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Legacy

Jamie Callahan

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Legacy

By
Jamie Callahan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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Finally, I would like to thank my family. It is from my family experiences that my thesis project sprang. I could not be here without them.
Legacy

By

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B.S., Geology, Tufts University, 1998
M.F.A., Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2010

Abstract

This thesis is an examination of family in relation to labor, as expressed through photography. My thesis exhibition, Legacy, grew out of a personal financial struggle while pursuing my graduate studies. Finding myself unable to find work to support my education, I began to travel back home to Chicago to work in my family’s house painting business. These journeys to home sparked an epiphany creating a realization that the family business, from which I considered my enrollment at RIT an escape, was actually my salvation. The business I felt I had run from was now supporting my photographic ambitions. I began to photograph in the spaces I had once abandoned, creating an homage to family and the painting trade.

The images all came from the private interior spaces of the families for whom we work. At first glance the images appear to be formal studies of space, but closer inspection reveals visual artifacts found on the jobsite. Though devoid of people, these artifacts and spaces are representative of my memories of the family business, and thus conceptually full of personal family imagery.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................. v

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1

Legacy ......................................................................................................................................................... 2

Photographic Origins ................................................................................................................................. 3

Definitions and Spaces .............................................................................................................................. 6

Influences ..................................................................................................................................................... 8

Process ......................................................................................................................................................... 20

Thesis Exhibition ......................................................................................................................................... 22

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................... 24

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................... 27
List of Figures

Figure 1  Tree Stump, Palos Park, IL..............................................................4
Figure 2  Liquidation Sale I, Mitch Epstein.............................................10
Figure 3  Crux............................................................................................10
Figure 4  Ground #78, Uta Barth.................................................................13
Figure 5  Pilaster...........................................................................................14
Figure 6  Mobile Homes, Jefferson Co., Colorado, Robert Adams.........17
Figure 7  Tract House #18, Lewis Baltz....................................................18
Figure 8  Repair...........................................................................................19
Figure 9  Legacy...........................................................................................23
Figure 10 Untitled (Image of the Exhibition)..............................................24
Introduction

My graduate experience changed many things in my life. It changed how I saw the medium of photography both artistically and personally. But maybe more importantly, it changed how I saw myself, and how I perceived my place in the art world, and more specifically, how I perceived my place within my family history.

The photographs presented here are wrought with family themes and influences. I would be the first one to say I never thought I would create a body of work dedicated to family, because I considered graduate school to be my escape from my family and from the family business for which I had worked for so many years. The family business is a house painting business that my grandfather started over 40 years ago. I had always felt an obligation to work for the business, and though I appreciated the skills and experiences I gained, I always longed to do something more. In many ways I felt trapped. As I got older I became a more integral part of the business, and I felt that by leaving it I would be betraying my grandfather, the man closest to me in my entire family. But eventually I was able to make the decision to leave, and it was not a popular one, but I felt like I was finally on the right path to making my life my own. I told myself that I was finally free of this entity that had held me back for so long.

But as is often the case with the young, my thoughts were misguided. I didn’t realize this however until quite a while after I had come to the Rochester Institute of Technology to pursue my Master’s degree in Imaging Arts. The fact is that financially I was not surviving. Early on it looked like I would be forced to end this dream before it even began: I could not afford rent, I could not afford supplies, and I could barely afford
the items needed to sustain everyday life. It was then, in desperation that I began traveling home to paint in order to make some money. This soon turned into the lynchpin of my graduate experience. Going home and intentionally putting myself back in the houses, rooms, and jobsites the business worked in, the places from which I had just tried to escape, brought on an epiphany. I finally began to realize the importance of the family business. And not just for me, but for many who came before me as well. This business that I had tried to shun was welcoming me back and the financial benefits were allowing me to stay in school. The business became my savior.

