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Inner sound: Contemporary abstract photography in the wet-plate collodion process

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Inner Sound: Contemporary Abstract Photography in the Wet-Plate Collodion Process

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

My work is Neo-Romantic in nature. This description implies a rejection of all that is tedious, mundane, and ugly in the modern world, in favor of looking to history, nostalgia, and mystery for inspiration. I intend for the work to be dreamlike and evocative of fantasy, to be poetic rather than prosaic, and to be beautiful rather than purposeful.

To this end, I am investigating abstraction in photography through the use of the wet-plate collodion process. The work is intended to reference spirituality and the subconscious, through the use of the abstraction of nature and natural forms, using the inherent aesthetics of the collodion process to convey introspective meditation and Surrealist automatism. Certain aspects of the work, namely the use of nature as metaphor for the psyche and a penchant for gothic aesthetics, have conceptual parallels in 19th century Dark Romanticism and the contemporary Dark Mountain Movement. These references will be discussed and related to the body of work presented here.

The work takes the final form of large-scale, colorful abstractions, which evokes a reference to Kandinsky and his investigation into the spiritual in art through the abstracted form. Although Kandinsky is referenced for his authorship of this idea, I supplement this reference with my own views on the creation and perception of art, and the necessity for the spiritual in art in the contemporary environment. Art is a form of transcendent experience in the face of the ordinariness and hostility of the everyday world. This idea resonates greatly with me, as I have always believed this to be the primary purpose of art.
Inspiration

"The path strangled onward into the mystery of the primeval forest."

Nathaniel Hawthorne

I see my work as an exploration, both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense, the exploration is there through the process of collecting the components of my miniature, self-built forests, through the construction of these sets, and through the use of the wet-plate collodion process to create the photographs. Figuratively, the work presents the viewer with a symbolic representation of exploration in the shallow-focused, chemical-stained image of twisted tree branches and leaves, only partially identifiable. This becomes suggestive of the lines and marks on a map, the ultimate abstraction of the landscape, and itself a universal symbol of exploration.

The map is intended to suggest a journey, and the possibilities of getting lost and navigating back to the path amidst ambiguity and unfamiliarity. The archetypal symbol of the map can alternately be seen as a metaphor for exploration and quest, or an example of humankind's attempt to create order from the chaos and chance of the natural world. The lines of the rivers, roads, and coasts, however, deny this imposed order and reveal the free and organic nature that they seek to represent.
Process

"To the upcoming generation of photographic artists, schooled with the pixilated sterility of digital imaging, and a social-networking visual aesthetic, using one’s hands to make an image is a persuasive argument simply because it is imperfect... and as a result a profound and precise reflection of us all. There is a hunger for the accident."

Christopher James

"Free and organic", "chance", and "chaos" are not terms that readily come to mind in association with photography. In our contemporary age, photography can easily be seen as an automatic process, the product of mechanics, electronics, and optics of standardized design, used to capture the objective image of that which is placed in its path. Historically, however, photography was a much more individualized and manual process. In the nineteenth century, photography involved the procurement and mixing of chemicals, the coating of one's own emulsions or plates, the chemical development and printing of the latent image, and sometimes even the construction of one's own cameras and lenses, making the process a hands-on art nearer to the processes of painting, printmaking, or sculpture. This necessary physical involvement on the part of the photographer more readily afforded the entry of chance and personal nuance into the creation of the photograph.

The process I'm using for this work is the wet-plate collodion process which originated in the nineteenth century. The choice of this process has both conceptual and aesthetic relevance to the previous ideas. Conceptually, it offers an obvious link to history, but also a link to the idea of exploration in that it is a fairly mutable, hands-on process. This process involves an investigation into materials and outcomes that cannot always be accurately predicted. Visually, it affords the same reliance on chance to produce imperfections and blemishes that contribute to a look of nebulous mystery and
dreamlike uncertainty. I like the idea of exploiting the uncontrolled chance of this medium to produce work that alludes to the Surrealist notions of the unpredictable and the subconscious, another manifestation of the idea of exploration.
Concept

"Nothing really known can continue to be acutely fascinating—the charm of many familiar things being mainly resident in their power to symbolize or suggest unknown extensions & overtones."

H.P. Lovecraft

"Automatism" is the term used by the Surrealists to define the act of subconscious mark-making, such as drawing or painting with random movements, without the conscious intent to create a specific image. The mistakes and accidental marks of a process such as the wet-plate collodion can be read as a form of automatism. The uneven coating of the plates or pouring of the emulsion, the scratches, stray hairs, insects, fingerprints or lint that embed themselves into the drying plate, or simply the variations in exposure and chemical error common with the process all leave their random and uncontrolled marks on the finished image. This affords an exploration into the visual possibilities of chance.

