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I am the landscape

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i am the landscape.

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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*Thanks to my Dad and my Mom who supported me all through these many many many years of school.
And to my deric, d-rock, d-rizzy, who probably kept me sane (or maybe made me beneficially crazier).
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the ideas and concepts of my photographic works. Ranging from still photography to video, these works convey how external surroundings affect internal states, and show my personal relation to these surroundings, the landscape. The landscape becomes more than just a landscape. The landscape represents me, my feelings, my reactions, and my internal states. The landscape becomes me and I become the landscape. The landscape becomes “the objective mirror of the world and the mirror of the artists’ soul.”¹ i am the landscape.

¹ A. Bermingham, “Reading Constable.” *Art History* (March 1987) Vol. 10 No. 1.: 42.

Mile after mile of dark pavement. The pulsating of the white line. The rhythm of my unbalanced tires. The radio I tune out; why do I feel that I need it on? The two trees that mock each other which I never seem to pass and not see. The goats, the garages, the turns, the stop signs, the speed limit, the clock, the coffee, the clutch. . . . Over stimulated and alone. In the car is my time to be alone, to think, to imagine, to remember, to forget, to escape, to create.

As a photographer, the outside realm stimulates me as I reflect upon it. I began to apply these ideas of the internal versus the external to my photographic works - first in still photography, and then leading into video. Underlying occurrences and ideas in the videos are presented through images of my daily life. The mundane along with the strange, these moments are all influenced by the powers of time and memory and are stimulated by my surroundings. As I became more involved in my surroundings, I began to notice the landscape and became more aware of the connections that I have with the landscape. I began to internally relate to the landscape. I shared the same experiences as the landscape. I felt the same tensions and ease as the landscape. I was still and quiet as the landscape, yet in motion and loud. I began to feel that I was the landscape.

I imagine, i conceive, i judge, i destruct, i want, i create, i love,

i see. i think. i feel. i am divided.

i am the landscape.

i balance, i work, i repeat, i sense, i witness, i speculate,

i see. i think. i feel. i am divided.

i am the landscape.

i comment, i compare, i like, i dislike, i fulfill, i empty,

i see. i think. i feel. i am divided.

i am the landscape.

i watch, i question, i repeat, i dissect, i analyze,

i see. i think. i feel. i am divided.

i am the landscape.

i capture, i wonder, i negate, i harm, i nurture, i repeat,

i see. i think. i feel. i am divided.

i am the landscape.

i am the landscape.

It is my intention through this writing to relate my ideas and conceptions of my most recent work, to the ideas and concepts of those of the past, and show how this work pushes further through the use of more current technology. It was during the age of Enlightenment and Romanticism that one's own relationship with nature became increasingly important and became an important subject in different forms of art. The idea arose that there is a definite connection and no separation between human and nature, and the idea that all humans share equal or similar experiences and emotions. It is through the present day technology that I revive these ideas to make my art. I want these shared experiences and emotions to become a new experience through photographs and video. I want to take the viewer out of their usual and comfortable context and allow them to see their surroundings in a new way. They are taken out of their routines, out of the hustle and bustle, out of instances where habitual responses are appropriate and necessary, and into a new area; a new physical area and a new mental area. In viewing my works, the viewers' reaction should stem from an internal feeling based on the viewing of the images. The landscapes become more than just landscapes: the images are alive, personified, sympathetic, curious, and out of the ordinary.

This viewing experience is based on the actions and reactions of the viewers' perception, based on the current time and then stimulated. The memory gathers information and stores it, then upon stimulation, recreates and presents these experiences as fragments. These fragmented memories are a fabrication and a representation of a specific time and place and happening. These images aim to recreate, not necessarily with complete accuracy, the specific moment and feeling triggered by the current experience. Through this representational recreation (these video pieces and still images) a way to relive these

experiences is possible. Often, in my work, these experiences are altered or distorted. They are intended to portray and evoke a feeling, not to be a clear reenactment or true representation.