Legacy

At first my epiphany was somewhat difficult for me to accept. But as I decided to photograph in these spaces I became more comfortable with the thoughts and ideas related to the subject. As I would be in-between working at home outside of Chicago, and studying in Rochester, one word kept drifting into my thoughts: legacy. I began to think that this might make a good title for my thesis exhibition. The word is defined as something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past.¹ Much of my life has been spent on construction sites as a tradesman, and, more specifically, as a housepainter. Not only have I done this, but my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all did the same. So contextually my legacy is familial as seen through the passing down of the trade, which is steeped in a patrilineal tradition.

However, it is the idea of potentially passing on my own experiences to my audience and those who might see my work in the future where legacy became an almost undeniable title for my thesis exhibition. I came to realize that in both housepainting and photography perhaps what is most important is not what I gained from those who came before me, but what I left for those who will come after. As I paint a house, the legacy of my toil lives on for those who dwell within. As I photograph, the legacy of my viewpoint lives on for those who observe from outside. Through both I am leaving my mark, bolstered by the knowledge passed down by my familial and artistic predecessors, and presented for all who will eventually find it.

My legacy is measured in terms of family and art. Through discussion of each in this thesis I feel I can create a dialogue, allowing my motivations behind this exhibition to become clear, and enabling the viewer a glimpse into my personal legacy.

Photographic Origins

Though I always loved making images, I never considered it would be more than just a hobby. And so I didn’t research the history of art and photography much, nor did I put much effort into doing anything more than taking “pretty pictures”. Intimate black and white 35mm images, with strong formal compositions were what I strived for. I scoured the landscape, looking for a bit of an unexpected view of the beauty of nature to show to those who would be interested. I essentially photographed the environments that I was most drawn to visually, and those subjects I was most comfortable interacting with. For me, the more I could get my images to look like those
of my favorite photographer, Michael Kenna, the better. Though sometimes dramatic, the images from this time are generally serene and calm. They are very structured studies of formal elements (figure 1). The need to explain what my photographs were about didn’t exist before I came to graduate school. The simple fact that I had chosen to create an image of a particular place at a particular time was, for the moment, explanation enough. Though I was well versed as a technical photographer, I never had the historical backing to inform my work. These images were all about the technical formal aspects and little more. It was visual candy, and like real candy, just full of empty calories.

I had taken many photography classes and as a hobbyist, I made a lot of images. I had studied geology at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, and I received my BS in that subject in 1998. I was concerned with finding a career in the earth sciences, and most definitely, photography was on the back burners. As I searched for employment with little luck, I ended up back where I had started: working for the family painting business. Frustrated with where I was, I began to take photography classes at Moraine Valley Community College (MVCC) in Palos Hills, IL. These classes became my escape for
the life I had never wanted to lead, and I began to put more time and effort into the images I was making.

It was at MVCC that I met and worked with an instructor whose lot in life had been similar to mine. His background was also in the sciences and he came to photography later in life. He knew I was unhappy in my current role, and suggested that I think about applying to graduate school for photography. This was the first moment I had ever genuinely thought about photography as more than a serious hobby. I took his advice and was accepted to the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). As mentioned previously, my decision to enter graduate school was met with ire from my family, but I was excited nonetheless.

Because I studied geology and not art at my undergraduate institution, I lacked the basic familiarity with art and photographic history that most of my classmates had received at their undergraduate institutions. So for me the first year at RIT was a whirlwind of ideas and concepts that were foreign to me. This led to me thinking about my work in very different ways. I had always told myself that I would never make anything but “pretty” black and white images, but that changed very quickly. Not only did I begin shooting color images, but for most of the first year at RIT I wasn’t even making pure images. I had allowed myself to get so far away from the traditional image making process that I actually got lost in my own attempts at pushing the bounds of artistic expression. The work from this time was not very good, and it dealt with concepts I wasn’t able to discuss clearly, and even more important to the matter, concepts I didn’t really care about.
Going back to Chicago to paint, and the resulting epiphany that these journeys led to, compelled me to photograph in these spaces. I no longer felt the need to “mess around” with other media. The call back to house painting also resulted in a call back to creating the pure image. Just as I felt the tug of my family history, I also felt the tug of my chosen medium of photography. I essentially went back to what I knew best, and to what I felt gave me the best way to present these spaces. In the beginning of my time at RIT I felt the need to break the bounds of my medium and really challenge how it could be used as an expressive tool. I realized that I could still do this with a traditional photograph. It was no longer about making photo-based, multimedia artwork to show how different my work could be, but it was about finally having something important to say.

