

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

TRANSIENT

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree Master of Arts in Art,

Visual Arts

By

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Acknowledgements

To my family, for always being my number one fans

and

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ABSTRACT

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Observing and documenting the passage of time, I photograph ordinary details in and around the domestic environment, emphasizing the tenuousness of the light as the world changes outside. This attempt to salvage beauty in an unlikely space cultivates a profound visual silence amid impermanence. While the photographs make the psychological environment tangible, the flat affect and reductive compositions deflect the physical world of specifics and attempt to preserve that which is fleeting and ineffable.

The series *Transient* uses traditional photographic processes to explore physical and emotional states of impermanence and isolation. As the wife of an Air Force officer living off-

base in Lancaster, California, I make photographs within and outside of the undecorated walls of our rented “home,” betraying my preoccupation with the uncertainty of military life and the inevitable and multiple relocations over the next ten years.

PROCESS

Ten years ago, most people sitting in a Starbucks had their coffee and a newspaper. Today that is a rare sighting; most people fixate on their smart phones, laptops, or tablets. “Advancements in internet-based tools over the past five to ten years, such as social networking, websites, Twitter, and other Web2.0 applications, are changing the way people use and share information for personal, political and commercial purposes...Information Technology has become ubiquitous and is changing every aspect of how people live their lives” (Globalization 101). The evolution of cell phones has also greatly affected the way people communicate with one another and greatly contributes to these advancements. This change in lifestyle and demand for digital technologies has specifically altered the photographic world and the relationship between the camera, photographer, and spectator. With the accessibility and speed of digital cameras, analogue approaches have been quickly replaced; digital cameras give instant gratification, something that film is unable to do, and allow artists to photograph more freely. Advancements in digital technologies have reshaped photography and threatened the availability and use of film, forcing companies like Kodak and Polaroid into bankruptcy and requiring camera operators to redefine their practice. The ready availability to make and share photographs, with applications like Instagram, Facebook, and Flickr, has eliminated the need for stand-alone digital cameras; anyone and everyone with a smartphone can call themselves a photographer. Digital photography has encouraged analogue photography to redefine itself within contemporary photographic discourse and establish a discrete place among other media. Using film when technology expedites the photographic process seems irrational on the surface; but film and digital approaches offer distinctly different aesthetics and techniques.

The “reinvention” of this medium has made the impossible become possible. Unlike traditional approaches that depend on the finite length of a roll of film, digital photography seems to have no restrictions; the number of exposures made on a digital camera is only limited by the size of the memory card (a typical memory card can hold between five hundred to five thousand images). Computer applications like Adobe Photoshop allow photographers to easily retouch and enhance their photographs with tools and filters, affording more creative freedom with less time and money. The digital camera operator can see the images as they are captured. “The instant rendering of data into an optical picture gives every amateur the tools for technical reflection and analysis, but equally if not more importantly, the potential for immediate digital processing of the image and its ‘correction’ also opens up a means to distribute the image ‘instantly’” (Lister, pg.82).

Digital technology has been incorporated into Smartphones. Unlike stand-alone cameras, whether analogue or digital, Smartphones have the ability to capture images, edit, and share all on one device. Much like digital has displaced analogue, Smartphones have begun to preclude the need for stand-alone digital cameras. Smartphones offer the accessibility, availability and immediacy people desire. Almost any cell phone purchased today has a built-in camera; this convenience has influenced a new genre of photography: phoneography or iPhoneography. Made using an Apple iPhone, iPhoneography allows people to edit and manipulate their images with hundreds of cost effective and user-friendly applications, or apps, including Top Camera, VSCO Cam, Pixir o Matic, Camera+, Afterfocus, Pro Camera, Filterstorm, EyeEm, Gradgram, Analog Camera, Hipstamatic, Blue Camera Pro, iPhoto, and Dubbles; they are easily downloaded onto

any iPhone and function similarly to computer-based photo editing programs, like Photoshop. In addition to iPhoneography, social media affects the way people experience images. Before these technologies existed, an artist's only means to see and share the work was in books, galleries, and magazines. Amateur and commercial photographers alike had to print out photographs for themselves and for clients in order appreciate and inspect them. The digital revolution has rendered the physical irrelevant. Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and Google facilitate the experience of looking at images on computer screens, tablets, and smartphones, eliminating the need for physical prints.

