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Trail of a Swarm

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for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

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Abstract

**Trail of a Swarm**

BFA Photography, Arizona State University, 2013  
MFA Photography, Rochester Institute of Technology, May 2016

Within *Trail of a Swarm* the photograph is used as a portal through which a new visual world can be discovered and explored by the viewer. The images take the form of desolate, abstracted landscapes articulated by paths of light and dark, and ranging from the highly saturated color photographs, to the subdued and black and white photographs. Also portrayed, in similarly abstracted form, are the inhabitants of this world - the remainders of the masses: humans, animals, and insects - subjects we commonly perceive as ordinary, appear alien. Artifacts within these images are also treated with an alike peculiar perspective raising questions regarding their origins. Time is similarly treated, removed from its linear flow, as these images simultaneously allude to both a potentially fabricated past and a foreboding future. The variety, or even oppositional qualities within these images is necessary in order to formulate images that reference this entanglement across multiple layers of time. *Trail of a Swarm* conveys an environment ridden with traces left to be discovered and discerned.
The images in the photographic series *Trail of a Swarm* create a world within themselves that vacillates between paths of light and dark, highly saturated to very subdued and monochromatic images. The variety, or even oppositional qualities within these images is necessary in order to formulate the experience that reference an entanglement across multiple layers of time. Some photographs make reference to the past and primal collective desires, while others allude to a foreseeable future within a familiar landscape, now destroyed or barren. The world created is a mysterious landscape. At times it appears mundane, and at others romantic. It is a place left for navigating through; ridden with traces to be discovered and discerned, but also a world that eerily resembles the present.

These photographs are derived from a process of ritualistically navigating through unfamiliar places within the landscape, walking and working very slowly, most often with a large or medium format camera. This process makes looking and discovery pertinent elements of the method of making this work. The unfamiliarity of a place is significant to a foreign quality that emanates throughout the series. The illusion of an equivalent, objective, perspective is a device utilized to entangle the imagery with fact and truth. These images, simultaneously, are very specific and carefully considered in
the ways they are composed and are integrated into this body of work in order to
deliver the viewers to a place to deeply consider this world of pictures.

Strange facts of the world exist within the images that lead to questioning of
their origins. In an article titled *Hubris, Utopia, and the Future*, Stanley Wolukau-
Wanambwa wrote, “The matter which surrounds us retains more than the mere
impression of our actions, but perhaps something of our innermost aspirations as well.”

1 The primal desires of humanity are something that seep through the images over time
and are alluded to more directly within the images of very primal forms of dwellings
and systems of navigation, such as teepees and Cairns. These photographs transcend
the subject of the photographs; they become an environment of an invisible presence
that has acted upon an object or place. My interests are in the manifestations of the
mind, or, how as observers, we conjure action upon objects and landscapes that give
life to a fictional or fantastic presence within our history or our vision of the future.

One night while photographing, I was staring at a spotlight focusing on its beam
of light piercing the dark. I watched flying ants hover in orbit above a spotlight. They
flew in revolutions as if they had been caught in a tractor beam. It was an ordinary
phenomenon seen many times, but I had never really stopped to consider it. Watching
their flight pattern within the circumference of the light beam invoked thoughts about

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means of navigation, commutes, and the cyclical and even circular nature of human routine and its delusions.

After being transfixed in beam of light and the active fluttering spirals above, I made a photograph of the spotlight bulb and the glass atop its housing, encrusted with tiny carcasses. The insect bodies, dark against the glass, became inverse star constellations across the bright pearlescent expanse of the image. The framing is focused only on the plate of glass and the light source beneath it, and this tight framing creates the feeling of expansiveness in the image that makes it difficult to locate in space. The housing of the light bulb itself resembles a huge angelic winged body, which lures in its prey out of the darkness.

