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Into the Pines

By
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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
College of Imaging Arts and Science

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May, 2017
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Abstract

Into the Pines

BFA Studio Art, University of Tennessee, 2015
MFA Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, May, 2017

Into the Pines is a photo-book that leads the viewer on a mediated journey, one that encourages the reader to construct meaning through an investigation of several photographic mediums and materials. A patchwork of incomplete stories, the work is a genre study of North American murder ballads built on a spine of both personal and cultural histories. While many of the images found within the work reference such histories, others speak to a universal fascination with tragedy, where it comes from, and how it shapes our lives.

In book form, the work is presented as a visual dossier, a collection of many individual “pieces” that function within a larger puzzle. By using an array of visual strategies, the work hints at past events, both authentic and fabricated. While the absence of original context invites speculation about what has or has not occurred, it is in the sequence that the images begin to foster new meanings and relationships. The work acts as an enigmatic book, a mixture of materials that the viewer is left with to construct meaning with on their own terms, allowing for narratives that become representative of the mind that constructs them. In the end, the work is an examination of a deviant world through the eyes of a deviant.
Extended Artist Statement

Into the Pines is a photo-book that leads the viewer on a mediated journey, one that encourages the reader to construct meaning through an investigation of several photographic mediums and materials. Heavily inspired by an examination of North American murder ballads, the work examines my family’s own sordid past, one that includes several murders, suicides, and a string of criminal acts. While many of the images found within the work reference such histories, others speak to a universal fascination with tragedy, where it comes from, and how it shapes our lives.

As a subgenre of the traditional ballad form, murder ballads depict a world saturated with violence and misery. These folksongs thrived within non-literate groups of society, becoming an oral tradition. Olive Burt’s book American Murder Ballads and their Stories is a historic study of such traditions and the true crimes from which the ballads sprang, providing a detailed reference for understanding the ballads within their original context.

While Into the Pines is not an illustration of these narratives, the work ultimately relies on the same formal and thematic frameworks that define the genre. Formally, murder ballads are broken down into three recurring narrative devices: the fictionalized account, references to documented fact, and an aesthetic examination of the sites or objects of transgression. Together, these three devices constitute the core of most murder ballads. Understanding these ballads and their history is of central importance when considering both the form and content of my own work.

The first device is the ballads characterization of an incident by a voice that recounts only after the fact, an often subjective and fictionalized version of events as expressed through an unreliable narrator. Within the ballad structure, this device is used to blur the distinction between the victim and the accused, fact and fiction. This narratological approach is reflected throughout In the Pines, as there is a mediated nature to both the content and sequence of the work. Much of the imagery falls within this construct, representations after the fact that could be based on actual events or simply my own account of them.

Next are the references to documented fact, details gleaned from official sources such as newspapers, police reports, medical charts, and signed confessions. However, not everything in Into the Pines is as it seems. There are photographs and documents that may appear to come

from an archive, yet exist as fabrications that support themselves. The use of seemingly official documents gives the work authority. In this way, these documents function as a device for truth, using the shell of scientific fact to further complicate the distinction between fact and fiction. By calling into question what is found or staged, Into the Pines tests how we relate to photographic imagery within a suggested context, one where meaning becomes reliant upon the document’s evidentiary nature and its ability to create a reality of fiction.

Forensic photographs, for example, are documented facts that are unable to explain themselves. Within the book, there is a black and white image of a tree trunk, marked with a spray-painted X. The bright spotlighting of the flash, common to forensic imagery, illuminates only in a literal sense. It certainly looks like evidence, but of what we can’t be certain. The narratives then become uncertain, complicated by the fact that they are presented photographically, a medium strongly linked to the notion of truth and our questioning of it.

Finally, there is the aestheticized representation of both the sites and objects of transgression. By privileging the spectacle of tragedy over its victims, these ballads reframe crime as art at the scene. This device is used throughout Into the Pines to explore the aesthetic power of violence and the charged histories of the spaces we inhabit. Within the book, there is a black and white image of an iced over road. This photograph was taken on the same street where my own grandmother was assaulted and beaten to death by two men, her body left behind in a bank of snow. Another image is of a non-descript hatchet. Alone, the image may function as a visual trope, meant to suggest malicious intent. However, a similar hatchet became the object of my own grandfather’s murder. Accounts differ, but one thing is for certain. His life ended violently at the hands of two women that day.

