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Hugo Teixeira
ht7554@rit.edu

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Dog Days on the Chaparral

by

Hugo Teixeira

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School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
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Committee Approval:

Joshua Thorson, PhD
MFA Director
School of Photographic Arts and Science

Catherine Zuromskis, PhD
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Science

Willie Osterman, MFA
Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Science
ABSTRACT

*Dog Days on the Chaparral* is an installation comprised of three photographic sculptures made in response to the question “where are you from?” Although I define myself as both Portuguese and American, as someone who immigrated as a child, my identification as either ebbs and flows. The work embodies this slipperiness—a complicated emotional geography—in fabricated sculptures which collage images of two landscapes, the California chaparral and Portuguese *montado*, as proxies for these two homes and identities. I employ vernacular building materials and tools, such as lumber, engineered wood, common fasteners, house paint and steel clamps to create a literal and conceptual framework to which I affix an arrangement of contoured photographs. Hacking together disparate materials and technologies to create multi-layered sculptures reflects the Sisyphean efforts to collage together a sense of home and belonging. The resulting photo objects are both visual and haptic and function as icons or shrines soliciting quiet contemplation of a place just beyond reach. When I contemplate these photo objects, I reflect on my family and our history, in this country and the old country, and collapse the distance between that narrative and myself. Although the body of work is rooted in my idiosyncratic immigration experience, it reflects a wider migrant narrative. Forces like poverty and conflict cause homes and nations to crumple like paper and it may take generations for migrants and their descendants to feel grounded again.
Dog Days on the Chaparral

Physical places on a map, like continents, countries, and even our homes may seem immutable. But these places can crumple like paper when dynamic forces like poverty and conflict drive people to search for new homes.¹ It may take generations for migrants and their descendants to feel grounded again. So called “decimal” generations of immigrants, those who immigrate as children, lack their parents’ memories and birth connection to their home countries. Unlike their native-born peers, they cannot look to immigrant parents who likely have not shed their native languages, customs and identities as models for acculturation.² As a 1.75 generation immigrant myself, I have a slippery relationship with two landscapes: my country of birth, Portugal, and my country of adoption, the United States. My conception of both countries and my relationship to them has been pieced together idiosyncratically from stories, trips and interactions with teachers and peers. Consequently, although I define myself as both Portuguese and American, my identification as either ebbs and flows: neither culture feels fully native, neither English nor Portuguese allow me sufficient expression and homesickness is ever-present. Dog Days on the Chaparral seeks to capture this slipperiness, a complicated emotional geography. In making collages which combine photographs of the California chaparral and Portuguese montado, proxies for these two homes and identities, I seek to “naturalize” a fabricated landscape where I feel grounded.³

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¹ International Organization for Migration, *Glossary on Migration*.

² Rumbaut, “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States,” 1197. Sociologist Rubén Rumbaut divides immigrants who arrive as children into three “decimal” generations: those who arrive aged 0 to 5 (generation 1.75), those who arrive aged 6 to 12 (generation 1.5) and those who arrive aged 13 to 17 (generation 1.25).

³ Adams, “Competing Communities in the ‘Great Bog of Europe’: Identity and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting,” 38-39. Ann Jensen Adams argues that elevating the natural landscape of the Netherlands to a subject worthy of painting and collecting served to render the seventeenth-century political, economic, and religious transformations of the new republic as natural (i.e. it “naturalizes” these).
To that end, I draw from a toolbox of skillsets and materials that I have assembled over a lifetime. I use vernacular building materials and fabrication techniques, skills I learned working alongside my father and uncle at home and in a machine shop. Conceptually, my use of these materials reflects the Sisyphean efforts made to collage together a sense of home and belonging without much guidance as I straddled two countries and cultures. The use of these vernacular skills and materials, alongside more mainstream photographic printing techniques, forms a hybrid approach, which speaks more clearly to who I am and why I make art.

FIGURE 1: *Dog Days on the Chaparral* installation. From left to right, *Chaparral C*, *Chaparral A* and *Chaparral B*.

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4 In *The Arts in Modern American Civilization*, John Kouwenhoven defines the vernacular as a creative response to the environment and a need to reorder the world into aesthetically satisfying patterns. The vernacular is an empirical approach, which subsumes form to practical and functional needs and experiences, ultimately supplanting the old-world order.
The resulting photo objects are both visual and haptic and feature the strong presence of my hand (see fig. 1). I’m cutting and reducing the landscape to its most essential horizons and planes and building it up again out of various materials into three-dimensional constructions. The camera bears witness to the real place or person, but my hand is central, present in my perception, interpretation and transformation of the subject. My work might be compared to the contemporary tradition of fotoescultura. These photo objects, popular in Mexico, do more than portray a loved one. They create three dimensional effigies which occupy the space in front of the viewer and dull the pain of their loss. My landscape constructions, like fotoescultras, possess the mechanical exactitude of the camera, "an indexical guarantor of the veracity of the appearance of the person," but the eye of the viewer focuses on the traces of the hand of the artisan who prepared them. To me they are objects of affection, but fall short of being holy relics. They function as icons or shrines which solicit quiet contemplation of a place just beyond reach, imbued with aura.