The body acts as a link to one's reactions and perspectives. Reactions of the mind and body can be influenced and altered because of time, memory, and the surroundings. My work addresses the internal voice that creates and decides on these reactions. It combines nature and human nature through the use of both optical sensation and emotional response.² In my work a landscape can evoke a memory, a road and rhythm can evoke a memory, a dark night can evoke a memory, and all influence and alter the state of the present. I take these elements, collect and filter them through the camera, and represent them on film. I show the moving landscape. I show the vague dark night. I show the road and allow the rhythm to be heard. I show images of myself relative to these events. The audience will begin to experience and react through certain feelings of anticipation, anxiety, empathy, ease or tension, control or lack of control, in viewing the work

I often use driving scenes because driving, to me, best represents the layered experiences of internal states and external events. There are many subtle coinciding things occurring during this time. There is the outside world versus the inside world. As I drive, I am seemingly focused on one thing, driving, but during this time my eyes wander, my mind wanders, my senses are stimulated, and the drive becomes not about driving, but about remembering, experiencing, anticipating, and searching. These times are portrayed in my video work through the use of representational clips and flashing interruptions. I have to function and sense and judge, all while being stimulated by the surroundings and passively observing my thoughts. Although this time, from what I just stated, does not seem like it

² A. Bermingham, 45.

would be relaxing, to me it is a time to unwind and sort and be present. I cannot change positions or leave the car, I must sit and be with myself. Here I am aware of my surrounding and the outside realm, but am completely enclosed. This is one instance where I have time to see, think, feel, yet I am still divided. I record my surroundings, time, and thoughts and the result is beautiful and ambiguous. i see. i think. i feel. i am divided. . . .

It is by moving through the landscape, the exterior, the outside realm, that I reflect and discover. What is it that I reflect and discover? It is myself; I am the landscape. I use the landscape in still photography and in video photography in similar fashions. The landscape becomes symbolic of instances in life and my internal reactions to those instances. These symbolic landscapes become a means by which I can use "something else" to express my "innermost feelings." These landscapes and the elements within them become personified and alive.³ They contain contrasting elements such as motion and stillness, ease and anxiety, abruptness and softness, loudness and quietness. As I photograph these landscapes, they reflect my personal experience, internally and externally. New experiences surface each time I view the landscape. This present moment is influenced by the past and anticipations of the future and therefore can never be the same. Each individual has these internal and external experiences, and therefore will have their own reaction and their own reflections about the landscape. These symbolic landscapes become, in reality, "only a reflection of their own thought and sentiments. It should not be so hard to unite that which is outside me. . ." with that which is inside me.⁴ "The realities of space and time are

³ O. Simson, "Philipp Otto Runge and the Mythology of Landscape." *The Art Bulletin* (December, 1942) Vol. 24, No 4: 336.

⁴ O. Simson, 334.

violated: the inner or mental space . . . invades the external world."⁵

Many of my landscapes are very minimal in form and in subject. These symbolic landscapes leave it up to the observer to "bring it out of its ethereal and formless state."⁶ "The forms around us are nothing without us."⁷ To further describe the term *ethereal* as relative to my work, it is defined as - *extremely light and delicate in a way that seems too perfect for this world*. This is an accurate description of these landscapes because they seem to exist as a cohesion or as a balance between internal spaces and external surroundings. This is why I choose to portray these landscapes often in a blurred state, in a state of motion, or in a way that in reality the landscape is not really seen. These works become not a reality, but a reproduction of reality, creating meanings different from those originally intended and perceived by the artists.⁸ It is important for the artist and the viewer to be in a receptive and "simple" state of mind upon which nature can impress itself. This open (or 'simple') mind is necessary for the true appreciation of nature and the closed mind becomes blind to nature.⁹ "The first artists, to whom everything was new, observed Nature with a simple mind and caught glimpses of truth."¹⁰ The driving scenes can be used as an example. We are constantly in motion as we drive, all the while internally in motion as well. In experiencing the driving videos, the viewer is forced to focus on the surroundings, where as in reality we overlook these surroundings as well as the motion and distortion that is occurring. We focus on a combination of the external and the internal, even while functioning (driving), and the

⁵ P. Ilie, "Goya's Teratology and the Critique of Reason." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* Autumn, 1984) Vol. 18, No. 1: 49.

⁶ O. Simson, 339.

⁷ O. Simson, 334.

⁸ A. Bermingham, 51.

⁹ A. Bermingham, 42.

¹⁰ A. Bermingham, 42.

two become an "intimate and inseparable connection." I capture images in these moments of connection and these poetic symbols then become a reality.¹¹ They become a reality, for me during the photographing, but also again during the viewing. Different connections are made because each viewing becomes "intimate and inseparable," and therefore each viewer will have these experiences as well.

i am the landscape is the name, vision, and relation behind my exhibition. This exhibition is, of course, first and foremost, based on my personal relation to the landscape, but the images exhibited are divided into two extremes. The *white* and the *dark blue*. Referencing past theories of art and art history "light is the good, and darkness is the evil . . ." "Morning is the infinite illumination of the Universe. Day is the infinite creation of life filling the Universe. Evening is the infinite destruction of life back into the origin of the Universe. Night is the infinite depth of knowledge of the undiminished existence."¹² I use white on one side of the gallery space and make an abrupt shift into dark blue on the other side. All of the images on the white side of the gallery have a white base and are for the greater part white. And on the dark blue side, for the majority are made up of dark blue images (See Figures 1-18). The white side also contains a white video projection and the dark blue side contains a dark video projection. To further separate these two extremes beyond color, the images and intentions also differ. On the white side, the images are more simple, less chaotic, and do not confront the viewer in an overt way. Having them white also allows the viewer to feel more at ease because everything is clearly lit and visible. The dark blue images create more unease. This side of the gallery as well as the images is darker. This creates a greater tension for the viewer. According to the philosophy of Edmund Burke, no

¹¹ O. Simson, 341-342.