Later that night, while researching the reasons why bugs fly towards light, I came across a theory called Transverse Orientation, which suggests that insects orient themselves to a distant, natural source of light, such as the sun or moon. When an artificial light source is present, the insect, unable to distinguish an artificial source from a natural one, circles the impostor with increasingly rapid revolutions, convinced that it is flying at a fixed angle to a distant, natural light.² Perceptual time and space are compressed as the insect flies circles around its perceived moon in seconds,

completely disorienting it and often dooming the insect to death in the heat of the impostor.

This theory provides a metaphor for the fictional presence that we humans conjure in the presence of trace, illusion and confusion. The man-made light convinces an insect it is the moon. The insect then orients the remainder of its life around something it has misperceived; flying circle after circle around this belief, much like how we, as humans, form believes and abide by them in an attempt to rationalize our own existence. The same beliefs that give life meaning are also beliefs that we will be defended to the point of the destruction of the physical world we inhabit.

The title *Trail of a Swarm* speaks to all of the elements in the complex conversation happening within this world. *Trail* references the physical traces and marks left upon objects and the landscape that are the subjects of many images. It suggests that something is being followed or in the presence of aftermath. *Trail* also makes a connection to the recording of an image as a trace in itself. *Swarm* makes a connection to insects, animals, and overall humanity as a mass that is being observed through its absence and its traces in the images.

The variety and even confounding nature of this group of images needs to be experienced in a breadth of imagery in order to convey an intention of confusion and displacement. This confounding sense, gathered from viewing the imagery in its entirety, leaves a committed viewer trying to decode and understand the bit of
disjuncture, echoing the perspective of an alien or insect trying to navigate amongst a sea of moons.

I chose to photograph in black in white and color in order to entangle this work with a conversation around regression, multiple layers of time, and a creation of an independent space. I also believe as a photographer that color is a bit subjective, it is never absolutely “true”, we do make great gestures at getting something “neutral” however my goal is ultimately to be outside, to quote Hollis Frampton “converting its appearances to the requirements of ecstasy.” Sometimes a requirement is grey scale. There is a creation of space through these images and a mixture of both gray scale and color images are a part of that and the combination of the two further embraces significance of an individual image and the poetic potential of photography.

In this series photographs are made with the above ideas in mind; taking fragments, relics and remnants from an expanse of time, and with them constructing a world. These fragment that constitute a world allow us to conjure up entities of unknown origins. In 1967, Nathan Lyons wrote about the possible worlds contained in photographs in the exhibition catalogue for Toward a Social Landscape: “We have pictured so many aspects and objects of our environment in the form of photographs that the composite of these representations has assumed the proportions and identity
of an actual environment.” The world presented in Swarm is in conversation with the work of contemporary photographer, Geert Goiris. His photographs of landscapes, architecture, animals, and people suggest a post-industrial scenario. Brad Feuerhelm, while writing on Goiris’s pictures in American Suburb X, articulates the contemporary post-apocalyptic vision:

“We live in times of economic flux and a terrible uncertainty pervades our future sponsored largely by fear within the excess of media. A new tragedy forms every day and the likelihood of catastrophe pervades our lives. It is not without reason that the solace of the post-human and post-apocalyptic should find its way into our consciousness. Goiris’ work is emblematic of this mentality, but also that of a fictional (for now) environment where we may wander and see flora and fauna, architecture and fragment within the context of his/our associations to the metaphors of post-disaster.”

Much of Geert’s vision resonates very well with the pictures in my world. Geert, however, romanticizes the desolate, post-industrial landscape that has survived our conflicting beliefs and destructions. While his work primarily provides the imaginative evidence of the demise of the world, I am interested in discovering traces and trails

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that can generate a presence in the human imagination, and how that presence is
externalized into structures of life in which we now live; the work extends into human
desire, discovery, the construction of physical and metaphysical space and its
relationship to photography.

It is in the traces and trails that our imagination, memory, and conjecture
formulate and infer existence, and this imaginative impulse is one humankinds most
beautiful and generative qualities, as well as one of its most terrifying and destructive.
This body of work is collection of images in a visual conversation around creation,
belief, primal human desire, and destruction and it’s relationship to photography in a
complex world of its own.
Bibliography