The desire to construct sculptural objects aligns my work closely with hacker and maker culture. While popularly defined as malicious penetration of computer networks, the term “hacker” is used to reference those who work in both digital (i.e. software hacking) as well as physical mediums (i.e. hardware hacking and modding). Hackers repurpose materials, devices and systems in ways unintended by their manufacturers and developers to realize ideas. The practice is often described as a reaction to the knowledge economy and long days manipulating pixels and bits and functions as release valve for the web generation insecure in its ability to

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6 Batchen, 264.
7 Grace-Flood, “Open World: Why Are We Makers?”; Hackaday, “About.”
create in the physical realm. My interest in employing the materials and techniques featured in *Dog Days* to make art began as a reaction to long hours spent in front of a computer at my day-job. Ultimately, hacking disrupts systems, whether software and hardware systems, or social and economic systems, seeking to open their black boxes so that they might be reformed to better suit us. Artist-hacker Jenny Marketou places hackers in the company of cultural and historical figures from Prometheus to Duchamp. Whether they are appropriating the fire of the gods for the benefit of mankind or repurposing a urinal to define art as a question of choice rather than skill, hackers and artists are activists engaged in resistance and critical discourse.

In addition to employing materials in novel ways, my work is engaged in a critical discourse about immigration through an analysis of my place in the world. So much of my artwork is made in response to the question, “where are you from?” This seemingly innocent question challenges the life trajectory that has shaped my identity. There are many *wheres* in answer to this question: where I was born, where my parents were born, where my extended family lives, where I live now, where I’ve lived before, and where I feel at home. The answer may even change according to the one who asks. To give multiple answers to this question, while truthful, would violate expectations regarding quantity, relevance, and clarity of the answer. I started to come to terms with this question on solo trips to Portugal and after moving there when I finished college. Throughout this period, I explored the country with my camera with no clear

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9 Grace-Flood, “Open World: Why Are We Makers?”; Marketou and Sollfrank, “Hacking Seductions as Art.”

10 Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case,” 5; Marketou and Sollfrank, “Hacking Seductions as Art.”

objective other than to observe. In so doing, I created my own sense of the country and stopped seeing it through my parents’ eyes. Home became a hybrid of both California and Portugal.

Later, other places, including Macau in China and now Rochester, New York were incorporated into my sense of home. In my photo archive, I find myself returning to features common to two or more of these homes. The first photos I ever took in Macau often featured the black and white cobblestones common to Lisbon where I was living at the time. More recently, in exploring the Rochester area, I seized upon views of Lake Ontario and a dairy in Avon and recast them as Capitola Beach and Uncle Isidore’s Farm (see fig. 2), tintype triptychs recalling two common backdrops of my youth. Dog Days reflects the subjective complexity of the answer to this question of home, combining elements of the Portuguese and Californian landscape to depict an emotionally bounded place. Photographing and highlighting these physical places serves to define where I am from. According to W.J.T. Mitchell, landscape images serve to represent an artificial world, the product of social and cultural forces, as the equivalent of natural wilderness.12 As such, they are used to form social and subjective identities. In combining common elements from my countries of origin and adoption in landscape images, I’m making a claim that this emotionally bounded (i.e. artificial) place is as natural as any physically bounded place. My landscape works are the product of an internal dialog regarding where I belong, and like all landscape images, ask the viewer to think about where they, too, belong.13

12 Mitchell, Landscape and Power, 2.

13 Andrews, Landscape and Western Art, 8.
In attempting to build a landscape as a focus for my identity, *Dog Days* examines the chaparral biome. This biome is native to Mediterranean climates characterized by hot, dry summers and wet winters, and is home to various grasses, sages, evergreen oaks and uniquely adapted animal species. More specifically, I have been investigating two regions dominated by chaparral, which are integral to my upbringing and family history. The first can be found in the Alentejo in southern Portugal. My family spent occasional summers in Portugal and these trips inevitably featured a bus ride through the yellow hills southeast of Lisbon en route to my mother’s ancestral home. This region of Portugal is home to the *montado* (or *dehesa* as it is known in neighboring Spain), an ancient cultural landscape and agroforestry system which exploits plant and animal species adapted to thrive in it. The cork and holm oaks are the most characteristic tree species in this system, and provide forage and shelter to millions of pigs,

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14 “Chaparral.”