¹² O. Simson, 345-347.

passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.¹³ Fear stems from the feeling of the unknown and unsure and the obscure, or in this case, the "dark" side of the gallery. "To make anything terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanished."¹⁴ When we can clearly see or sense our surroundings or a situation to its full extent, an internal ease is prompted. But when there is a sense of obscurity or the unknown, qualities of anxiousness, hesitance, and insecurity arise, creating a sense of caution. Here, the body is described as a "receiver of stimuli, as an organ that both protects one from and exposes one to the shocks of external reality."¹⁵ These extremes represent the broad pulls that can exist in life experience. The viewer is not able to combine these moods on opposing sides of the gallery; they must endure each side separately in the extremes.

To further explain my inclusion of these two extremes, they not only represent the effects of color and chaos but are symbolic of opposing states of mind. I want these two extremes to show a split in character, a double, a reflection, where the viewer can realize that "where there is light there is also darkness and where there is reason there is also madness." This exhibition confronts the viewer with these extremes.¹⁶ The videos in the exhibition reference different frames of mind. I neither observed the natural world nor rationalized it, but reacted and envisioned the landscape to represent certain internal states based on

¹³ E. Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2008, 101.

¹⁴ E. Burke, 102.

¹⁵ A. Bermingham, 41.

¹⁶ J. Ciofalo, "Goya's Enlightenment Protagonist—A Quixotic Dreamer of Reason." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (1997) Vol. 30, No. 4: 422.

experience. In the making, I identify with the landscape and combine these two elements, internal and external, to create the desired imagery.¹⁷ The landscapes, out of context, become more than nature; they become a story, emotion, an internal state. The large blurred tree, soft, seemingly disappearing, is not just a tree, but an expression of an internal state.

Situated in between these two contrasting light and dark videos, will be a projection of hundreds of individual self-portraits, taken over the course of four years. These images were taken in my home, usually before I left the house. At first they may seem mundane and repetitive, but each one is individual. The placement of these projected self-portraits brings together both the light and dark projections, as each series will slightly overlap. This creates one large, joined piece. The three projections combined, become more about the involvement and relationship to one another, and the connection between these driving scenes and myself. These driving scenes, in relation to the self-portraits, become connected. They not only show my surrounding but become a symbol or description of the internal states happening simultaneously.

I am incorporating private viewing areas into the exhibition so that the viewer can sit in an intimate space and have their own private experiences with each video. These private viewing areas will allow the viewer to digest each video in an intimate and quiet setting with minimal distractions. This will enable the viewer to have a separate, discreet, and uninterrupted viewing experience.

The piece *I thought I could save us* is a video based on a night where I had no control. I have not experienced many of these instances where the matter was out of my hands and there was nothing possible that I could do. No added component or concept could have made a difference. I sensed a loss of power and authority. I was alone and afraid and had

¹⁷ P. Ilie, 47.

lost all direction. What started out as concern ended in distress.

It was on January 24th, 2009 around 3 a.m. and during this time alone, in an internal and external frantic state, I wrote the text that is spoken in this film.

This piece includes some of the driving elements that I have used in several of my other pieces. The video, mostly abstract, represents that night and the state that I was in. The images and their tones are significant to the experience of the night. The images contain a great deal of stark white, barren qualities. They represent ideas of white, empty, winter, and isolation. The forms are not stable and seem to expand and contract. They intensify and then recede. They are moving leisurely and then rapidly. The objects are foreign and unknown, they are cold and unrecognizable, as the experience of the night. The figure is ghostly and odd and ambiguous in its intentions.

All of these images are shown as fragments. They represent the lack of control and sporadic remembrance of the night. As I came to recreate this event through film, as with my other works, I remember in segments and pieces, which combine to create a whole. This remembrance conjures up images and feelings piece by piece. Sometimes with direct connection and sometimes with vague connections of the whole experience. As these fragments were remembered and pieced together, the feelings of the event then became apparent and prominent and an experience, just as in the video where upon viewing these fragments, feelings arise and create an experience. Another importance of these fragments, creates ambiguous clues, which pieced together, create a vague yet powerful story. The stark white driving scene, the eerie lights, the ghostly figure, and the ominous black hole, all fragments pieced together, create a powerful story of experience and feeling.

