"Transitions through a painter's eye"

Benjamin M. Wailes IV
James Madison University

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“Transitions Through a Painter’s eye”

Benjamin M. Wailes IV

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Studio Art

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Cole Welter

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Aderonke Adesanya

Ken Szmagaj
Dedication

This body of work would never have been created without my Mom and Dad. My Mom, the late Ellen Lee Wailes, worked as a corporate chemist in the New York metropolitan area during a time period in which few women got this opportunity and also attended law school when few women studied law. She was a talented painter and artist. My mom nurtured my love of art. She was gifted academically and skipped a year of high school. She ran her own business for over 30 years. My Mom would be thrilled to know that I studied art and got my MFA.

My Dad, I. Paul Wailes III, started selling live chickens on the street when he was fourteen years old. He started his own business at the age of 25, which he ran for over 50 years. My love of history and sales totally comes from my Dad.

So I dedicate this thesis to my Mom and Dad. These are two people I will never be able to repay for all that they did for me. They are both amazing people who I love and owe so much to, and as a result, I have dedicated this body of work to them. Love to you Mom and Pop always.
Acknowledgments

This document would never have been completed without a great deal of help. I want to thank Corinne Diop. Diop’s support with my photography in the last year has been monumental to what I am doing as an artist. This monograph would not have gotten written without Diop’s help and support. Diop was vital, indispensable, and invaluable to this project.

I also want to thank Cole Welter for all his support while I was in the program. Welter is a world class story teller with a great deal of knowledge to give. I also thank Welter for being my advisor and on my committee. Welter’s work on this monograph was indispensable and vital. I thank Ken Szmagi for supporting me during my time at JMU and the thorough analysis of my art. Szmagi was a wise calming steady influence on my committee and his input was invaluable to me. I thank Aderonke Adesanya for being on my committee and writing amazing end of semester review documents on my work. Adesanya gave me vital thesis information and her support during my time at JMU is greatly appreciated.

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Karen Gerard, Lilia Murray, and Carli Toliver thanks for helping me during my time at JMU. Eric Morris and Jeff Campbell thanks for your support as well and being great people to work for. Betty Shifflet, Wendy Schwister, and Amanda Woodson thanks for all your help and support during my time at JMU. Chris Cohen thanks for your help in formatting this document, it is greatly appreciated.

I need to also say my art education started six years before I came to JMU Arts. I need to thank NOVA, VCU, RISD, SAIC, the Arts Students League in NYC, and the Art League in Alexandria for their tremendous support. Rebecca Freeman, Dr. G. , Todd Messaggee, Sherry Trachtman, Danni Dawson, Bev Ryan, Mike Francis, Kurt Schwartz, Ted Reed, Ridley Howard, Holly Coulis, and Micheal Jones Mckean are all great artists who offered me great support and help on my journey. Without the above people’s support and help, I never would have able to attend JMU and obtain my MFA.

I have thanked some individual people above, but I want to also thank all the people associated with JMU Arts, and not just the people above. I thank you all for this experience I was able to have at JMU. I love to make art and this experience was just amazing and I think as the years go by, I will appreciate it even more.
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Abstract

This monograph discusses a body of work that I completed during 2016 and 2017. The medium used for this project was photography. This work started on a very small scale taking a few photographs in Harrisonburg Virginia, but this initial investigation led me to complete over 25,000 photographs and travel to over thirteen different states including Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, and Tennessee over an eleven month period of time.

This work presents photographs of everyday items going through transitions as metaphors for the passage of time and mortality. This monograph addresses the original idea that led me to this project, why I wanted to study this topic, and why I chose everyday objects to complete this investigation. I further discuss why and how everyday articles were chosen, and how their inherent qualities made them a good selection for this analysis. I also discuss how these everyday objects can potentially affect a community as they go through transitions.

The photographs in this body of work also dealt with the concept of space and place. I also discuss the process of discovering space and place during my journey, and how the broader ideas about space and place impacted my research.

This monograph addresses my past painting experiences including which painters have had an impact on my artistic practice and I also mention specific photographers that have influenced this work.
I. Transitions

A. How This Work Originated

The genesis of this work comes from a very personal place. As I have aged I have started to think about my own mortality seriously for the first time. This led me to contemplate the passage of time and the transitions that all human beings go through. Things that seem so important at certain times of our lives become trivial when we look back on them years later. These transitions ultimately layer themselves over time, one on top of the other, and eventually the sum of all these transformations become the tapestry of our lives.

