Traces of Existence

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Traces of Existence

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

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Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY Date May 1, 2021
Committee Approval

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Abstract

The everyday seems, well, everyday, but there is much more than meets the eye. Woven into the banal scene of everyday, are instances of everyday surrealism—uncanny moments of the unexpected. These moments can be found through the practice of wandering, finding the extraordinary a random way. Meandering through the world allows for the element of chance to take hold, encouraging keen observation around every bend. Finding these moments where the banal scene contains surreal elements reveals the unexpected and sensation of the everyday. Through this body of work, I hope to encourage the viewer to take this spirit with them while looking at the images and engaging with the everyday themselves.
The mundane is where I find my subject matter. I'm drawn to this setting because this is where the performances of day-to-day life are happening. Within this performance of life is an environmental exchange between the users and the environment. Inhabitants utilize their surroundings and it reacts by creating what I call traces of existence. These traces play out subtle accounts of interaction that punctuate the mundane. Some highlight commonplace settings by focusing on the ordinary: residential houses, parks, or other banal spaces. These types of images, speak to, what is seen on the surface level of the inhabited environment. Pausing to document such findings creates a conversation between the seemingly insignificant and the larger landscape. It is important to appreciate the subtly of this environment; all too often the banal is taken for granted as stale background to our life.

Throughout the course of making *Traces of Existence*, I looked towards several photo books for inspiration in the conceptualization of this work. This not only nurtured my connection to the medium of the photo book but also aided me in understanding the mechanics of a successful photo book. Perusing through piles and pages I set my sights on a few books that spoke to me as an artist and spoke to my project. *Lago* By Ron Jude documents the return of Jude to his hometown in the desert of California. Coming back with wiser eyes Jude finds glimmers of hope scattered through the depressed landscape rekindling childhood adventures and possibly the reasons for why he left. I was drawn to Jude's ability to capture a place photographically both at a macro level as well as an intimate scale. Having open environmental shots paired with closer ones connects the link between the whole of the inhabited environment and the smaller traces of existence.
Considering Jude's use of these dynamic tactics of grand together with the finite sparked my observation of such happenings within my project. Much like when I'm wandering to make photographs, the act of walking allows me to hone in and become close to my surroundings. The photo book does this by proximity to the viewer. Looking at such close range and being included in the narrative by turning pages creates an intimate experience through interaction. The book as an object also draws me in as the form creates a tangible product with the ability to be used and interacted with.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 1. Untitled-22501, Alec Landon, digital photograph, 2020
Paradoxically, this is the exact reason I'm drawn to the mundane. Looking to the image of a park water fountain in *Traces of Existence* demonstrates the pinnacle of boring magnificence. A chunky water fountain sporting nine faucets that line the perimeter of its top is centered in the frame. The fountains body is constructed of a wooden cube with one spout protruding out at about dog height on the left side above the shallow step for the younger drinkers. The sun is bright illuminating the top surface of the fountain and glinting off the spigots chrome, steeply contrasted by the shadow cast on the blacktop. Quietly peeking out of the shadow is a silhouette of one faucet head. Filling the background is the vivid green of park grass bathed by a high sun. What drew me into this scene was the metallic iridescent glow of the chrome-lined spouts. I had also never seen a water fountain with such a multitude of faucets; I couldn't help but admire the symmetrical utilitarian layout. Within these elements of no-frills function, I find the subtleties of form, and I am, enticed by what it's not rather than what it is. For this reason, I think it is important to admire the banal and all of its charm.
Other traces shift the focus towards exceptions to the mundane illuminating instances of everyday surrealism. Within these moments, the face value of the everyday is juxtaposed with the curious and strange. These scenes add contrast by highlighting the uncanniness woven into the fabric of the ordinary. Observing this surreal level of the inhabited environment it uncovers a reality not yet fully revealed, showing an ulterior side to, everyday interactions. For instance, there is an image in *Traces of Existence* of a fence that has been jabbed with a knife, the knife juts out in a halted pose. A top the fence accompanying the knife is a small American flag ball resting on a support post. Encountering this while out wandering was quite puzzling raising questions as to why or
how this random assortment of gestures came together. It seemed almost methodical in the violent positioning of the blade in comparison to the subtle resting ball. It wasn't until after studying the image that I realized its nuance. Not only does this attest to hidden surreal moments of the everyday by illuminating an oddity found by happenstance, but it also references the current American cultural and political climate, depicting the dynamic layers of the commonplace that are hiding in plain sight.