**Definitions and Spaces**

I think it is important to give some background into house painting. House painting is a trade, it is a form of labor. Merriam-Webster defines trade as the business or work in which one engages regularly, or an occupation requiring manual or mechanical skill. It also defines labor as human activity that provides the goods or services in an economy\(^2\). The idea of legacy is quite palpable in the trades. Even to this day, it is a frequent occurrence to find a son who has followed his father into the family business. In families such as these, the trade often becomes synonymous with familial bloodline. This labor linked legacy can also be directly related to family just by analyzing

\(^2\) Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary
certain surnames. Some of the oldest surnames known come directly from the trade of a particular family bloodline. Smiths, Tanners, Carters, Millers, and Coopers are all names that derive from occupations. While none of the surnames in my family are trade related names, we do come from the same tradition.

As a tradesman, I am allowed into the private spaces of the clients who hire us to perform our job. It is an interesting relationship because we get carte-blanche access to areas that are often reserved for only the closest family members. This relationship is integral because these were the spaces that I needed to photograph in, and I couldn’t have been in them without being given this kind of access. These were the spaces that I thought about when I thought about the history of the family business, and when I thought about my own history. The three generations of housepainters in my family before myself had toiled in these private spaces for decades. As an artist only, it is unlikely I would have been permitted to enter these spaces.

The fact of the matter is that I have little hand in determining the looks of these spaces. Though I spend a great deal of time working and interacting in them, it is ultimately the homeowner who makes the decisions about things like color and the overall architectural design of their houses. This relationship of homeowner/laborer means that I am somewhat restricted in my subject matter. For instance, if I would personally like to photograph a blue wall, I can only do that if a homeowner directs me to paint a room blue. This is then a symbiotic relationship. I cannot create these places from scratch - they must come from the homeowner. In ways this was problematic and limiting. Generally, as an artist, I like to have as much control over my subject matter as I
can yet here I am entering houses where the only control I have is how, when, and where I point my camera.

   Even still, these spaces were where I needed to be, and so I dealt with the limitations. Ultimately, I feel it was a good experience for me to allow some of that artistic control to slip away. It forced me to think about how to create my images in a way I had never done before. It represented a more cognitive approach to my imagemaking.

Influences

During my graduate studies I became aware of a number of artists and art movements that became influential on my own work. Learning about these influences helped me understand my own place in the legacy of photographers and other artists who came before me. Some of these influences relate to my work conceptually, and others relate visually. In this section, I will discuss a number of these influences and show how they had an effect on my photographs.

A contemporary influence with whom I feel a poignant connection is Mitch Epstein. Epstein photographed, made video, interviewed, and listened to his father as his business ventures declined in the 1990s in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Growing up, Epstein viewed home as someplace to escape from and he did just that leaving to attend art school, just as I did. But when it became obvious that the family furniture store started in 1911 by his grandfather was failing, Epstein returned to document its demise.
Though Epstein’s intention was only to document, he would eventually find it impossible to be only an unbiased observer\(^3\).

I believe Epstein and I share a similar “prodigal son”-like experience: only realizing how important our family businesses were to us after we had left and were then faced with difficult situations. One thing that I learned during my process was that I could not separate my own existence from that of the family business. Whether I liked it or not much of who I have become is tied to the efforts of my grandfather who started the business, and other family members who worked for it. I was another cog in its own legacy. It was in first coming across and studying Epstein’s work that I realized exactly why I was drawn to photograph in these places where I worked. I existed as I was because of these places, and in photographing them I was actually photographing important aspects of myself. It was as if the images I created were telling my own history, and not just a history related to the family endeavors. Until this time, I had never had those thoughts or feelings, and I never expected that I would take photographs to honor the family business and my place within it. But as the realization crept in as to how much the business had influenced my life, I needed to document it. I needed to create an homage. Not only to the family business, but to myself as well, because in truth, the business and I are one in the same.