A photograph is defined as the "image of an object, person, scene, etc, in the form of a print or slide recorded by a camera on photosensitive material" (Merriam-Webster). The dictionary definition of "photography" is "the art or process of producing images by the action of radiant energy and especially light on a sensitive surface" (Merriam-Webster). However, phoneography and digital technologies challenge these traditional ideas about photography. A majority of images made with smartphones rely on post-production methods, are uploaded to the Internet and have solely a cyber-presence. "Cell phones have become an essential tool in the navigation and documentation of daily life; ultimately, altering our temporal relationship with the everyday image and has altered the way that we construct narratives about ourselves and the world around us" (Lister, pg.166).

Despite the convenience and proliferation of digital technology, many still photographers maintain a commitment to traditional photographic practices. Analogue photography is tangible, encouraging an intimate experience of physical objects in the form of negatives and prints that

digital sharing eliminates. The analogue, or traditional photographic process offers a physical experience that affects the five senses.

Whereas many artists, but not all, using digital photography and phoneography rely on post-production to personalize and reconfigure images, my approach to analogue photography concentrates on pre-production. Some alternative photographic processes, including hand-applied emulsions like argyrotype and cyanotype, manipulate photographs in post-production, but many analogue processes require making important compositional decisions before photographing. Still photographers who use film select cameras and formats best suited to their concepts and styles: 35mm, 120mm, or 4x5. Then they choose a film brand and speed that suits their desired aesthetic, environment, and subject. Unlike digital cameras' adjustable "film" speed or ISO, traditional photographers need to consider the lighting situation and color saturation, as each film brand and speed has different characteristics. Digital post-production allows the artist to choose color and saturation after the fact, while analogue requires these decisions to be made before photographing. These pre-production choices oblige the photographer to commit to an aesthetic and then slow down while photographing, because film has a finite quantity of exposures: 12, 24, or 36 still frames. Being restricted to a limited number of frames compels special attention to composition, lighting and subject matter while photographing. Although these limitations seem to be inconvenient deal-breakers, they require the photographer to be "present" in the moment and vigilant to details while photographing, rather than fixated on the glowing screen of a digital device.

Physically handling negatives and making prints from those negatives are delicate and time-consuming processes that require space and equipment. Working in the darkroom

establishes a meaningful relationship between the artist and the work. Digital output entails a detached, mostly virtual process, whereas analogue photography requires multiple, time sensitive steps during which the artist must be present. Darkroom skills as well as chemical, mechanical and technical knowledge are required. Processing and printing film necessitates a physicality that digital processes have eliminated; analogue approaches infuse the artist's hand in making the work, unlike sitting in front of a computer, or smartphone, to manipulate an image.

To experience the photograph as a tangible object is distinctly different from looking at the same photograph on a computer screen. An image posted on Facebook is intended for digital accessibility. However, many images captured on film culminate in a physical form, a photographic print hung on a wall or published in a book. The moment a photograph is posted online, the photographer has little control of its subsequent circulation and reception; but an analogue photographer has more agency in the exhibition of the work and displays it accordingly in the desired context. Tangibility and empowerment are attractive qualities that draw photographers to use film.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Married at the age of twenty-three to my high school sweetheart, I knew that the military would always be part of my life. In May 2012, my husband commissioned as a Second Lieutenant into the Air Force and was hired to work at Edwards Air Force Base for his first four-year term. The following month we moved twenty-two miles southwest of Edwards Air Force Base to Lancaster, California, a suburban environment that best accommodated my husband's career and my graduate studies. Being so far away from friends and family, I struggled to adapt to this geographically and socially isolated place.

Unfamiliar with my new surroundings, I felt confined to this new "home" and photographed myself within its minimally furnished rooms. I noticed the way the light moved across the floor throughout the day and how it penetrated the vinyl mini-blinds to cast surprising shadows. I began to photograph these fleeting phenomena within the predominantly beige domestic environment. This attempt to salvage beauty in an unlikely space cultivated a profound visual silence amid impermanence.

As I continue to photograph within this "home," windows function as physical and symbolic boundaries, allowing me to document the passage of time while revealing my isolation from the suburban community as a perpetual outsider to the Antelope Valley.