The relationship to automatism can best be described by this quote from Carl Jung:

"The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image and elaborating and shaping the image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life" (Jung 113).

This quote is important and relevant to me because it concisely summarizes a key idea that I hold about art in general. It speaks about the inherent intuitiveness of the art making process, something that I think is sometimes lost or denigrated in the
contemporary art environment. It is about accessing the subverbal part of the brain that we all innately possess, and giving voice to something that doesn't communicate in words- a universal, primeval language of emotion and intuition.

The pseudo-environmentalist art collective *Dark Mountain Movement* provides a conceptual basis for this idea of "find[ing] our way back to the deepest springs of life." A quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson at the beginning of this group's manifesto succinctly summarizes their outlook: "The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization." (http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/) The *Dark Mountain Movement* does not believe in civilization, or rather does not believe in the rightness of our current civilization. The problem, they argue, is that our civilization is built upon faulty values and beliefs which separate us from nature and are responsible for our current cultural, economic, and environmental descent.

This dark and apocalyptic view of contemporary civilization, and the suggestion that global collapse should be regarded as an opportunity for art making, has been criticized by Solitaire Townsend as "reveling in social collapse…. like an orgy of Armageddon" (Townsend 10). He suggests that the *Dark Mountain Movement* is fetishizing the very collapse and destruction they are purporting to oppose, and that they are "enjoying the show" (Townsend 10). This is not a far-fetched conclusion, in my opinion, as the suggestion of creating art in response to apocalypse has a very decadent aspect, and if they are interested in seriously opposing the wrongs they see in the world they would do better to "get down off that gloomy mountain and get to work" (Townsend 10). But "they are not out to save the world; they propose neither solutions nor visions of a better future. Instead they propose a way of relating to something that they describe as the imminent
collapse of our civilization" (Edstrom 3). This decadent fetishizing of the abominable, though, has a history in art extending back at least to Symbolism and Dark Romanticism, which also share the Dark Mountain Movement's preoccupation with "the natural world as a place that is dark, decaying, and mysterious" (Dincer 222).

My work also shares the Romantic and Symbolist use of the metaphor of nature in relation to the human psyche, and the apocalyptic vision of the death of nature as presented by the philosophy of the Dark Mountain Movement. I intend for my work to be dreamlike and evocative of fantasy, to be poetic rather than prosaic, and to be beautiful rather than purposeful. With this intent, I see a similarity between the exploration of nature and the subconscious as a metaphorical concept in my work, which is intended to be interpreted as Neo-Romantic in nature. This description implies a rejection of all that is tedious, mundane, and ugly in the modern world, in favor of looking to history, nostalgia, and mystery for inspiration. Figun Dincer lists these, among others, as some principle components of romanticism: "Rebellion against the objectivity of rationalism; feelings, intuitions, and emotions more important than reason and common sense; individualism, placing the individual against the group; strong interest in the past; the wild, the irregular, the indefinite, the remote, the mysterious, and the strange" (Dincer 219).
"Form itself, even if it is completely abstract and resembles geometrical form, has its own inner sound, [and] is a spiritual being that possesses qualities which are identical with that form."

Wassily Kandinsky

In a statement published in 1947, abstract artist Mark Rothko "offers a modern revision of Romanticism, conceiving art as a form of transcendent experience in the face of the ordinariness and hostility of the everyday world" (Harrison/Wood 571). This idea resonates greatly with me, as I have always believed this to be the primary purpose of art.

I define Romanticism as that which emphasizes the personal, emotional and dramatic through the use of exotic, literary or historical subject matter. Likewise, I define abstraction as representation of a derived essential character having little visual reference to objects in nature- a visual style in which nonrepresentational lines, colors, shapes, and forms replace accurate visual depiction of objects, landscape, and figures. The subjects are often stylized, blurred, repeated or broken down into basic forms so that they become unrecognizable. Intangible subjects such as thoughts, emotions, and time are more easily expressed in abstract form.

The landscape is a perfect vehicle for the traditional Romantic themes of reverence of nature, spirituality, universality, and transcendence. I express this idea of Romanticism in my photographic work through the use of abstraction. Abstraction may work in degrees, and my intent is to balance the abstract with the representational so that the image is still recognizable and relatable, yet sufficiently removed from realistic depiction to convey mood and emotion. Abstraction provides my work a means of
achieving this transcendence by removing the mundane objectivity from the visual experience, thus allowing for emotional and spiritual associations to form subconsciously in the viewer's mind. This ink-blot-test quality of my work is powerful with meditative possibilities as it offers an ability to connect the artist and viewer in a communication not reliant on linguistic, cultural, or temporal homogeny. According to Anne Morgan, "the potential for artwork to manifest some form of mystical communication that transcends our ordinary reality is great. Abstraction lends itself naturally to this goal, since many of the concepts of spirituality are by nature abstract" (Morgan 32).