Many of my connections to Epstein are based on our similar life experiences, but there is also connection visually. One thing that strikes me most about Epstein’s images is that many of the most poignant photographs are devoid of human figures, and yet the

\(^3\) Mitch Epstein, *Family Business*, (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2003), 18.
images are still full of family imagery. It is an idea of presence through absence. For example, *Liquidation Sale I* (figure 2) shows only a gaudy red couch pushed against a window with big red letters that appear to read something along the lines of “closing forever.” To one familiar with the context of the work, this relatively simple image speaks volumes to what is becoming of his family’s legacy. Even without the presence of a figure such as his father, we can still feel the pain from the descent into bankruptcy of one of the largest furniture and appliance stores in western New England. The couch serves as a figural stand-in, representative of both the family and the business.

Like many of Epstein’s images, all of my images are devoid of people. However, I feel these images have that same kind of presence/absence relationship as in Epstein’s scene. Because of visual clues present in them some of my images become “abstract family portraits” even with a lack of human figures. The image *Crux* (figure 3) presents the detail of a small section of a wooden door whose
main lines create the shape of a cross, a symbol that fits in well with the concept of legacy. The surface of the door, freshly dusted with a coating of sandpaper residue, is marked by the unmistakable presence of some anonymous fingerprints. From a distance, these fingerprints cannot be seen, and the image just looks like a formalist exercise, and thus very similar to my earlier images. But on closer inspection, the revelation of the fingerprints opens up a world of previously unimagined stories. Like Epstein’s *Liquidation Sale I* - though no one exists physically within the image - an implied presence is still felt. To an uninitiated viewer, it is an unexplained presence, but at least it forces them to realize that there has been someone there.

This common theme of presence within absence is an interesting one to discuss. Because of the nature of photography, it had been historically felt that a photograph presented a truthful representation of the real world. So the basic truth about images in which there is no actual human presence is that no person exists in that moment of time in that particular place. But the actual truth is in the details. In Epstein’s scene, the truth comes conceptually: the couch becomes a representation of his family, it is a stand in for it. Because the couch physically exists, so must the connection to his family if we allow it to become a stand-in for a human figure. In my image, the truth comes from a deeper observance: the fingerprints, likely unseen without close up examination, tell the story that someone did exist in that time and place. In this case it is visual truth. It may be subtle, but it is truth nonetheless.

Even though no humans are physically present, both of these images still have an aura of human interaction, and may begin to force the viewer to ask questions of who
was once there. Beyond that, one familiar with my story can potentially read even further into *Crux* and begin to understand how an image such as this can still be representative of the idea of family and the family business. Undoubtedly questions arise: do the fingerprints belong to the artist, or perhaps to his recently deceased grandfather, the patriarch of the family and founder of the family business? Even if this question goes unanswered, the mere idea of a story gives these photographs another level of meaning, and it is the presence of those human artifacts leads to this next level of reading. In Epstein’s *Liquidation Sale I*, the couch and the hand painted sign points to human activity, just as the fingerprints in *Crux*. The implied human activity becomes representative of the humans who are not physically present. Though I attempted to distance myself from my family and the family business, they inevitably became my subject and a presence is left throughout my images even if their human forms are invisible. The spirit remains, and the legacy holds tight. For after all, I would have never been in these spaces if it were not for the family painting business.