B. Using Objects and Places Instead of the Body Directly

While I initially thought of taking photographs of the human body aging over time or photographing different people at different stages of life, neither seemed to be exactly what I wanted to focus on. As an artist, I thought about how I could look at transformations through an independent lens and in a different way so that I could better understand process-this led me to using everyday objects as a metaphor for the passage of time. After more contemplation, I decided that everyday objects and places would be accessible to a large group of people. Quotidian articles such as deserted small businesses show their age naturally, and are a good way to show an honest examination of the passage of time and the world in transition.
C. Everyday Objects

The subjects of my photographs include trashcans, construction sites, tires, small businesses, trains, hand painted signs, stacks of bricks, and other objects. Construction sites are about transformations through both the destruction and the creation and rebirth of the new. Small businesses are going through transitions in both physical property and in the sales, assets, and liabilities that fluctuate a great deal according to the ebbs and flows of the global economy. Trains, boats, trucks, tires, cars, planes, and construction vehicles all are going through transformations by the fact that they were literally created to move humans and objects around. Stacks of bricks and other industrial items are usually always in the process of transition.

These everyday objects in transition do more than just affect themselves—construction sites can have a big impact on the human population as well. Buildings being knocked down can affect communities in a major way. A hospital being knocked down is not just a major loss of health care for a community, but also a major loss of jobs and income as well. Where houses are built can have a huge impact on where people get their education, which in turn can have a huge impact on their lives. The tax rate someone pays, and even his or her health and life span, is greatly influenced by where he or she lives. In urban areas, one neighborhood with a very high average life span can be right beside an area with a pathetically low life span.

Small businesses closing can also greatly affect the human population. The local grocery store can be for some, the only source of healthy food. Post offices closing down in rural areas in order to save on financial expenses are creating areas in which
people have no post offices that are within a reasonable distance. Healthy food and postal service are basic needs. In many rural areas, the local grocery is not just a place to get healthy food, but also social nourishment as well. Small businesses and construction sites also have the potential to improve and enrich a community. New housing can bring a fresh source of taxes to a community, which can potentially bring more services people need.

D. Examples

In *Untitled # 13* the construction vehicles are moving dirt and creating a new space, which will be a business (see Figure 13). New products will be sold by this newly created business market, which can result in increased individuals traveling to this area. What strangers will meet each other that would not have as a result of this business being created? What individuals will stop going to this area because they do not like the increased traffic to the area?

The photograph *Untitled # 2* shows a business that has closed down (see Figure 2). People might have lost their jobs because of this, which could result in people leaving the area. Lower populations can lower tax revenues, which could ultimately greatly lower vital services and growth potential for the area.
II. Space and Place

A. Introduction

When I photograph a city or town, I get a more focused and intimate understanding of it than I would obtain otherwise. I wanted to know more about this phenomenon and my research led me to the concept of space and place.

B. Defining Space and Place

Anthropologists and Geographers have studied the idea of space and place for sometime. “Space is freedom and place is security: we are attached to the one and long for the other” (Tuan p.3). Space is an area you do not know that well and place is something people have knowledge of. “Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan p.6). Human beings need both space and place in order to survive. I am more of a space person, but as I have aged I do certainly think of place as well.

Ethological studies have shown that animals also have a sense of space and place. Both space and place can be everything from a small room to a large city or even a country, it just depends on the individual and his or her perspective. Even a favorite sofa can be a great sense of place. As our lives change our idea of space and place changes as well. A set of stairs in ones own home can alternate between a space and a place according to ones situation in life. A toddler will look at stairs as a space. An adolescent who can easily climb stairs might think of the stairs in the home as a place, while the elderly person who struggles to walk, will find those stairs as a space.
C. What Space and Place means to my process

I had been in Harrisonburg for almost three years eating downtown every night and I never knew or understood Harrisonburg as well as I did in spending just one eight-hour day photographing downtown. Photography really makes me look and focus on things and I wanted to try to find a new way to express this sense of adventure, discovery, and exploration. When I am out shooting, I am making an area familiar. Places where I take photographs transform in time from a space to a place in my mind. As human beings we need both the adventure of space and the comfort of place. Photography and art has certainly made me understand these concepts on a much deeper level.