There is also a connection between the abstracted formalism in my work and the previously discussed philosophies of Romanticism and the Dark Mountain Movement. Kandinsky, a pioneer of abstraction, is described by Charles Pickstone as having "the need to describe his progress into abstraction in almost apocalyptic language… taken from the Russian Orthodox tradition, in which he grew up, of great floods, last judgements and resurrections, and that provided the subtitles and inspirations for many of his early improvisations and compositions" (Pickstone 74). This "apocalyptic language" echoes that of the Dark Mountain Movement in their discussions of impending environmental disaster and cultural collapse, and the use of religious allusion as a vehicle for personal expression is a common theme in Romanticism. Speaking of the modern artist's formal response to contemporary apocalypse, Mikhail Sergeev brings up "an intrinsic connection between abstraction and apocalypticism" saying that "when spiritual confusion spreads as an epidemic,… artists [feel] an urgent need to express it in abstract forms…. [The] more fearful this world becomes… the more art becomes abstract” (Sergeev 18). Anne Morgan speaks more about a conceptual response, saying that "as a
way of dealing with [this] chaos and terror, the spiritual content in art is becoming a
necessity to the human soul. The metaphysical in art is becoming hip again" (Morgan
36).
Work

“The process of delving into the black abyss is to me the keenest form of fascination.”

H.P. Lovecraft

My investigation into these ideas began with shooting some traditional photographic landscapes. The landscape in rural central Virginia is beautiful in and of itself, lending itself to these themes even before any artistic interpretation is undertaken. By transposing this landscape onto the photographic image, though, the many possibilities for the visual investigation of these themes begin to reveal themselves.

My first attempt at interpretation began with shooting the camera at a slow shutter speed while in motion, in order to introduce blur to the images (Figures 1, 2, & 3). This is known in photographic language as "extrusive time", or motion blur, and it serves as a simple and basic means to abstract the visual reality in front of the camera lens into a more universal and archetypal image that transcends photography's inherent tendency to depict the physical world as it is visible to human sight and perception. In other worlds, use of this technique allows this particular field, or this particular tree, to be transformed into an image of the idea of field, or the idea of tree, generally representing these objects in an archetypal way that goes beyond physical particulars and opens the way for meditative introspection by the viewer. The further production of the resulting images into wet-plate collodion introduces another layer of abstraction that furthers this archetypal quality.

This experiment with the landscape and its trees further developed into a studio practice in which I used sticks and leaves collected during my photographic outings to construct landscapes in miniature in the studio window (Figures 4, 5, & 6). This
introduced a new component to the work in that it allowed me to place the elements of these "landscapes" into the most visually interesting compositional arrangements and situate the lighting and camera position in any way that I found the most visually appealing. In this way, the production of the work became an introspective and meditative experience for me as the maker as well as the primary viewer (I do consider myself the primary viewer of my work. I make it, first and foremost, to satisfy my own aesthetic impulses. If it later can communicate something to other viewers that is wonderful, but it is not made with outward communication in mind).

The making of these images was not totally under my control, however, as it was not always clear how the arrangements and compositions would translate directly onto the collodion plates. In the previous images I was working from an already-extant image in the darkroom and could repeat the process as many times as I liked until I was satisfied with the plate. These self-constructed studio images were being recorded directly onto the collodion in-camera, and the arrangements would often fall apart or the lighting would change after one exposure (sometimes during the exposure), making exact repetition impossible.

This intervening of chance continued to exert itself in the next stage of production. After making the plates, both in the darkroom (as in the first set of images) and in-camera (as in the second set), I then scanned them in order to make larger digital prints. I have always thought of the collodion process as a black and white process, producing a purely grayscale image, but found in this last stage that isn't exactly true.

The process does not produce a full-color image, certainly, but the plates are tinted with faint color casts that don't reveal themselves readily to the eye. Depending on
the type of plate used, there can be faint traces of cool purples and greens seemingly sitting on the surface of the plate above the image, or the entire emulsion of the image can be a warm brown or copper color, also faint, apparent upon close inspection but again not readily visible to the eye looking at the image as a grayscale reproduction. The scanner, however, picks up these color casts much moreso than the eye, resulting in files rich with color (Figures 7, 8, & 9).

Although my first instinct was to eliminate this color cast and print the image in the grayscale that the eye sees (or thinks it sees) on the plates, I decided to let this additional element of chance into the finished pieces and see the result. Not only does it add the emotional component of color perception to the images, it furthers the abstraction I had been trying to achieve in the plates themselves by moving the depictive subject matter even further away from realistic representation. The tendency toward representation is also thwarted by the scale of the finished images. Normally, collodion plates are 4x5 or perhaps 8x10 inches, no larger. My images are enlarged a great deal, from their original 4x5 size up to 24x36 or even 44x56 inches. Printed large, the combination of the blurred or soft-focused photographs, the imperfections of the collodion plates, and the random areas of supernatural color reflecting off of the deep and iridescent metallic paper surface combine to create unworldly visions of the landscape and natural forms that invite the viewer to read the finished pieces as symbol or metaphor, much like the intention encoded in nineteenth-century Romantic landscape paintings.