15 Paleo, “The Dehesa/Montado Landscape”; APCOR, “Floresta.”
sheep, goats, cows and horses in the region.\textsuperscript{16} For many, the region conjures up memories of thinly sliced Iberian ham, sharp cheeses and bullfights. I grew up hearing family stories from the 1960s and 1970s, which all took place on the stage of this landscape. These stories have guided me as I scout for other locations in the landscape, like the stream in my mother’s story of nearly drowning on the way home from school (see fig. 3). When I go back today, I glimpse the inherited memories of such stories in those hills and valleys.

\textbf{FIGURE 3: Ribeira de Enxoé.} This stream is a tributary of the Guadiana River, which flows through Serpa Municipality.

The California chaparral is significant to me because it was the landscape of my youth. I grew up in Santa Clara County in the southern extremity of the San Francisco Bay Area. Just outside my parents’ front door were the oak-dotted Diablo Mountains. I spent my teenage years mountain biking in these hills in places like Joseph D. Grant County Park, Alum Rock Park, and

\textsuperscript{16} Maté, “La Dehesa Un Ecosistema de Leyenda”; Paleo, “The Dehesa/Montado Landscape.”
Mission Peak Regional Preserve. Beyond these hills were the California Central Valley and my uncle’s dairy. The view of the wind turbines that dotted the rolling hills of Altamont Pass was a sure sign that we had almost reached his home. The uncanny continuity between these hills and the Alentejo startles me even today. They merge to form a distinct sense of home.

_Dog Days_ offers an alternative approach to discussing the reality of immigration as an experience, which continues long after the moment of migration. In this way my body of work functions much like the literary genre of magical realism. By marrying concrete situations with surreal elements, the genre offers ways to discuss alternative approaches to reality that transgress geographical and political boundaries.¹⁷ The genre plays an outsized role in my work, visually and thematically. From the very beginning of this project, one line from _One Hundred Years of Solitude_ provided a visual cue to guide the work: "...he bought an eternal ticket on a train that never stopped traveling."¹⁸ At first I saw this locomotive as an engine of heartbreak, a reminder that you can never find home again, but now I see that journey as a home in itself. García Marquez goes on to describe the images that the character Álvaro observed from the window of his coach and subsequently recorded in postcards. My landscapes reassemble glimpses of Portugal and California, the length of my own migration journey, into fantastical three-dimensional objects, shaping the landscape into a form that better suits me. The resulting sculptures can be traversed in multiple dimensions and force reflection on the notion of home and belonging.

¹⁷ Bowers, _Magic(al) Realism_, 64.

¹⁸ Marquez, _One Hundred Years of Solitude_, 194.
Magical realism empowers writers to furtively challenge the unquestioned beliefs that enable colonial, fascist and other totalitarian regimes. José Saramago’s novels reflect the rural poverty, fascist dictatorship, colonial wars and revolution that characterized Portugal in the 1960s and 1970s. The “savage humanism” of his novels washed away the pastel tones of my parents’ nostalgia for their country of birth. Ultimately these were the forces that pushed my family and millions of others to emigrate. In Saramago’s *A jangada de pedra (The Stone Raft)* the main character draws a line in the dirt, symbolically separating herself from a past life with an abusive man, only to split Iberia from the continent and set it adrift in the Atlantic. This caused international political upheaval. I reflected on this story in *Two Stone Rafts* (see fig. 4), where I juxtaposed inkjet enlargements of two tintypes made near Rochester on top of which I pasted cutouts of landscape photos made in California and Portugal. The piece brought the cliffs of California’s Central Coast and Portugal’s Sintra Coast together on the shores of Lake Ontario as an allegory for my immigrant experience. In his novel, Saramago criticized unquestioned geopolitical and geographic fantasies, while I reflected on the massive forces that contribute to the creation of national identities.

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20 Bloom, “The Grand Comedian Visits the Bible.”

21 Saramago, *A Jangada de Pedra* [The Stone Raft].
In addition to merging disparate geographies, *Dog Days* also relies on meaningful use of materials not usually associated with photography. The artist Binh Danh often employs atypical materials (i.e. living plant tissue) or obsolete photographic processes (i.e. daguerreotypy) in the creation of images. There is a careful balance between the concept and materiality of his work—the latter does not eclipse the former. Instead, every single leaf and silvered plate adds a level of meaning that magnifies his intended message. His conspicuous use of material speaks to the materiality of our own bodies. His chlorophyll work often hinges on the idea that nothing ever dies but is simply transformed in a fragile transmigration of elements from one body to the next.\(^\text{22}\) The people he portrays were consumed by the plant life in the places where they fell, and now plant life brings their images back to us. More