Not long after beginning my graduate studies I came across the work of Uta Barth, another contemporary photographer who became a significant influence. One significant connection between our work is in the abstraction present. For Barth, much of her abstraction results from her particular way of looking which influences her shooting. Starting with her *Ground* series (beginning in 1992) she has often claimed that it is less “what it is you are looking at” that matters in her work, but rather it is attending to the activity of looking that is important.\(^4\) The images in this series are typically

\(^4\) Uta Barth, *Uta Barth* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), 47
blurred, a result of her focusing on a foreground subject that was removed before the photograph was taken. This results is an image that is largely devoid of any perceivable subject for the viewer to analyze, and only a few out of focus clues remain (or, infrequently, a sharp, somewhat benign detail), and they are usually located towards the margins of the photographic frame. In the absence of any such concrete subject matter, the content of the image remains largely unnamed. This lack of ability to say “I see this” created by visual abstraction is uncomfortable to many viewers. As a result, Barth’s images are suggestive rather than descriptive, alluding to places rather than describing them explicitly.

An example of Barth a image is *Ground #78* (figure 4) where we see an area of sharply focused window frame to the right. However, focus quickly falls away and the left of the frame is merely light on the walls creating a somewhat familiar, yet ambiguous space. Barth argues that this ambiguity actually breeds some meaning through forcing the viewer to visually “sort things out”.

I feel that my thesis work is similar to Barth’s *Ground* series in both subject matter and in our approach to photographing it. Barth and I both enter private, domestic spaces to create our images. The “activity of looking” is almost forgotten because of the familiarity of the inhabitants to those spaces. So they, and the objects contained within, become almost invisible. Barth forces her viewers to notice them

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5 Barth, *Uta Barth*, 43
again. While studying Barth’s images and comparing them to my own, I realized that I too relish the chance to essentially reintroduce people to what they have forgotten, or, more accurately in relation to my own work, what lies beneath the finished surface that they may have never thought about. Yes, this does present a significant difference in our work conceptually, but visually the treatment is the same. Often in my own images the subject matter exists as only a temporary moment in the construction/decorating/redecorating process and not a finished product. So while there is recognizable and very familiar structure, it is to an extent very different to the “forgotten” spaces presented in Barth’s work.

In my image Pilaster (figure 5), the closely cropped view presented is that of a naked, uncovered framing stud surrounded by ambiguous areas of near white and black. These undefined areas create an intense emphasis on the stud as the only recognizable object in the frame. In the real world the stud is exposed in this way for a relatively short time before it is covered over by a wooden door casing, and as a result its existence as pictured is very temporary. But even so the view is ambiguously identifiable, as all who view it will have had some interaction with a similar location in their own personal spaces. This idea of ambiguous familiarity is where the “visual sorting out” mentioned by Barth comes to be. The presence of something that is
at the same moment known and unknown creates a visual tension, and compels the
onlooker to think more about what it is he/she is actually looking at. As mentioned
previously, these types of temporary views are made available to me because of my role
as a tradesman on the jobsite. Without this access I, like the homeowner, would only
see the end result, and not the work in progress. Again, this harkens back to the role of
the family business in my artwork.

One place where Barth and I differ is in the contextual role of the subject matter.
Though we both call on abstraction to help create our ambiguous spaces, Barth is
ultimately more concerned with the act of pointing the camera than the thoughts that
naturally arise from photographing in interior living spaces. Themes of home,
domesticity, and family are of no interest to her, even though the viewer may not be
able to help but think of those subjects. For me, these ideas are of the utmost
importance. As has been touched upon previously, I am in these spaces because of
family and so I welcome the connection.

I can also point to the work of Barth as making similar use of another form of
abstraction, and that is the square format image. Every image in my exhibition was a
square image taken with a medium format camera. For both Barth and myself, though
familiar, the square images create some tension because our work leaves the viewers’
expectations unfulfilled. Expectations regarding what a photograph normally depicts, or

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6 Barth, *Uta Barth*, 21
of how we are supposed to read the space within the image are turned upside down.\(^7\)

The traditional reactions and readings are no longer valid.

In terms of legacy, the abstraction that Barth and I trend towards refers to the Pictorialist movement of photography. Though I will not be going into an in-depth discussion of the Pictorialist movement here, I think that it is still necessary to note that visually, Barth and I take cues from them, our photographic ancestors. The Pictorialists were the first to pursue creating images that did not necessarily need to be exact representations of the real world. They began to experiment with soft focus, blurred movement, square images, and other techniques.

