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Ethereal Body: Searching for the Spirit in Photography

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You have to systematically create confusion, it sets creativity free. Everything that is contradictory creates life.
-Salvador Dali

For the summer of 2009, I wish to engage myself in the study of the photographic medium as a way to convey the idea of Spirit and individuality within a given subject matter. Utilizing almost exclusively the photographic medium (bookmaking and printmaking will play a small part in the final portfolios), I wish to create a body of work that explores the dynamics presented between gender stereotypes within portraiture, questioning the nature of the gaze hidden within a work and how that gaze changes an audience's perception of the work when it is changed from the female to male perspective. Famed photographer David LaChapelle once said, "Photography is like painting- it can be whatever you want it to be at any time." As such, my work this summer will center on the production of portraits of men within stripped down interiors to allow for the emotion and questions within the subjects to become the focal point of the image. I believe that portraits, more so than other areas of photography, hold the ability to produce a glimpse of 'reality' for a chosen individual. Each person interacts with their environment and situation in different ways; some chose to self-medicate to create a more interesting and intense form of reality, while others hold onto the more traditional ideology of work and religion as means to legitimize their understanding of what is occurring around them. The project will examine these ideas of what reality is as told through the photographic subject matter, drawing the audience into their story and enabling a questioning of the traditional use of the female form within the artistic realm as a means of expressing emotional and physical fragility. Specifically, my work this summer will be to give a voice to the human subjects traditionally misinterpreted by many within the art world, drawing upon my own issues with men as a starting point for creating each piece.

In order to fully convey these questions concerning the male individual within photography, I plan on utilizing both 35mm black and white photography and large format (4x5) black and white photography to produce prints of various sizes. My goal in doing this is to produce a body of work that is both intimate and imposing to the viewer. I plan on printing these prints anywhere from 40x50" down towards what is known as *cartes de viste* (small portraits about the size of business card [3.5x2"] that was popular during the 1860s). I believe that in playing with the size of the work produced, the audience will respond differently; larger prints tend to place the audience farther away from the work itself, allowing for a disengagement with the work and the subject matter, while smaller prints tend to invite the audience in for a closer examination of the piece itself. Printing relatively unknown male portraits at various sizes will hopefully play with the audience's perception of each individual and how they relate to the series as a whole.

I originally conceived of the idea for this work when presented with the latest work of photographer Todd Hido in my large format photography class. His work, *Between the Two*, focuses on the nature of what is simultaneously hidden and revealed within a work of art, juxtaposing ambiguous portraits of women in seedy motel interiors with exterior shots of houses shot at night. I found myself drawn to the vulnerability of the women's gaze; they appeared to be stripped bare of who they are and instead given a single emotion as a name. In viewing this body of work, I began to question how these photographs would read if they utilized the male form. As a result, I began imaging how an audience would react to a work of art if the gaze staring them back were that of an ambiguous male, given a random number, occupation or name as a

means of identification. I wanted to examine how gender and social stereotypes played a part in an audience's understanding of a work. In starting with Todd Hido's work as my inspiration, and drawing upon my work last summer at a photography studio in New York City, I found myself viewing traditional photographic portraiture, including some nontraditional works such as that of Robert Mapplethorpe and Annie Lebowitz, to determine what it is within the photograph that reveals the imagined identity of the subject matter.

As such, my goal in creating these photographs is to explore the dynamics and tensions that exist between the subject matter and the audience. By choosing to shoot these images entirely in black and white, the contrast and grit found within the film will allow me to form a narrative based off of what is shown within the image formally as well as what is hidden to the viewer. My own work over the past year has been to determine the ways in which photography can function as an Equivalent to an audience, quietly adding into the work some element that functions as a mirror of something found within the viewer. I firmly believe that a photographer is only able to capture that which resonates within his/her self and without this element the work itself would fall flat and fail to engage the audience. Working specifically within the film medium, I am aiming to stay away from creating stagnant photographs (which can often occur when the work is solely digital), and instead instill within the work my own sense of reality. My style on a whole tends to lean towards that of lifestyle and photojournalism; I find that I am the most comfortable when shooting what is placed in front of me, the people, moments, and realities presented to me for the camera to capture. As such, I am going outside of my comfort zone in creating such stylized and 'posed' portraits.