The viewer of the photographs sees the images and the places, but is not able to grasp the meaning of space and place on the same level as the creator of the images. Photographs are a visual map of the journey that the artist undertakes and space that the artist creates. Focusing and taking my time to create art really makes me feel this idea of place on a much higher level. Getting out walking in an area gives me a much greater sense of space than simply driving my car through an area. Even though the observer does not get to see the process of space and place, I still think it is important to discuss this important part of my artistic practice.

D. Broader Space and Place Ideas

This concept of space and place is a vital role in many things we do in our life. In my mind space and place is not just about geography. Our relationships with other human beings in many ways are about this space and place concept. When we do not know a person they are more of a space. As we get to know them they become more of a
place. The education and knowledge that we obtain through our lives is in many ways a
discovery of space and place. As we learn new languages or new skills these things
become more comfortable to us, more of a place. Place to me is comfort, knowledge, and
understanding. Space to me is adventure, wanderlust, exploration, discovery, and
experimentation.

E. Examples

Looking at photograph *Untitled # 5* reminds me what an example of space
verses place looks like (see figure 5). This is an industrial part of a city that I have visited
before, but I do not have an intimate knowledge of it. Getting out and taking this shot
really helped me get my bearings.

They were not a lot of people in this area and the roads were not paved. It was
kind of a country junkyard right in the middle of a large urban environment. The unpaved
roads were like a maze and it was easy to get lost in this situation. My looking around
and really trying to take in the atmosphere enabled me to navigate the terrain and get a
deeper understanding of the rest of the photographic images I captured in the area.

In the photograph showing a construction site, I found myself in an area that I
am very familiar with (see Figure 13). I have lived in this small city for the last three
years while attending graduate school. This is a neighborhood of strip shopping centers,
big box retailers, and some small businesses mixed in. Given the fact that I have been all
around this region many times, but not to the location where I did this shot, once I took
the photograph I had a totally new perspective on this location. Looking at this area from
a different angle totally gave me a new perspective on this neighborhood. I felt more
apart of it then just a place to go and buy groceries, or look at the latest edition of *Art Forum*. I started to look at this area as a place that was growing and changing all the time.
III. Painting’s Influence

A. My Painting History

I painted as a child and took art lessons up through the 9th grade, while I wanted to continue to take art classes, I was advised to take more rigorous academic courses in order to get into a good university so that I could get a good paying job. Years later, after I had been working as a professional in business, I started going to the National Gallery of Art a great deal, which got me back into painting.

My painting style is a simple abstract style using only two or three bold hues. My photographs are not abstract, so the two bodies of work do not look alike. However, the skills of looking, and thinking about composition, that I learned as a painter has had a significant influence on my work as a photographer.

B. Painter’s and Photographer’s Influence

I am proud and happy that a great deal of my art education has been in the medium of painting. My painting education really taught me about value, hue, and composition. In fact, many of the great photographers in the history of art got their start as painters. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Cindy Sherman, Edward Steichen, Man Ray, and Thomas Struth, along with countless others, started their artistic careers as painters.

As a painter I spent a great deal of time looking at other artists’ work. My influences have been some of the great artists in the history of art. Some of these artists include Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Roy Newell, and Cy Twombly. I also
follow many contemporary artists. Some of these artists are Richard Aldrich, Katherine Bernhardt, Mark Bradford, and Sara Sze.

I still look at work constantly online and every time I visit a city, the art museum is the first place that I visit, but it should be noted that as much as I learned from looking at artists as a painter, at times I felt that having so much information and knowledge hindered my creativity. I would say to myself “no I will not do that,” because I know ten other artists that have already done that before. So, while I still study artists and follow a great deal of photographers as well, I am trying hard to spend more time creating my own work, rather than looking and studying the works of other artists. Having said that, I cannot deny many great photographer’s influence on my work. Some of these photographers include Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Walker Evans has had a large impact on the types of things that I shoot. Henri Cartier-Bresson’s way of framing the photograph and composition has also impacted my photography.
IV. Form

A. Casual

The photographs for my thesis were shot in a very casual manner. No special lens or unique camera maneuvers were used to create this work. No digital dark room post editing was added to the process. These photographs are simple shots, taking photographs of ordinary items in a very ordinary way. I did use good quality DSLR cameras for the shots and not a cell phone camera, but they still were created with modest technique.

