Southern Compass

Gail Goers
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By
Gail Goers

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School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Science

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Signature Page

_____________________________________________________
Christine Shank      Date
MFA Director
School of Photographic Arts and Science

_____________________________________________________
Willie Osterman      Date
Chair of the Fine Art BFA Program
School of Photographic Arts and Science
In this work, Southern Compass, I utilize the process of walking as a path to knowing in order to investigate the psychological landscape of my past by photographing the landscape of my hometown, Greenville, NC. In her book, Wanderlust, Rebecca Solnit makes the observation, “Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world.” Limiting myself to days when the sky is gray, I make images that speak to the uncertain memory I feel in the space as I am traversing it; images composed by an ambiguous light where the time of day is not known, when the light is soft and the landscape and sky meet at an indeterminate point.

Although my family moved to the South when I was six, I never identified with being southern, worked hard to not gain a southern accent, and grew up wishing to be elsewhere, always feeling like a “stranger in a strange land”. The view of Mount Rainier from my bedroom window in Seattle was replaced by the view of flat open land, expansive skies and ragged pine trees of eastern North Carolina. During my time in Rochester, my thoughts have often strayed to those views of straggly pine trees as seen from a distance, a necessary distance. In choosing to not specifically identify the landscape as “southern” by using well-known visual tropes, I consciously chose to make a body of work that allows the viewer a space to travel through, perhaps to his or her own past, or perhaps forwards, seeing in the distant horizon, the possibilities of the future.
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MFA Thesis Exhibition
William Harris Gallery
Southern Compass
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from book *Southern Compass*, Gail Goers 2016
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Extended Artist Statement

This body of work, Southern Compass, is comprised of landscape images which explore metaphorically and visually via the process of walking the landscape of my hometown, Greenville NC in an attempt to address and come to terms with the new understanding I have of my personal identity and how it relates very specifically to where I grew up. In his 1981 essay “Truth in Landscape” from his Beauty in Photography, Robert Adams writes, “Landscape pictures can offer us, I think, three verities- geography, autobiography, and metaphor. Geography is, if taken alone, sometimes boring, autobiography is frequently trivial, and metaphor can be dubious. But taken together, as in the best work of people like Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, the three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact- an affection for life.” 1 The elements of “geography, autobiography, and metaphor” form the matrix of this project. The geography of the flat, expansive Coastal plain of eastern North Carolina blends with the location of my childhood hometown. Overlaid upon these two specific factors is the element of how I construct the images, the almost halved horizon line, the gray days in which I choose to photograph. In looking backwards as I approach the end of my fourth decade, I am choosing to pause and, just like in pausing while making a photograph, in that pause I am able to construct meaning and make sense of my own personal story in a way that I had not done previously. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, “Life is understood backwards, but lived forward.”

Discussing the notion of place, the humanist geographer Edward Relph describes home in the following words. “wherever it may be, home is a center of meaning, a familiar setting in an uncertain world, it is the place where one belongs and is best known.” 2 In the past few decades, a renewed interest in the study of place in relation to individual experience has arisen in both the fields of humanist geography and environmental psychology. Place attachment is a term broadly used to describe a type of relationship to place. It is “the experience of a long-term affective bond to a particular geographic area and the meaning attributed to that bond.” 3 Consistent amongst the research is the idea that place attachment is strongest and most often formed in relation to one’s childhood home. Paying heed to the notion of place attachment, I explore through my work how certain elements within the landscape have altered in meaning for me over time, how my attachment to these elements has changed.

The geography of one’s environment can contribute to one’s sense of identity. In his book, Space and Place, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan gives the following example of how physical environment can affect a person’s understanding of space. He describes the spatial conception of a culture on a small, three-mile long island in the Pacific, the Melanesian island of Tikopia. “They have wondered,” he writes, “whether any land exists from which the sound of ocean waves cannot be heard.” 4 In consonance with Tuan’s description of place attachment, the Southern photographer Jeff Whetstone creates imagery concerned with the way the landscape constructs the body’s relation to place. He writes on his website, “Where I am from

4 Yi-Fu Tuan. Space and Place. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 55.
from there is no horizon. The close hills and veiling trees contain your vision in a viscous, intricate tex-
ture. The dense terrain coddles you. For some, it smother. Out West, out of my element, I feel exposed. 
But the desert’s emptiness, its succinct horizon clarifies thought. Space laid bare seems to make time 
stand still. He goes on to ask, “How is my identity structured by my native landscape? How close am I to 
the land, subconsciously?”\textsuperscript{5} Though speaking of a different Southern landscape, that of the Appalachian 
Mountains, Whetstone’s questions reflect my own at present.