Though conceptually we may differ, the visual similarities, and the historical cues taken do serve to connect Barth’s work with my own. Viewing Barth’s images was a very important moment for me because for the first time I came across someone who made the same kinds of images that I tended to create. Even before I thought about any deeper connections, I was immediately impressed be the visual similarities.

The final significant influence I will discuss is that of the New Topographics. Spurred by the 1975 exhibition: *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, at George Eastman House: International Museum of Photography and Film, the New Topographic movement of the 1970s was signaled by what one might call a “counter aesthetic.” This aesthetic centered on a redefinition of the once virgin mythical western landscape into contemporary terms. Photographers such as Robert Adams, Joe Deal, and Lewis Baltz adopted this aesthetic and produced work that displayed the force

\(^7\) Barth, *Uta Barth*, 43
of human development and expansion in the American landscape. These are emotionless photographs of the banal structures and artifacts of human interaction within the natural landscape. Shot in a documentary tradition, the images in this exhibition strive to remove sentimentality and emotion out of the presented views. Assistant curator William Jenkins wrote in the exhibition catalogue: “As individuals the photographers take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgment or opinion entering their work... if “New Topographics” has a central purpose it is simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph.”^8 An interesting aspect is that even though these images have a documentary approach in subject matter, they are also rigidly formal (figure 6). The photographers included in the exhibition are not documentary photographers, but they are trained formalists whose work is firmly rooted in and influenced by the Modernist movement where form plays a significant role in the imaging process. I share this respect for the formal with New Topographics photographers. Often what first compels me to photograph a scene is the formal structure within it.

Another feature that the New Topographic images share with my own is that they are devoid of human figures. Yet even so, the presence of human interaction is

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intensely felt. This happens because the natural landscape is seen intertwined with the strictly human constructed features, and at that point it is near impossible to unlink the two. Like the images of Mitch Epstein, the impact of human existence is still very much in the images even if the humans themselves are not.

I feel my closest kin in the field is Lewis Baltz. Baltz’s images are often very minimal and personal. He seems to strive to photograph that which is generally unseen. The image *Tract House #18* (figure 7) shows a quiet stillness of soft grays interrupted only by an indentation in the cement and a box of presumably electrical origins. As a whole, the image is a study in composition and balance, but broken down into its formal elements it becomes a commentary on that which is no longer there. The implied human presence becomes the subject. Baltz confronts the subject matter directly, his images monolithic in the sense that they flatten this once broad landscape into a mere two dimensions and abstract it. The solid surfaces depict a purity of pattern that is often quite beautiful, yet its implicit social commentary is anything but soothing. Baltz emphasizes the picture plane, and in doing so it leads to an abstracted space, minimal

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9 Michel Frizot, Editor, *A New History of Photography* (Cologne, Germany: Koenemann, 1998), 656
with foreground removed. The familiar made unfamiliar through the approach of the artist.

In comparison, my image *Repair* (figure 8) displays many of the aesthetic sensibilities as Baltz’s *Tract House #18*. It is minimal and beautiful, generally unadulterated until artifacts of a human presence are noticed. But where Baltz’s commentary is on man’s alteration of a once pristine landscape as shown by an unbiased observer, my image is just the opposite. For my purposes, *Repair* is not presented as a means to show how man has ruined the natural, but rather it is there to praise man’s influence, specifically the influence of my forefathers. This is not the message of foreboding perceived by the viewers of many of the New Topographic images. The repair in the image is just that, it is a flaw made whole again by the sweat of a tradesman like myself. The other obvious difference is that I am not unbiased, nor am I looking to avoid the idea of subjectivity or sentimentality. My purpose was not to objectively describe a familiar space, but to share the history infused in that space. The relationship is still one of man’s influence on his surroundings, but the message is decidedly different. Though I cannot help but feel a relationship to the New Topographies, my images serve as something of a response to theirs. Perhaps my work
signals a return to the beauty inherent in man’s own experience of his natural surroundings and not the damnation of human influence.