\(^{22}\) Guth, “One Week’s Dead.”
recently, he was drawn to Yosemite National Park because as a child he saw photos of national parks but never visited them. To his parents, who had spent years in refugee camps before coming to the United States with their young son, the idea of camping in the wilderness was anathema. Consequently, he could only imagine himself in those spaces, part of the mainstream culture. In displaying these landscapes on the mirrored surface of the daguerreotype, viewers of the work can see themselves in this space, and in so doing, define themselves as Americans as well. Furthermore, Danh’s use of a nineteenth century processes to make contemporary photographs speaks to the inescapable influence of the past on the present. Although I came into the MFA program relying heavily on alternative photographic processes, my work has evolved to exploit the semantic properties of an expanded set of materials. Images and materials are saturated with personal meaning and modulate each other to communicate ideas more complex than the sum of their parts. Dog Days employs lumber, engineered wood, house paint, fasteners and clamps to give sculptural dimension to photographs but also to reflect the effort undertaken to build an emotional home out of the landscapes of Portugal and the United States.

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23 Ly, "Binh Danh: Yosemite."

I treat the landscape itself like material as well. Photographs of the landscape don’t work their way into my final images and sculptures as is but form part of a bank of images and materials, which I draw from in the construction of my artwork. Early on, I found it difficult to identify individual landscape images that might be appropriate to my intended compositions. Assembling hundreds of small test prints proved tedious and time-consuming. I needed a tool to quickly categorize the landscape images I was producing. To that end, I adapted the Chao tone-letter system which was developed to represent linguistic tone in print. This system represents the pitch/time relationship of linguistic tones (see fig. 5) numerically or using a series of iconic elements.

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tone-letters (see fig. 6). Similarly, I divide my landscape images into five segments from the bottom to the top of the frame and map the curve of the horizons within these. A horizon, which is level across the middle of the frame, is categorized as 33 (corresponding to tone-letter ˧ in the Chao system) while the trough between two hills might be categorized as 434 (corresponding to tone-letter ˥ in the Chao system; see fig. 7).26 Equipped with carefully organized folders of horizon lines that are level, rising, falling, crests and troughs, I can quickly assemble new compositions or return to the field to find horizon lines which are missing from my archive.

Dr. Silke Krohn describes collecting as a way artists stop time to facilitate studying the past. In turn, the past can be reinvented by juxtaposing images and objects of historical significance in novel ways.27 For me, this act of searching, collecting and cognitive organizing

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26 I studied linguistics as an undergraduate student. I find myself drawing on this skillset in making artwork today.

reflects the efforts made to connect with both my ancestral and adopted homes. My work gathers disparate landscapes of my past and present to create images that represent my slippery relationship with place and memory.

Interpretation is sometimes required to stitch together these collected fragments. Reflecting this in my work, I manipulate horizon lines to achieve my intended compositions. I manually extend them beyond the photographic image to create imaginary hills and raise them by using content-aware fill, a digital tool that analyzes textures in the existing image and algorithmically extends it. These actions recall the attempts made by decimal generation immigrants to make sense of differently textured cultures without much guidance. Their goal is to eventually fit into their adopted and ancestral homes as best they can. The work both creates and destroys, physically tearing apart the landscape building it back up again, much as memories and one’s place in a community break down and are reinterpreted over time.

As a decimal generation immigrant, the seemingly innocuous question, “where are you from?” reads heavily as, “you don’t belong here.” Without a birth connection to my ancestral home, and little guidance to navigate through my adopted one, I’ve found myself improvising in an attempt to find my footing in both. It has been no easy feat to close the distance between the two. As I swing between them, I find myself alternatively at home and a foreigner. Our origins are not the static places we might wish them to be. In demanding to know someone is from, we may deny them the agency to trace a line between that place and where they are now (or even where they wish to end up). Alternatively, in placing faith in the melting pot as a leveler of all people, we ignore that without warmth, solids precipitate out of solution and sink into a murky sediment. Dog Days begs the viewer to have empathy and hospitality for all migrants, minorities and marginalized peoples who struggle to find their footing in this land.
In making these sculptures I’ve become aware of just how far I’ve come from those days in my teens and early twenties when I was in desperate search of home and refused to admit that I would never find it in a single physical place. As a younger man the sensation of home was scarce, but as I’ve matured, it has become omnipresent. Reflecting the overwhelming presence of this composite place in my life, *Dog Days on the Chaparral* collages much more than image—it collages material, skillsets and memory. As I fabricate these images, I’m shaping them into physical structures that pull these two poles closer together. As I move literally and figuratively through the spaces I’ve created, I finally feel at home among the hills, guarded by the shade of the oak trees, and blanketed by the drone of the cicadas.
Bibliography


