

Outcome Report: Learning Limits

R. Susan Xie, Third Year Arts Award

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Throughout this past year in various locations, I've had the privilege of studying photography. I learned various tools, starting with a pinhole camera in the summer, moving onto a standard black and white film camera in the fall, and finishing off the year studying digital processes. I took technical notes, jotted down thoughts on photography, and reflected on photographic works. *Exhibits 1, 2, and 3* further elaborate on significant locations, processes, and reflections.

UVA in Italy, a chance to make art and take art history in Italy, presented unique opportunities for learning, but I brought along many reservations about photography. I assumed all photography would essentially be appropriation and not creation, and the process would limit my ability to make artistic decisions. Despite my ambitions to pursue photography all year, I expected myself to lose interest quickly and return to drawing and painting, which I saw as more substantial and physically involved mediums. However, I have grown to appreciate the objects in film photography. Film grants me the privilege of watching physical manipulations and chemical interactions translate light into substance. It's a beautiful, deliberate process.

To see my work from the summer and fall semesters, visit:

<http://rsx3cd.wix.com/astudentartist#!photography-2015/rmwmw>

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Exhibit 1: Locations important to my studies as a photography student

Here are the places I've loaded film: the bathrooms and closets at Santa Chiara in Castiglion Fiorentino, closets at a hotel in Venice Lido, the darkroom on the second floor of Ruffin in Charlottesville

Here are the places I've developed and printed: the makeshift dark room at Santa Chiara, the darkroom at Ruffin

Here are the places I've shown my work: Santa Chiara, 318B 14th Street Charlottesville, Open Grounds

Here are some of the notable places I've seen artwork: Barcelona, La Sagrada Familia and other works by Gaudí, Madrid, La Reina Sofía, Rome, the Borghese, the Moderna, various churches in Tuscany, the Burri Collection at The Old Tobacco Dryhouses, Florence, the Uffizi, the Strozzi, the Gori Collection, the Venice Biennale, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Istanbul, the Hagia Sofia, Boston, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Charlottesville

Exhibit 2: Comparing three different photography tools

Pinhole Camera: I learned to make pinhole pictures in the summer. For a camera, I taped together a black box, created a needlepoint opening in a sheet of gold foil, and inserted light tight 4 by 5 inch film holders. Focus and aperture were fixed, but everything else, from framing to exposure time, was a guessing game. Exposure times ranged from 2 seconds to 1+ hours, and the developed image was almost always a surprise. Predictions improved in accuracy through the use of the “Pocket Light Meter” ios application, a reciprocity chart, and experience. Even though I carefully kept track of which film holders contained exposed film, multiples times I unintentionally developed double exposures or unexposed film. Development required 10 minutes of agitation in complete darkness.

Pentax k1000: When I switched to a 35 mm film SLR in the fall, I realized I had taken the pinhole’s miniscule aperture for granted. While the camera’s viewfinder and light meter allowed better control over framing and exposure, I now had to make tradeoffs regarding focus and depth of field. In comparison to pinholes, photos seemed too easy to take. Limited by time, since I was back in school taking 12 other credits, and limited by resources, such as my budget for film and fiber paper, I knew I would take far too many pictures to print, which again increased the number of decisions to make. Combined with more sophisticated dark room equipment, my Pentax k1000 increased my control as the artist, which in turn increased the complexity of the process.

iPhone 5S: My first assignment in “Introduction to New Media” was to upload 10 unedited stills to a shared folder on Google Drive. I turned in 10 images on my iPhone 5S. My phone camera automatically adjusted many of its dimensions to produce vivid color images. I produced images immediately with fewer limits on time and nearly no limits in resources. Prior to this spring, I had largely used digital photography as a tool to aid other works or art or as a means to document and store away important moments and images. While I am captivated by the vast capabilities for image making in the digital landscape, I find purely digital works somewhat unsatisfying. The average American consumes an overwhelming amount of digitally produced images a day. The Internet is too busy, too easy to skim, not conducive to careful consideration. It seems too difficult to compete for people’s attention digitally.

Exhibit 3: Selected notes from May 2015 to April 2016 in chronological order

...Photography is an act of theft...

...a frame limited by time. I can zoom in/out, but I cannot capture in one print change in time. In other words, it is true to time, unlike painting and drawing, which can transcend time and portray ideas in full to better capture the overall ambience, the full narrative...

...I love the manipulation of paper: scratching into watercolor paper with an exacto knife, soaking pigment into boards, spending days on end cutting strips to glue back together. The textures, the cut and paste action in real time, working with paper is physical composition manifest...

...I want to learn photography to use as a tool. The whole world is a tool chest for creation. I have no desire to become a photographer...

...Is it a tool for documentation or art making?

...I see the lure of photography in its simplicity and accessibility; There is a certain truth and purity in recording light itself. In comparison to mediums more familiar to me like paint or charcoal, film seems especially clean cut and careful. Yet, I also see its simplicity as a mask to sophisticated technology. Nowadays, with the press of a button, anyone can record hundreds of images in just one burst on the iPhone...

...Why did people conceive the idea of the camera in the first place? What were its original uses? How did this develop into the trillions of Google images and surplus of information available to us today?

...Pictures take moments. Capture them. Steal them away from privacy...

...When you shoot, do you kill the moment?

...Photography has to do with memory, with recording memories of lines and shapes in three dimensions and flattening them...

...latent stories...it has to do with what comes into my frame of reference and the items I personally select from that frame...

...Every print comes from a unique story of artistic decisions. Every step of the printing process involves choice...

...I've never been so aware of time. Working in the dark room forces all choices to enter into systems of conscious decision-making. While drawing, time reorganizes into chunks of mark making, and my hand follows my eyes and my mind's eye so that it's difficult to clearly explain how I got from point A to point B. In the dark room, I become hyper aware of time. I make intentional decisions to use filter 2 or 2 ½, to expose for 11 or 12 seconds, to burn or dodge...