**Process**

The images presented in my thesis exhibition are all square medium format C-prints. I chose this format because of the fact that the square image abstracts. As previously discussed, this abstraction is important to me because it forces the viewer to take a more active role in sorting out what the images are presenting.

I made my first square images in 2001, and now rarely use any other format. Even when I do sparingly return to my 35mm roots I feel that those images are lacking compared to my square images. It is in the way a square image abstracts that I find it holds advantage over other formats. The obvious difference is that the biases and expectations of what one should see in a landscape or portrait orientation is removed. This is not just for the artist, but the viewer as well, as they are also forced to see the images without those same biases. At the time of my earliest square images, I never would have equated square format with abstraction, but in essence a square image begins life as an abstracted image when compared to the ordinary rectangular format if for no other reason than the removal of any preferred orientation and related meanings applied to their traditional roles. But the abstraction that appeals to me most is much more subtle. The fact that it isn’t a horizontal rectangle actually takes away from the sense of a window onto the world and instead suggests that it is a created object.\(^{10}\) It is

not just someone else’s view, but it has a substance to itself, it is a real thing. This idea is especially appealing to me, and in terms of the context of my thesis work, it directly relates to the “created” nature of the environments I am photographing in.

Another very important aspect of my work is I chose to create traditional C-prints. This way of working was chosen for a number of reasons. Just as the content of the images connect to the legacy in the family business, my rejection of the digital and video trends within photography inexorably tie me to my photographic ancestors. I stick to the classic analog hand crafted still image and in doing so I continue to build on their legacy.

By the time I was making the final prints for my thesis exhibition, my grandfather had died. Part of my own healing process was cloistering myself in the darkroom to print. This became a time of reflection, and seeing the same images over and over as I was carefully color balancing served to hammer in all the feelings and emotions I was putting into the meanings of these images. It was in this time that I gained a certain reverence for everything that my thesis was dealing with. Maybe up to that point it hadn’t completely sunk in, but I realized that what I was doing was not all that different than what my grandfather did. To explain: I believe that there is a large amount of craft involved in making a traditional C-print. Color balancing is not for the weak of heart or for the impatient. Craft is defined as skill in doing or making something, as in the arts, or an occupation or trade requiring manual dexterity or skilled artistry.¹¹ While I was working on this project I began to more closely watch my grandfather work, and even at

¹¹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary
an old age his hand was as steady as a rock, and the speed at which he could stain a
window, or varnish a stairway to perfection was staggering. His ability truly was talent,
and truly was artistry. What I began to realize was that he was a craftsman and an artist
just as much as I was. It was something I had never felt about him prior to those last few
years of his life. My current reflections do nothing but bear that fact out even further. In
essence, as I was toiling within the processes of my medium, I became completely
aware of the linkages between myself my grandfather and me. I saw his toils as equal to
my own in a different medium, and I realized that he was as much an inspiration to me
and my photographic work as were any of the artists and photographers that I
considered important.

**Thesis Exhibition**

One of the most difficult parts of moving forward with my thesis exhibition was
deciding which images to choose, and exactly how I would go about laying them out and
displaying them. Based on the space I had available to me, I knew that I could have
around 25 images without overcrowding the wall space.

My time spent shooting in the interior spaces I painted was relatively short
because of the timing of my “eureka” moment, and my eventual realization that this
work would make the basis of my thesis. But nonetheless I still had many images from
which to choose. As I was laying out my work trying to choose which ones would make
the cut, certain groupings seemed to appear. I had images of interiors at all different
stages of construction, as well as certain formal structures that seemed to appear
relatively frequently. I decided to ultimately focus on the images depicting the interior
spaces at the stages during which I would normally be spending the most time in them.
This meant that the images of houses still in the framing stage, or in the early stages of
drywall would be eliminated. Also the few images that depicted the houses post
construction/redecorating would not fit either. Though these images still fit in terms of
the formal structure, the content was somewhat out of place. Beyond that, because this
was a very personal project for me, I
basically decided to choose the images
intuitively. I let my feelings decide which
images would go into the show. Many
images had a multitude of visual layers
which spoke to me because of the
relationship to the complexity of family
and the relationships therein, as can be
seen in the signature image, *Legacy* (figure 9). As for color, many of the images chosen
had softer color palettes. Pale pastels and soft whites dominated. Without going into a
psychological dissertation of the nature of color, I assert that the more traditionally
feminine colors chosen reflect my state of mind. My grandfather had recently passed
away. The resulting melancholy and the loss of the last male influence in a decidedly
female family pushed me to the softer side of the color spectrum.