While some of the images are based on documented fact like the ones mentioned, others are based on familial stories passed on in a tradition like that of the murder ballad, becoming personal mythologies to examine and interpret. How much of these stories are based on fact versus how much has been constructed is open for interpretation. Not at all pained by the brutality of their nature, the investigation of such histories becomes a focal point throughout the work, revealing my own fascination with violence and tragedy.

The works titular inspiration comes from "In the Pines" (also known as "Black Girl" and "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?"), a traditional North American murder ballad that dates to the 1870’s. Common to the genre, the ballad’s narrative centers on elements of betrayal and murder. Originating in Southern Appalachia, the identity of the song's original author is unknown. While there have been over 160 documented variants, "In the Pines" was once passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth.³ The first printed version of the

³ Judith Marie McCulloh, "In the Pines," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1970).
song, comprised of just these four lines and a melody, was first documented by folk ballad collector Cecil Sharp in 1917.

My girl, my girl, don't lie to me
Where did you stay last night?
I stayed in the pines where the sun never shines
And shivered when the cold wind blows.

While most ballads have a more specific narrative, the meaning of "In the Pines" is a blurry continuum of differing types of misery and suffering. The basic elements of the song remain similar from version to version, but the context is often altered with just a few words. Men, women, and sometimes children flee, with the pines themselves serving as a metaphor for everything from sex to isolation and death. The elliptical nature of my own work mirrors the often-blurry narrative of this particular ballad. While its thematic core never changes, the narrative of the song evolves to fit the needs of the culture that has reproduced it.

As Jean Genet writes in The Thief's Journal, itself a part fact, part-fiction autobiography exploring the narrator’s own moral inversions, “This association, which tells me things about myself, would not suggest itself to another mind.” While Genet's story is also one of darkness and misery, it is an inversion of the morals and structures of Western society. Much like the murder ballads, Genet transforms murderers into artists, repositioning the act of crime as a valid means to provoke sensation and find purpose.

Initially, I approached Into the Pines systematically, through research and archival digging. However, I responded to its ongoing development intuitively, through my own image making, editing, and sequencing of the material. While the absence of original context invites speculation about what has or has not occurred, it is in the sequence that the images begin to foster new meanings and relationships. To reflect the musical structure of the ballad, tone and rhythm became important when sequencing the work in the form of stanza-like verses.

For example, one short verse begins with the text, “Don’t try to find me,” followed by a dated print of an isolated landscape. The next spread shows a handwritten grid of numbers juxtaposed with a topographic map. An X marks a location on the grid. When the page is turned, the X aligns with a defaced school portrait, itself a visual trope that is revisited throughout the book, suggesting significance. In the concluding spread, a silhouetted group of individuals appear to be looking down at something just beyond the frame.

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images of this movement are time stamped with the same date, suggesting causality while offering no definitive answers as to their relationship or context. Later in the book, another short verse revolves around images suggestive of aftermath and injury. Such sequences function as thematically contained verses, separated by text and color images that serve as visual refrains.

The presentation of Into the Pines has been largely influenced by Dennis Wheatley’s Crime Dossiers, a series of interactive detective novels written during the 1930’s. These novels included a variety of materials to assist in the creation of narrative, including both real and fabricated items, such as cablegrams, reports, handwritten letters, and newspaper clippings. As with my own work, Wheatley provides no overt narrative, allowing the reader to construct that for themselves by assimilating the facts and assessing the evidence surrounding the case.

The physical design of Into the Pines serves to further complement the nature of its source material. The book is a removable wire-o bound block, housed in a rough linen hard case, resembling a case file or journal. Anachronistic materials and techniques, such as the use of dated film stocks, hand drawn maps, and typed pages, echo the feel of a familiar, yet undefined period, while also granting the work a sense of historical authenticity. By alternately revealing and redacting details throughout, I am referencing both the blurry nature of stories based in an oral tradition and my own clouded investigations.

A patchwork of incomplete stories, Into the Pines, is a genre study built on a spine of both personal and cultural histories. As in life, the work does not neatly resolve itself, leaving open the possibility that resolution is something that may never come. The work acts as an enigmatic book, a mixture of materials that the viewer is left with to construct meaning with on their own terms, allowing for narratives that become representative of the mind that constructs them. In the end, the work is an examination of a deviant world through the eyes of a deviant.
Bibliography


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