Velleity

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by

Yiyun Chen

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

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

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
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Abstract

Velleity

B. A. Studio Art Photography, Cleveland State University, 2015
Post-Bac, Photography and Video, The Cleveland Institute of Art, 2015
M.F.A. Photography and Related Media, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2018

The work Velleity is an installation of photographs presented on the gallery wall along with a photobook, which explore the process of self-reflection and self-discovery. This experimental work is a form of meditation, which reveals itself through the process of walking photographing, and repurposing into a work of art. The photobook, with its textual references and adaptation of color, develops the concept of the images and text as the language to describe the seemingly unexceptional moments of everyday life. Visualizing the experience as a person navigating different cultures, social expectations, and realities, ponders my displacement in the past and present, leading to moments of isolation and a struggle to communicate with those around me.

Throughout the work, there is a series of repeated motifs. Photographs of a window are a recurring element of the work, as well as a soft pink color. Writing is an important part of my artistic process. The writing makes its way into the series in the photobook, in the form of deconstructed, murmuring text. Within the photobook, the text becomes a visual element, working with the images to reinforce the use of image as language to describe the seemingly unexceptional moments of daily life and the challenges of communication with those around me.
Extended Artist Statement

*Velleity* is comprised of two complementary bodies of works, an 80" by 36" shelf installation of 55 photographic works, and an 8" by 7" photobook on a pink wall. I have intermingled my personal emotions with image and language as a way of abstractly interpreting my expectations and disappointments with life in the United States, in all its helplessness and longing. In this work, I focus on the concept of images and text as the language to describe the seemingly unexceptional moments that I encounter in my everyday life. *Velleity* is not only a way of sharing a personal visual journey but also a way of exposing social complexities and wrestling with the challenges of universal communication.

*Velleity* reflects my experiences as a Chinese immigrant who has lived in the United States for ten years. I was born and raised in Taishan, which is the largest city in China and the one that most immigrants to the United States are from. Journalist Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times writes, “Taishan has 400,000 of its descendants in the United States, 300,000 in Canada, and smaller numbers scattered in 75 other countries. And the people of Taishan are still leaving for abroad.”¹ When I was a kid, I already knew I had to go to the United States, and that I would have to work in a restaurant as a chef or a waiter. At first, I pictured a life like most Chinese immigrants have: become a chef, open a restaurant, buy a big house, and then go back to China to get married.

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Day by day, I found that many people stay working in restaurants in Chinatown for twenty to thirty years, sometimes even for a whole lifetime. I feared this kind of life, and I didn’t want to sacrifice my dreams for the sake of stability. I share my personal experience as an immigrant to open a broader dialogue around the social complexities of immigration and assimilation. Struggling between the old memories and my American life reveals the contradiction between past, present, and future. It's a challenge to myself, a Chinese immigrant in the United States. My skin color, language, and history tell me I'm Chinese, but my passport tells me I'm a citizen of the United States. But I prefer to identify myself by saying "I'm from Cleveland."

My process for making this work comes out of my daily practice of both walking in and photographing unfamiliar places, such as in the streets of small towns and cities, parks, and the interiors of buildings. There is a repetition of motifs throughout the work, visualizing the contradiction between the old memories and my current reality. This practice reminds me of my early experiences living in the United States. Whenever I had days off from work, I would walk around the Chinatown area, looking at the street lamps, mailboxes, and old confusing posters that were stuck to walls of the city. Sometimes I would sit in a parking lot or watch TV shows in the laundry. The practice of photographing and thinking are referenced in the concept of boredom as a function of attention, described in Susan Sontag's book *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964–1980*. Sontag points out that “most of the interesting art of our time is boring.” Finding something interesting and enjoying the playfulness in its boredom is my process of shooting. I was drawn to this concept of boredom and attention in photography,

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using it to create a romantic and poetic communication of my inner meditations. I become most aware of subtle feelings when I am in a state of extreme boredom. Stylistically, I choose to be very direct with my subject matter and environments abandoning all notions of ambiguity. I portray my inner world in the simple private moments of life.