I did not take these shots in a de-skilled manner, but I also did not try and shoot them in a super sophisticated manner. I go with the light that I am given, which is usually natural light. I do not try and control the light. Sometimes, I will go back and re-shoot if the light is ultra strong, however, normally this is not the case. I tried to take these photographs of everyday items in a very humble style that embraced mistakes that I discovered. Some examples of miscues for me include buildings or objects that are not exactly lined up with the camera frame which can create an unusual composition. The miscues in this work make it more real and everyday to me. The mistakes and awkward moments in life are always much more interesting than getting things done perfectly. We learn more from the awkward situations than the smooth ones. It is almost a casual indifference to these photographs, which I think makes them interesting.

B. Familiar

I wanted these photographs to look like what the viewer sees during their typical day. I wanted the observer to feel like they had seen that everyday object before. I was hoping the viewer would look again after seeing it photographed, but I still wanted it to look familiar. The human lens tends to focus on one item and block out the background.
These photographs do not focus on any one item, like the human lens, instead these photographs focus on the whole image. These everyday items we see all the time that are part of our lives have ultimately inspired a unique vision, dialogue, and language for my work.
V. Next

I will complete my MFA in the next three months. If I had been asked what I was going to do once I finished my MFA when I started, the program, I would have said I am going to New York City and create paintings.

Things have changed a great deal for me in the last three years. I have gone from being a painter to a photographer, and now consider myself an artist who uses both the mediums of photography and painting. I have also done some ceramic sculptures and installations using tape, cloth and other materials.

In the future I think I will experiment with new materials. I hope to complete a self-published photography book about the body of work from this monograph. I also plan on publishing a book on my recent paintings. Despite the enormous potential pitfalls and struggles, I look forward to the opportunity and the challenge of getting my work seen. I plan to work on this on a consistent basis. One thing I am almost sure of is that I will be taking photographs wherever I am, and photography will be a part of my artistic practice. Photography both amazes and haunts me.
VI. Conclusion

A. Why do I create Art?

I am a very curious and restless person and want to learn new things all the time. One of the greatest and most interesting ways I know how to learn, is to create what does not exist. To me creativity and making objects is one of the highest forms of knowledge. When I create new objects I am creating new knowledge.

When I create new objects I am literally opening up all kinds of new dialogues and discussions. How does this new object relate to other objects I have made in the past? Will I continue to create these objects? Will these objects lead to other new objects that I would not have been able to create unless I made the objects I am currently making? What objects will other artists create as a result of looking at the objects that I created? I also think that I create art to better understand the world that I live in. In creating groups of new objects ultimately one is creating new worlds.

When I go out and take a photograph of an object or a place that exists in the world, and then take that photograph and inscribe my meaning and understanding to it, that object ultimately takes on a new identity. I feel this is surely creating new objects and new worlds, with new meanings, that have potential to create new knowledge and ideas. I have gone back to the locations that I have photographed and I am amazed at how different the location can be from the photograph of that location. When I put together groups of photographs this also changes the identity of the work.
B. Pro Humanitate

It is interesting that this work started about the passage of time, and then as a result of my artistic process, it also included the concept of space verses place. Both of these ideas are about awareness and being present and taking in ones world. These concepts are ultimately about knowledge, learning, focusing, and being familiar about things. These notions are what make up the concepts of meditation and mindfulness.

When one is focusing on a space and learning about it, to create a place, one is using mindfulness. The ideas of mindfulness and meditation are being studied in the medical field as a way to reduce stress and help humans live longer in this fast paced 24/7 world we all inhibit. Being aware of life and slowing down in order to better understand it. Obtaining knowledge and finding ways to improve ones life and health are both pro humanitate ideals. Pro humanitate literally translates into “for humanity.” I like the idea that many of the concepts in this art are humanistic.

C. Final Thoughts

When I look at these photographs I see history in much the same way one looks at photographs of human beings from a different time period. Looking at these old buildings, I think often about the financial and social impact on communities of people, and wonder about the individuals who spent time in these places and the dreams that they had. During these moments I forget about the stresses of my everyday life and I think about these imaginary people and how as vastly different as we are as human beings, we are much more alike then different. These moments to me are like hearing your favorite song on the radio, they just take me to a mystical, magical, dream world if only for a few
seconds or minutes. During these moments I get a strong feeling of hope for a better world. All things start with hopes and dreams.
Figures

(Untitled # 1) Mississippi, 2017.
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