WORK

Capturing an instant and being able to dwell within the confines of a photograph is something that defies all odds of the physical world. This idea interests me and influences my decisions in actively working with analogue processes. Having my hand in the work is an important element and creates a personal relationship to each print that I make in the darkroom.

Focusing on impermanence, isolation, place, and time, the work acknowledges my lifestyle change by including and responding to my environment as I explore the mundane within a domestic space. My thesis project, *0800 Hours*, draws on these themes; it consists of twenty, 10 x 8 inch handmade color prints that represent thirty-minute increments over the course of one day. The images hang in a singular line; fifteen on one wall lead to five on the adjacent wall, meeting in the corner and emulating the space in which it hangs.



Figures 1 and 2: *0800 Hours*, 20 Chromogenic Prints, 8x10 inches each, 1/2014

At first glance, the twenty photographs of a frugally furnished breakfast nook beneath three large windows seem to be the same image; however, closer examination rewards the viewer by revealing subtle differences in sunlight among the prints. The work transforms a practical

place for gathering in an average home into a site that witnesses time passing. The title signifies my husband's military lifestyle as well as the regimented process required to make the images.

The following project, *Two Hundred Thirteen Joshua Trees*, acknowledges technology's transformation of photography. Concentrating on one subject and using accessible photographic tools and approaches, I not only emphasize process, but also I embrace reoccurring themes of time and place. *Two Hundred Thirteen Joshua Trees* compelled me to explore these themes beyond the domestic environment within the vast Antelope Valley landscape.



Figures 3 and 4: *Two Hundred Thirteen Joshua Trees*, Chromogenic, Gelatin Silver, and Pigment Prints, dimensions variable, 3/2014

The Joshua Tree is a unique species that thrives only in California, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah, and is mostly confined to the Mojave desert. Its ubiquitous presence in these desert regions signifies the desolation I experience living in Lancaster. Similar to the straightforward way Diane Arbus photographed people, my approach portrays each Joshua Tree in a full-length, frontal orientation located in the center of the frame. Typically, I make only one photograph of each Tree, honoring the humble and unique presence of each one. *Two Hundred Thirteen Joshua Trees* embraces the monotonous landscape and relates back to the contemplative yet tedious monotony

of *0800 Hours*. Just as the viewer notices the changing light in *0800*, the discrete gestures of each Tree reveal themselves next to one another.

The variety of cameras and film used for this project imitates the variety of Trees I photographed:

Film

Expired 120 Kodak 400TX
35mm Fujicolor 400
(2) 35mm Arista Premium 400
120 Arista EDU 100
120 Lomography Color 100
Expired 35mm Kodacolor 100

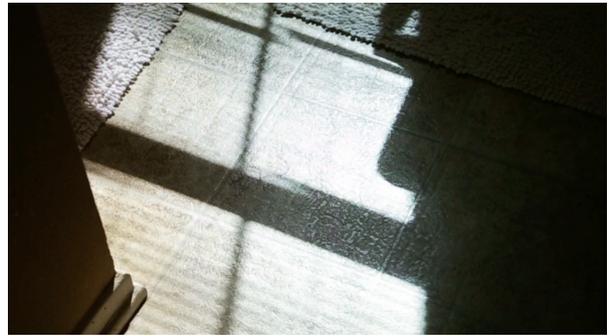
Cameras

Disposable Kodak Camera
Minolta SRT101
Minolta Hi-Matic AF2
Yashica-A
Holga 120N
Pentax K1000
Canon Rebel with 50mm lens
Canon 6D with 24-105mm lens
iPhone 5S (VSCO & Instagram)

Each camera allows me to approach the subject differently. I become more selective about the Trees I photograph when restricted to 12 or 36 exposure rolls of film. Using a digital camera allows me to work faster, and I make two or three exposures of one tree. The distinct qualities each camera possesses influence my aesthetic decisions. The gesture and texture of some Joshua Trees are more enchanting when photographed with a Holga camera. It yields square format, high contrast images, whereas the 35mm Canon creates full frame, distinctly rectangular images. Joshua Trees situated in neighborhoods lend themselves to color

photographs, and Joshua Trees along roads or in isolated environments are more effectively rendered in black and white.