Although my family moved to the South when I was six, I never identified with being Southern, 
worked hard to not gain a Southern accent and grew up wishing to be elsewhere, always feeling like a 
“stranger in a strange land” growing up in Greenville, North Carolina. The view of Mount Rainier from my 
bedroom window in Seattle, WA was replaced by flat open land, expansive skies and ragged pine trees. 
Throughout the thirty years I spent living in North Carolina, I was always dreaming and planning on 
being elsewhere one day. However, since leaving North Carolina, I have come to understand I do or am 
now willing to identify with being from the South, even if this sense of belonging does not derive from 
socio-cultural relationships or behaviors but rather from my bodily engagement with the land itself. Many 
photographers have photographed the South but fewer photographers have identified themselves as 
southern photographers. William Christenberry, Sally Mann, and William Eggleston are a few of those that 
do. Of the three, it is William Eggleston that has the least romantic vision. In describing Eggleston’s photo-
graphs in her introduction to The Democratic Forest, the Southern writer, Eudora Welty, wrote the fol-
lowing. “The extraordinary, compelling, honest, beautiful and unsparing photographs all have to do with 
the quality of our lives in the ongoing world: they succeed in showing us the grain of the present, like the 
cross-section of a tree.”\textsuperscript{6} In order to investigate the idea of home as a sense of place, I decided that I would 
return to the South, to the landscape where I grew up; the place that registers in my memory when I think 
of North Carolina. I sought out expansive views and objects at a distance to articulate within the frame of 
the photograph the feeling of being in space. My approach was oriented towards a view of the land akin to 
Eggleston’s, to photograph neither the picturesque nor the sublime but rather the everyday commonness 
of the landscape. While locating myself physically in that landscape, I gave myself the psychological space 
to wander through my mind in order to better understand who I am in this present moment. As I began to 
reflect on my past, thinking about growing up in Greenville NC while spending some time looking at my 
previous photographic work as well, I realized that no matter where I am, it is the landscape of my past 
that forms my point of comparison for how I experience place and this defines the type of places in which 
I feel at home.

In his chapter on time in space, Yi-Fu Tuan addresses perspectival vision in relation to landscape 
pictures and photography. He writes the following about the distant view: “Every perspective landscape 
painting or photograph teaches us to see time flowing through space. The distant view need not call forth 
the idea of future time...Both the past and the future can be evoked by the distant scene...Eighteenth cen-
tury aesthetics required that one’s eye be directed outward to the distant scene where one’s mind could

rest and find personal meaning in the past, future, or eternity.” Tuan. Space and Place, 124. This idea of the distant view as a place for the mind to rest, as a mental space, is an important element in my project. Though the landscape is always an exterior space, it has a potential to lead to internal reflection. Rebecca Solnit, in her book Wanderlust, A History of Walking, addresses this meditative aspect of moving through the landscape as a conduit for contemplation. She writes,

“The rhythm of walking through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were traveling rather than making. And one aspect of the history of walking is the history of thinking made concrete, for the motion of the mind cannot be traced but those of the feet can.”

The images in Southern Compass are the result of my embodied movement through varying spaces of my hometown in two to four hour walks. And though this cannot be traced within the visual imagery, these images are also a record of the time spent thinking in solitude; they are images recorded while walking through a mental as well as a physical landscape. The landscape of the town has changed immensely since I left but still retains a sense of familiarity for me within the physical landscape, characterized by sparse and expansive space.

In his essay, Measure of Emptiness, the photographer Frank Gohlke speaks to the formal construction of his images. He writes: “Holding the camera level while standing in a flat landscape means that the horizon cuts the middle of the picture and divides into equal portions of earth and sky.” Likewise, as I walked the environs of Greenville, I too held the camera as level as possible, thus creating in many of the images a foreground that is defined by the land, with details and textures, and a background that is open sky, both being equally important for the emotional atmosphere of the images. While I composed the images in relation to the objects in the foreground, I was always aware that there was a lot more in the background than what I could actually see. For me, that distant horizon line leads me toward reflecting on the past, from the vantage point of the present. Both are equally important in the same way that the land and sky are given almost equal weight in the images. I photograph on days that have an ambiguous light in which the time of day is not known, when the light is soft and even and the landscape and sky meet at an indeterminate point. This ambiguity is important, as the images are not meant to recreate my specific memories of my childhood home nor be an objective documentary photo essay of Greenville. The focus is on the space between the objects,

7 Tuan. Space and Place, 124.
the empty space, the distance, and the sense that no matter how far you walk, you will never reach the horizon promised in the photograph. The cloak of the gray sky creates a feeling of intimacy within the space. The eyes are forced downward into the landscape without the contrast of a blue sky or the distraction of cloud formations. On days such as these, I have always felt that the world becomes quieter, that a space for introspection, for examining the interior of self, opens up. For me, the landscape is filed with the stories of human experience, and it is often imagined stories that come to my mind as I walk through the landscapes. It is these thoughts of stories already lived and stories yet to come, shared across time within one space, that I find fascinating.

This way through emphasizes the return home and the new understanding I have of myself and my past and how this understanding forms my current identity as both an individual and a photographer as I move forwards. My journey has been an understanding of what home means to me. More than anything perhaps, what is most important is that one has a knowledge of where home is located in this immense world; a place that orients one’s identity, a somewhere that feels familiar and safe, a place of return, even if only through the mind.

Gail Goers, 2016