These fragments are sewn together and use time as another element in creating an experience. Some fragments are extended and some are shown as quick flashes. This

creates an uneasy feeling of inconsistency and lack of regularity and control. The fragments are separated into timed clips which allow the viewer to only get a small viewing sample, to quickly intrigue, or a longer fragment which can become mesmerizing, threatening or redundant. This allows the viewer to become involved or anxious during these fragments, not knowing how long each one will last or when the image will change. Some clips need to be endured, and some clips are endured before it is even realized.

Often in my videos, in terms of framing, there is a separation from the subject and the viewer. There is often a window, mirror, or wall between the subject and the viewer. This has several different effects. The viewer becomes separated from the event which can cause distance, or create the feeling that the viewer should not be witnessing the events. In the driving scenes, the audience experiences this event, but only at a distance. A ghostly figure is shown, but with a foot in front of the figure, to create a separation, but to also show that there is another presence. The black hole is shown in the mirror, but not directly. This creates the effect of a hole, which is a direct reflection, and yet a direct confrontation.

This theme appears in most of my works - on one end is the camera or point of view, on the other is the scene or subject, and in between is a separation which presents a struggle between two forces¹⁸. For example, during the driving scenes there is this apparent separation from the camera to the subject. The subject is in an intimate setting because of this barrier of the windshield. If all that was visible was the inside of the barrier, the subject/camera would be 'safe.' But it is the action on the outside of the windshield that creates the tension. This outside space can hold two opposing interpretations. In one extreme, this space can be inspiring and optimistic and on the other, could be threatening. This

¹⁸ L. Eitner, "The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism." *The Art Bulletin*, (Dec., 1955), Vol. 37, No. 4: 281.

outside space has possibilities and options, but also contains obstacles and hazards.

Therefore, the landscape and the interior combine to become not one or the other, but a curious combination of both¹⁹. As an example, dating back to the Age of Romanticism, open windows were used in many paintings and portraits. These portraits often show the subject in their home or comfortable environment, gazing out an open window at the exterior, a landscape or cityscape.

The window is like a threshold and at the same time a barrier. Through it, nature, the world, the active life beckon, but the artist remains imprisoned, not unpleasantly, in domestic snugness. The window image thus illustrates perfectly the themes of frustrated longing, of lust for travel, or escape which run through romantic literature. It contrasts what A.W. Schlegel called the "poetry of possession"--the intimate interior--with the "poetry of desire"--the tempting spaces outside. This juxtaposition of the very close and the far-away adds a peculiar tension to the sense of distance. . . . The emotional stress on the view of space from an enclosing shelter, on the tension between the human and the natural setting, between the "inside" and the "outside," are such striking features in these paintings. . . that the expression "view from the window" has been quite properly used to characterize a romantic attitude toward nature.²⁰

There is the component of audio in the piece. The repetitive yet sporadic sounds of driving are interwoven with my whispering voice. The voice softly breathes a message, to myself, the viewer, and the night. It speaks clearly but quietly; it is almost a struggle to hear. The viewer may have to lean in, change positions, or even struggle to hear what is being stated. The viewer has no control over the volume and cannot rewind to hear a missed sound or message. This may cause curiosity, frustration, anxiety, and a sense of a loss of control. On the other hand, for those not paying close attention, the sound may be white noise or ambient.

¹⁹ L. Eitner, 285.

²⁰ L. Eitner, 286.

The piece concludes on a black hole shining ominously in a side view mirror of the car. The black hole is threatening, dark, empty, obscure, even fearful. This emptiness seems to continue on into infinity; into an unknown depth. This dark depth signifies the emptiness, threat, and ambiguity of the feelings of that night. I want the viewer to be confronted by this darkness and emptiness. I want them to feel threatened by this image, or at the least be discomforted by its ominous, obscure qualities. This shifting mind frame will make the viewer suddenly aware and vulnerable as if it were reality. This reality is abstracted into a visual form then transferred into a physical reaction. I use this powerful emotion and conclude this video with this terror evoking black image, which leaves the viewer confronted with these intense feelings.