In the short video *Civilian*, I began to use the camera as an extension of myself, documenting the way I interact with and move within the domestic space. Video enables me to simulate the experience of anxiety and chaos, an effect that the still photographs do not create. The soundless video visually bombards the viewer with constant motion, flashing scenes from one to the next in a continuous loop that has no distinct beginning or end.



Figures 5 and 6: *Civilian*, Video Still #1, Video Still #2, 3/2014

CONCLUSION

In an age when people are over-stimulated by social media and ephemeral images, it's easy to forget the power of a photograph: its ability to change people's perspectives, to declare the ordinary as something valuable, to acknowledge and transcend differences that divide and connect creator to viewer. No matter the technological advances, photography will remain a unique craft influenced by its ability to secure a moment in time.

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Appendix

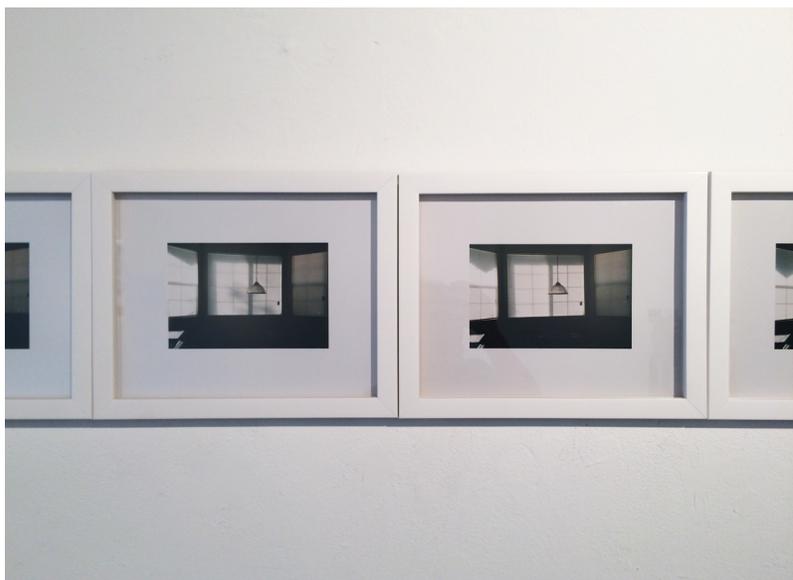
0800 Hours

20 Chromogenic Prints
8x10 inches each, 1/2014



0800 Hours (detail)

20 Chromogenic Prints
8x10 inches each, 1/2014

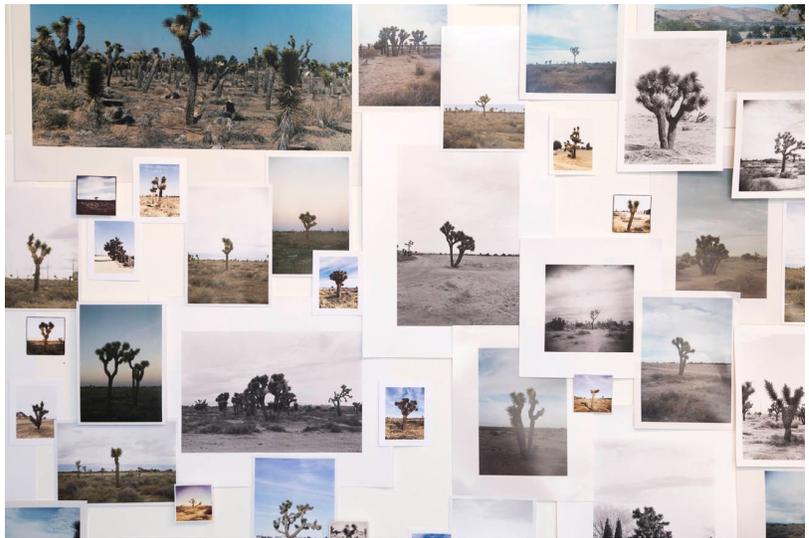


Two Hundred Thirteen Joshua Trees

Chromogenic, Gelatin Silver,
and Pigment Prints,
dimensions variable, 3/2014



*Two Hundred Thirteen Joshua
Trees (detail)*
Chromogenic, Gelatin Silver,
and Pigment Prints,
dimensions variable, 3/2014



Civilian (Video Still #1)
3/2014



Civilian (Video Still #2)
3/2014