I am often asked about the deeper meaning behind my images, with the expectation that there is some kind of very specific symbolic association behind every
minute detail or aesthetic choice. My response to that, should the readers of this
document have the same question, would be that while I do work with symbol and
metaphor, it is in a much more generalized sense than that which is apparently expected.
For instance, there is a recurrence of landscape elements and natural forms in my work,
intended, as previously stated, to allude to the Romantic tradition of nature as metaphor
for psyche and to reference the contemporary naturist/apocalyptic collective Dark
Mountain Movement. This is the use of symbol broadly applied. There is not
necessarily a deeper personal meaning for me in each specific element of nature in each
specific photograph.

The same broadly applied interest can also explain my approach to process and
form, or my choice to use the wet plate collodion process as a vehicle for abstraction.
This process, as explained in further detail above, provides a near-perfect medium for the
exploitation of chance in art. Through the inherent imperfections of the process, from the
uneven emulsion of the first pour right through to the color casts of the finished prints,
there is an automatism that furnishes the work with the subconscious associations
employed by the Surrealists. Again, people often assume, or seem to expect or even to
want, that there are very specific and personal references in my intentions with this
process and form. There are not. It is, for me, a formal endeavor intended to create work
with a strong visual appeal and a link to historical themes and processes.

This does not mean, however, that I am against the idea of deeper meaning being
read into the work by others. In fact, I love symbol and abstraction for this very reason. I
think it is the greatest quality of art that a viewer can have a deep and personal experience
with a work just upon sight alone, without the constraint or confusion of pedantic verbal
explanation. Art should be a personal experience, a moving experience, and a relational experience, and I think it is destructive to the experience to instruct the viewer on what they should be seeing or how they should feel. This is especially true with abstract art.

When I approach work as a viewer I do so on a purely emotional level. I want to feel the colors and shapes and textures on my own terms and let the art affect me in a way that is beyond the intellect. I do not want to deny the viewers of my work this same experience by insisting, for instance, that this particular space of color or this particular unfocused tree branch holds this one specific and particular meaning that I have assigned to it. I want the work to have a different life in the eyes of every person who sees it, like a grander version of the famous ink-blot test.

We all have a vast and diverse store of subconscious associations in our minds, which means, theoretically, that each of my images has the potential to be something completely new to every viewer, an access point to the universe contained in everyone. This is a far more interesting prospect for me than the simple communication of my own conscious experience. “The more of us that feel the universe, the better off we will be in this world” (Freedman 73).
In Conclusion

“Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end; then stop.”

Lewis Carroll

So, beginning with a fascination with exploration, I have investigated a variety of themes and processes in the creation of this body of work. What began as an actual exploration of the landscape (through photography) soon became a metaphorical exploration of the subconscious, through the Surrealist notion of automatism, as represented by the landscape and natural forms. The means of this exploration, and a kind of exploration in itself, is the wet-plate collodion process, which suits this conceptual framework very well in its famous unpredictability and mysterious aesthetic quality. In the process of making the work, I began to uncover some analogues in contemporary and historical theory and practice, namely in the Dark Romanticism of the 19th century and in the contemporary Dark Mountain Movement, which both make heavy use of nature as metaphor and an apocalyptic, gothic aesthetic.

As I continued working more with natural forms, however, abstraction began to creep in, first somewhat subtly, then becoming more pervasive. The materials and themes of the project lend themselves well, though, to the abstraction, and it soon became a conscious choice. This opened the final door to where the work had been leading me all the time, to a search for the spiritual in art. Pioneered by Kandinsky in the early 20th century, but seemingly lost in the cool and ironic self-assertiveness of art today, this spiritual abstraction has a place in contemporary art as a reaction against it. By reintroducing this sincere and meditative type of work into the jaded and meta-aware art space of today, I hope to create an emotional response within the viewer that is not reliant
on any explanation or reference outside of their own consciousness. It is this quality of art that I feel most strongly about, and which potentially leads to the kind of work that we most need right now.
Figures

Figure 1: *Untitled*. 2014.

Figure 2: *Untitled*. 2014.
Figure 3: *Untitled*. 2014.

Figure 4: *Untitled*. 2014.
Figure 5: *Untitled*. 2014.

Figure 6: *Untitled*. 2014.
Figure 7: *Untitled*. 2015.

Figure 8: *Untitled*. 2015.
Figure 9: Untitled. 2015.
Bibliography