My desire in creating this work is to question the role of gender within portraiture. If the audience is given a specific context in which to view an image of a woman, how do their own socio-politic understandings of gender feed into how they interpret the image, and in turn, how does this understanding change when the context is changed to a male subject? Historically, artists have objectified the role of a woman in highly charged, and often passive, situations, utilizing the model's body as an allegory for motherhood, sensitivity, and lust (among other things). As such, my work this summer is to examine the reversal of the gaze, looking at how a work changes and gains new meaning when something as simple as the gender of the model is changed. Additionally, how do these images read when they are paired with specific texts, be it a title or a paragraph accompanying it? What weight does the text of an image carry in relation to the overall image itself, and is it important in the audience understanding of the work as a whole?

I plan on examining these questions, among others that may arise through a more hands on research approach, examining contemporary photographic portraiture (such as that of Ryan McGinley) and art historical references over the course of my ten-week research period. By placing myself out into the community and engaging myself within the lives of those being shot (to some extent), I am hoping to bring a more humane approach to my work, tying myself into the subject's identities on some level. The project effectively breaks the summer into three parts: preparation, shooting, and processing, with the first two parts of the summer dedicated to the creation of the images themselves and the final weeks accumulating in the printing and binding of the work. As a photographer, I recognize that any dates 'set' are subject to change; at points, I will be able to prep, shoot and process simultaneously depending on circumstances, while at another point in time, I may have to conduct research to further enhance the images and their meanings. In understanding this, I realize that any schedule (aside from the dates chosen to work with the models) is going to be in constant flux moving toward the final due date. This presents me with an opportunity to constantly check and see what aspects of my work are effective and

which components need to be adjusted given the nature of the project. As such, a rough copy of my schedule is as follows:

May 18-31: **Preparation**:

Background context shots (35mm)
Place call out for models
Contact models to set up shoot
Location scouting
Friedlander Exhibition Cleveland Museum of Art (ending 5/31)
Type up model contract (permission for use of likeness given any future actions pertaining to the work)

June 1-July 5: **Shooting**

Working around schedules set up with the models, I plan on utilizing this period of time to shoot the work itself, developing the film as I go to ensure a smooth transition into the final period

This period is going to involve some travel to locations (in and around Columbus, with weekends serving as a way for me to travel to further locations such as Buffalo or Cleveland).

Research will be periodically conducted throughout this time, viewing photographic and art historical books to gain inspiration for the next shoot, as well as visiting the Columbus Gallery Hops (first Saturday of each month) to view what others in the area are producing. The majority of my time during this period will be establishing ideas and trying to reproduce these ideas using models for each shot; due to the nature of photography, these shoots may produce multiple useable images or none at all.

July 6-26: **Processing**

Printing and editing Mulberry Lab
Finish editorials and binding
Completion of project
Move out of dorm

Weekly meetings with my advisor will take place on Mondays, allowing for time to develop, print, and/or voice concerns for the following week.

The working budget for the project is as follows:
(Pricing source: B&H photo: www.bhphotovideo.com)

- Kodak TMX (#4052) 4x5" 50 Sheets T-Max 100 Professional Black & White Negative (Print) Film (ISO-100)
  - Price: $55.95 (x2) = $111.90
- Ilford FP4 Plus 135-24 Black & White Negative (Print) Film (ISO-125) - 50 Roll Pack
  - Price: $172.50
- Arches Infinity Smooth Matte Paper (230gsm) for Inkjet - 8.5x11" (Letter) - 25 Sheets
  - Price: $29.95 (x2) = $59.90
- Arches Infinity Smooth Paper (Matte, 230gsm) for Inkjet - 44" Wide Roll - 40' Long
  - Price: $223.95
- Arches Infinity Smooth Matte Paper (230gsm) for Inkjet 11x17" (B) - 25 Sheets

- Price: $61.95 (x2) = $123.90

Total working budget (excluding any location and mode fees, as they apply)= **$695.15**
The total price of this budget also allows for some material (if left over) to follow over into the fall semester for a continued study on art and religion.

Upon 'completion' of this work, I wish to have two portfolios, one portfolio bound to be sent out to publishers and another for my own personal use, in addition to the large formal photographic prints and a projection of the images within a gallery space. I'm hoping that in my research this summer, I will be able to further determine what direction my work during senior year will go; I view this project as an extension and starting point upon which my entire senior year will eventually be based. I believe that the work produced this summer will enable me to produce a more serious and informed body of work, focusing my energies for my eventual graduate schoolwork.

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