Oh no where did she go? is another recent work. It is about her. she was a she, but she is dead. i look and search. . . . she is dead. she had more time, but she is dead. i can see her eyes, or are those mine? the space is empty. the noises are there, but she is dead. there are no living sounds coming from that hole. . . . that disintegrating hole. the hole is full. she is dead. i search, i question, i do not believe. real because the space is empty. the hole is full. her eyes or mine? empty lap, empty touch, empty eyes, empty stare, full of what, something, nothing? dead. the others are ok. she is not. the others are ok. stolen. confused. replace? i walk, i sit alone, stark dark night but white. a cling, a clang. the night is alive, she is dead. i walk, i think, i move, i remember. . . . i forget while remembering. the hole is full. empty. stupid.

Oh no where did she go? is a self-portrait of the internal duality that transpires on a daily basis. This work represents internal states such as loneliness, fear, loss, longing, and obsession. It shows the conflict with the internal self versus the external self. It shows these expressions and feelings on the exterior. It uses the body and surroundings as a form of

expression.

The video begins with the subject (me), looking, searching for something, something that is absent. It is not clear to the subject where or why this absence has occurred. So the subject keeps searching. She searches into the night, walking, contemplating her own internal states while physically existing and functioning in the present. She sits to rest, to passively observe her thoughts. She is now remembering and yearning for another time, perhaps from the past, or perhaps an anticipation of the future. Her mind continues to wonder and scan over another time and another place. She can picture these other times and other places. She can feel the surroundings and the motion. She is present, possibly in the current time, possibly in a memory, perhaps in coming times.

She continues to look, though nothing has been found. She continues to feel, though there is nothing near to be felt. She hears the surroundings, though she does not really hear them. So she leaves. So she comes back. She comes back to keep searching and hoping, still alone. The surroundings seem to be making too much noise. Not the right kind of noise. A noise that makes it impossible to think and to find. So she keeps sitting, and searching, and thinking.

There are key elements used in the video to represent these states. There is use of repetition, direct and obvious repetition and also varied repetition in different situations and different locations. There is repetition of the fragments and spaces used throughout the video, and also in the motion of the subject. Also in the video I sit as if I am petting something in my empty lap. This repetitive and obsessive act of absent stroking becomes a metaphor for loss. As a ritual it is a symbol of searching and longing.

The framing of the piece occurs in different states throughout the video. From a distance, beyond a shining lamppost, where the figure walks to the destination and

continues. Yet the lamp is stagnant. Then the viewing shifts from being straight forward and at a distance, to being close and above. Although the image is physically and literally closer, it still retains distance and separation and creates tension.

The significance of timing in this piece allows the obsession and longing to become prominent and more obvious. Without the prolonged fragments, there would be no trace of these qualities of obsession and longing. The viewer must endure these prolonged obsessive fragments to reach the next and to reach the conclusion. The viewer upon enduring and feeling then becomes involved in these obsessive acts and begins to empathize and yearn along with the subject.

The fragments show repetitive motions and repetitive situations, but the instances and spaces slightly differ. This even further portrays the obsessive repetition and creates the feeling of loss and longing. The longing and obsession do not occur only in one instance and one space, but in several different instances and spaces.

There are the natural sounds that occur throughout the piece. These sounds were created in the present while filming, but have a surreal and reminiscent quality. The breathing sounds coming from the subject as she comes closer to the camera and to the viewer, which allows the viewer to feel her presence and existence. The dog barking in the distance represents the isolation of the viewer from the surroundings. The soft but prominent tap on the flagpole further expresses the isolation of the viewer but creates an awareness of the surroundings. And the silence during the zoomed and close scenes of repetitive stroking expresses the emptiness, nothingness, and extinction of what is not there, and portrays longing. These soothing incidental sounds are then interrupted with a crescendo of disturbing static noise. This creates an unease or tension as the sound gets louder and louder. The viewer does not know how loud and disturbing the sound will get

and may feel violated or alarmed by the sound as it continues to increase. Then suddenly it stops. The reaction is due to the suddenness and unexpectedness of this confrontation. A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of considerable force contains great power. To again quote Burke: "whatever either in sights or sounds makes the transition from one extreme to the other easy causes no terror, and consequently can be no cause of greatness. In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses to guard us against it. It may be observed, that a single sound of some strength, though but of short duration, . . . has grand effect."²¹

As I explore and record life and the world I inhabit through photography and video, I have become more aware and stimulated by what I see, but also more connected to and influenced by my surroundings. I continue to search and live through the flurry of the internal and external, all the while taking time out to imagine, conceive, judge, destruct, want, create, love, balance, work, repeat, sense, witness, speculate, comment, compare, like, dislike, fulfill, empty, watch, question, repeat, dissect, analyze, capture, wonder, negate, harm, nurture, repeat. . . . and to see, feel, think, and be divided.

i am the landscape.

²¹ E. Burke, 124.

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