My photographic works are a collection of emotions, symbolizing a person’s life in a place without the primary language, culture, and habits that are familiar to them. I stay in the same location and take the same yet different picture. This becomes a metaphor of a memory from the past and the longing for the best of what is yet to come, a metaphor for the contextualization of being disconnected from history. Jason Fulford’s work, The Mushroom Collector, inspires me with his way of using an image as the language with which to communicate with the audience. Fulford states, “When you embrace the fact that pictures are inherently ambiguous, the possibilities open up in terms of using images as language.” I realized that I was looking for a picture similar to my superimposition of past and present in the physical world, a conversation between my emotions and reality. I invite the viewer to consider every image of my work and the space within the installation for an intimate art experience.

In the exhibition Velleity, 55 5" x 6" images stand propped on a shelf of the wall, creating a kind of close reading atmosphere. I am interested in how one image can affect the reading of another, using formal elements such as colors; lines; and shapes to create a sequence and express the ups and downs of emotion, distance and time. For example, an image of a dazzling light in a dark space is placed close to another image with a similarly shaped shadow, creating a visual clue that passes through these images. In this work, associations are not just

made through visual similarities but also between the viewer’s experience of viewing the images found on the shelf. The shelf installation has a scannable layout, categorizing the content through visual elements and collected instants, which juncature the flow of emotion.

The color pink is used in multiple ways in this body of work, both in the installation and the photobook. The website *Color Psychology* mentions that “Pink is a very contradictory color. Its meaning can depend greatly on the culture and context in which it is presented.” The specific light pink that is used represents the qualities of optimism, hope, and gentleness. I invite viewers to look beyond the photographic images and the pink color that, by their silence and obscurity expose social complexities, and consider how the photographs relate to the color, as pink represents the definition of velleity: a wish or inclination not strong enough to lead to action. It conjures a space of openness and possibility and wrestles with the challenges of universal communication. These images are created and situated to foster an experience of emotional release, as well as a step towards learning acceptance.

The photo book is another component of Velleity, consisting of photographs and murmuring texts. In the book, I work in an associative and intuitive process. The process of negotiating the subtle relationship between the concept of image as language presentation and word choice has made me reconsider the otherness of communication between people. In Lydia Davis’ writing *The Cows*, she uses short sentences and simple language over and over to describe the cow's life, which immediately grabbed my attention and inspired me to rethink visual communication. Image as "words" can be a tool of human communication. It’s a direct

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visualization exchange with the audience. As a non-native English speaker, my use of English has caused me a lot of trouble and people have made jokes about my use of language, but I am unfazed. Image as language is an internal meditation, one that cannot be ignored or muffled. It is as if one is demanding their desires and needs be met. For me, this is better than any kind of language. It is convincing and universal. For this reason, the photo book conveys a feeling of being “longed for” on the inside. Words are meaningless when one is in the pursuit of truth. The truth of who we are and what we desire is found in the daily moments and the expression in our eyes.

In the texts of the photo book, I have boldly used my English pronunciation problem, my "broken English," to create abstract illustrations. Their lack of apparent meaning speaks to the complexities of universal communication. The murmured, deconstructed writing brings in my voice, but the text is taken apart, broken. The idea of broken English is taken literally in this process. My sentences, words, and punctuation marks are broken apart and re-arranged visually to aesthetically convey a contradiction between visual and emotional perceptions and they reflect the difficulties in communicating one's innermost thoughts to others.

Velleity explores the processes of self-reflection and self-discovery and develops the concept of images and text as a language to describe the seemingly unexceptional moments of everyday life. Visualizing the experience as a person navigating different cultures, social expectations, and realities, while pondering my displacement in the past and present, has led to moments of isolation and a struggle to communicate with those around me.
Bibliography


