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Miller Arts Scholars

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Nature and Human Society as bespoken by Photography

Rising 3rd-year Grant Outcome Report

Last summer, a Miller Arts Scholar grant allowed me to shoot 46 rolls of film during various outdoor excursions in an aim to make art representing the arbitrary division I see between humans and nature, *natural* and *unnatural*. I proposed a series of color photographs in book format to showcase the best photographs I took over the summer, along with some writing to help explain my thoughts and process. Anticipating that summer being one of self-discovery (learning more about myself and nature than the grandiose scope of society as a whole,) I first purchased a tripod, light meter, and a long shutter-release cable to both give me more flexibility in the way I made my images, but also make taking self-portraits feasible on my solo hikes. I also started the summer with intensive reading, to provide my work with some artistic and scholarly background to help guide it. I began with Thoreau's *Walden* but found it too dense, outdated, and arrogant for my liking, so I switched to Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (described to me as a feminist, contemporary *Walden*), which struck me deeply. Throughout the rest of the summer, I read Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, and *Nausea* by Sartre. All of these novels influenced my mindset and process as I photographed this summer, culminating in a philosophy of nature-as-wholeness and society-as-fragmentation, undercut by tones of existentialism.

I was fueled by an Environmental Sociology class that semester when I started my project, facing the fact it is not good enough to have an individual zero-impact life; the issue is industry. Particularly, I was shocked by the EPA statistic that residential areas make up only 11% of carbon dioxide production for America, with the rest being produced by agriculture (9%),

industry (22%), and burning fossil fuels for electricity, heat, and transportation (58%). If I cared about our environment, it would not be enough for me to simply strive for zero-impact by composting and not purchasing plastic, etc. I knew that making any significant change required doing something, and I figured, what I can do is art. The goal of my project developed into illuminating boundaries and relationships that could help explain how humans treat and conceptualize nature in today's world.



Self-portrait on a backpacking trip in Grayson Highlands State Park

I wanted to make art that was meaningful, that spoke a truth, but by bisecting the photographic process I started thinking more about the camera itself as a representational medium, and my faith in photography as a truth-bearer began to falter. A photograph is such a limited slice of the visual world, imprinted on film into *representation*, which is always an abstraction of the truth. These thoughts grew and coalesced into an independent study the next semester, where I sought to theorize what a photograph truly is and how clearly it is capable of representing the truth. Because that path of inquiry was inspired by my summer photographing, and it involves the probing of inherent limits and boundaries of photography as a medium, I have included the essay I wrote that semester at the end of my book for this grant project. Additionally, many of the photos I took - taken with the aim of representing an arbitrary social divide between natural and unnatural - can be reinterpreted as metaphors for

photography as a medium that abstracts, distorts, fragments, and cannot faithfully portray truth in its wholeness.



Self-portrait in the house that belonged to my Great-Grandparents, North Carolina

It was fascinating to take so many photos (460 to be exact,) but see none of them for three months. During that period of liminal, transitional time, I felt even myself was between boundaries: between school years, between photographic stages, creating compulsively but producing no visible object of creation. I wasn't sure if the photos truly existed yet, in their latent and undeveloped state. And despite not being able to see the photos, I could "remember" (in a strangely retrospective futurity) how I thought they would look like, and I noticed patterns and themes appearing in the photographs I was taking. Namely, I kept being drawn to fragmentation and obscurity: my limbs chopped off by the frames of mirrors, objects through the window of my car in the rain, and intentional blurry abstractions.



I noticed that the photos I took in nature that were simply *of* nature being beautiful tended to not strike me later as particularly interesting, because they failed to pass on the urgent message I was grappling with. The more interesting photos dealt with my interactions with nature, and how nature is represented in social places, like the patterns of wallpaper in my Great-Grandparents' home, stuffed heads and art in a Colorado diner, and portraits of others interacting with nature on a mundane level.



Left: Ice Lake Basin, Colorado (Nature as Sublime) and Right: portrait of Jake from Dolly Sods, West Virginia

I am endlessly thankful to the Miller Arts Scholars program for granting me the opportunity to spend so much of my summer on this project, which was difficult but incredibly rewarding. I think it marked a very significant shift in my work that, from then to now on, is making my photographs much more intentionally conceptual and myself a much stronger artist. I have cared deeply about the environment for my entire life and will continue to do so, so I

also believe this project has marked the beginning of what will be a lifelong theme in my work - dealing with how humanity sees nature and its relationship to us.

Many of the photographs that I took this summer are available for viewing on my website, <https://annalwarner.com/>, but the most important results are intangible: the skills this summer developed within me, the more focused drive and expansion of how I use photography, and a reconceptualization of the photograph. For presentation, I have printed selected photos onto matte paper, cut and organized them, and bound them into a handmade book that will be showcased at the Miller Arts Scholar Outcome Presentation & Showcase event in April, 2019. Thank you again to the Miller family, the Miller Arts Scholar program, and everyone who accompanied me into the wilderness for their generous support of my art.

Works cited:

US EPA, OA. 2015. "Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions." Overviews and Factsheets. US EPA. December 29, 2015. <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>.