During this time I also decided to stick with the 15x15 inch images that I had
been making. Some thoughts on creating a few larger images did cross my mind, but I
began to see the uniformity of the shapes and sizes of the images as almost a
genealogical table, where each member of the family is given equal importance within
the family structure. I did not want any single image to appear more important than any
other. Each image was equally important, and I feared enlarging certain images would
create unwanted emphasis on them. It was for the same reason I chose to mat all the
images with a 3.5in wide bright white and a narrow black metal frame. These
accoutrements served to finish the pieces, but also assured that they would be only
subordinate to the images themselves. To my pleasure, an unforeseen result of the
finishing of the images was that the images became almost like bricks. As I placed these
visual bricks on the white walls, all hung at the same height, with consistent spacing
between (at least as consistent as possible give the wall space), the group as a whole
reminded me of a foundation of a building. An unintended idea, but I felt it fit well
within the metaphor of legacy (figure 10).

Conclusion

As discussed, creating Legacy was a very personal experience for me. It became
an experience that ushered in a new-found respect for my family and the business that
had sustained it, and it also represented a significant growth in my own art making.
In terms of my own art making, *Legacy* represents my artistic voice. Even though at first glance, the images are rigidly formal, the meanings of the images transcend the visual artifacts captured by my camera. Now, for the first time I had something to say. Before this project I made images just because I wanted to. I made images of those things I felt were worthy of photographing, but my reasons were basically shallow. I looked for lost fragments of beauty in the real world, but my only reason was to prove that beauty existed. With *Legacy* I have used the camera as a tool for self-expression.

For a long time I wondered what I wanted the viewer to get out of these images. The truth of the matter is that they will never get the same meanings that I used as my motivations unless by some chance their life experiences mimic my own and they are able to recognize that. And, ultimately, I think this is where my sense of composition and design really prove themselves as strengths. I think someone looking at my images with no supporting information can appreciate them as a glimpse into unseen private spaces as they are being shaped for the people who will eventually inhabit them. Visually, a viewer can see these images and have a positive reaction to them because of my formalist sensibilities. I do hope that the viewer would realize that at some level there is more to these photographs. But often it is the “wow factor” of the subject matter that makes people think about what

This project also elicited some important personal realizations. Until recently, I had considered myself an outsider in the art world. I was just a tradesman trying to cross the bridge to fine art. But I realized that that bridge was merely a manifestation of my own fears and doubts, and the truth is that art can be found anywhere if you are
vigilant in the way you see. I have always been an artist, even though I may not have been classically trained, and may only have a recent education in art history. In hindsight, I can also now see my grandfather as artist, and we both found our art the same way: by gathering the wisdom and experiences built by the legacy of others. But perhaps the most important recognition to have come out of this project is the return of my respect for this trade that I had felt was holding me back. The trade that I always felt had prevented me from living my own life in the end saved my life; perhaps not literally, but certainly artistically. I was struggling to find my voice as an artist, and it turns out all I had to do was look inward into my own life to find that I had volumes to say.

George Eliot once said “What greater thing is there for human souls than to feel that they are joined for life - to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent, unspeakable memories.” Ultimately this is the foundation of legacy. The images are in a way my own silent, unspeakable memories, family portraits of a history that I hope I have honored. They are images that attest to the beauty of the legacy of my family.
Bibliography


