, what makes a place extraordinary? It is my vision of the landscape, my affection for it that translates in the photographs and reminds the viewer of places they loved as a child. The worth in deeply considering the importance of place by making it personal to the viewer is the potential shift in a cultural mindset to one that values the environment as our home.
FIGURES

Fig. 1.1 Reflection I

Fig. 1.2 Reflection II
Fig. 1.3 *End of the Road I*

Fig. 1.4 *End of the Road II*
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