Fig. 3. Untitled-25593, Alec Landon, digital photograph, 2021

My interest in wandering and observing falls in line with Charles Baudelaire's conception of the flaneur. This is a person who meanders, absorbing visual pleasure from their surroundings. In his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* Baudelaire describes how a flaneur navigates the world gaining an almost transcendent connection for this activity.
What resonates with me the most out of this writing is when Baudelaire References this way of seeing as being a "child seeing everything in a state of newness, they are drunk."¹ I try and emulate this mindset when searching the everyday by allowing my curiosity to strike me and admire the novelty of this environment looking to the urban landscape as means for observational joy² this is how I relate to the inhabited environment through photography. By wandering and searching I'm able to make a visual exchange with my surroundings finding run-of-the-mill scenes or sidewalk curios acting as slices to the greater whole of the inhabited environment. Trading my reinvention of a subject for its ability to highlight the mundane and its moments of everyday surrealism. By participating in this activity I'm a witness to elements that otherwise get little to no attention from a pedestrian perspective.

The camera allows me to recognize these everyday curios by heightening my awareness. I see the camera as a tool that invites me to explore, express, and share what I encounter. Using the transformative property of the camera I document what I find interesting and recreate that instance of discovery for the viewer to experience. Noting that these scenes of minutia have little value when seen in a normal setting, it is only once the camera into a photograph transforms them that they gain a sense of importance. The significance of taking time to search out these scenes is that they most likely go by the wayside, being overlooked and disregarded. But when made into a photograph it allows for the voice of these happenings to be heard. When composing my photographs I do so in a way that reflects how I discovered them to prompt intently observing the everyday,

and delivering an opportunity for viewers to see and encounter things they might not have noticed in their walking life. I provide a sense of a "first-person encounter" fostering an element of wonder that indulges in the gratification of the unknown.

Discovering William Eggleston’s work altered my understanding of how to make photographs. There was no need for a fancy studio or a cumbersome large-format camera; He only needed to walk out the front door. William Eggleston’s 

*Guide* offered a hall pass for me to wander, and explore what was surrounding me. Eggleston employs an

Fig. 4. Untitled-25366, Alec Landon, digital photograph, 2021
egalitarian way of photographing holding all of his subjects to the same standard, viewing everything as a potential picture. By exploring the mundane Eggleston shows the viewer what he is gravitating towards and finds of interest replicating his way of seeing. In most of his work, he intertwines the exploration of the mundane outside world with fleeting moments of the familial. His interior shots exemplify the private, going inward-looking to the family setting as a way to investigate what is concealed from the external world.

In *Guide*’s opening essay John Szarkowski details his thoughts and moods towards Eggleston’s work. Szarkowski points out that, “the goal is not to make something factually impeccable but seamlessly persuasive.” Reinforcing the notion that although photographs are read with a veneer of truth, they are only fragments of a perspective.

Eggleston creates stand-ins for the happenings that the images attempt to record, providing a chronicle of his private view.

While Eggleston's work prompts his intake of the world, my work operates by recreating the instance of discovery. I situate the viewer in the encounter of the subject to heighten observation, providing an opportunity to display what can be seen rather than what I can see. This sheds light on the multifaceted layers of the everyday. Yes, there are banal subjects to be admired for their humble attractiveness, but peeling back the leys reveals uncanny moments woven into commonplace scenes. Displaying both of these subjects’ points to the potential of what can be witnessed in such a run-of-the-mill environment, not what is simply seen from scratching the surface.

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Wolfgang Tillman’s work captures the ephemeral of the everyday, looking to the common and not so common to create a conversation through context. This dance of sequencing is referred to by Tillmans as the “wandering image.” These images are made with no hierarchical nature, meant to adapt and change as their setting does. His images foster a dialog, presenting a narrative that develops between the lines. This provides the

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viewer with opportunities to bounce around, jumping from image to image intertwining what is present on the wall with what is linked in the mind.

Although Tillmans and I find interest in the similar subject matter he creates a conversation through the juxtaposition of differing contexts by pairing images with seemingly no relation to each other to create a jumping-off point for pictorial dialog. Through my work, I’m creating a conversation through the same context. Rather than looking to images of varying context for juxtaposition like Tillmans does, I focus on a singular one in a particular inhabited environment. Within this overarching theme, I allow the banal to juxtapose itself with moments of everyday serialism. This highlights the overlooked elements that are taken for granted by intermixing them with the uncanny experience of discovering the unexpected.

The everyday is a multi-layered environment ranging from the banal to the surreal. *Traces of Existence* explores these subjects through wandering, finding the magnificence in a random way. I point towards passed over elements both mundane and uncanny to peel back these layers as parts to the greater whole of the inhabited environment. By recreating the instance of their discovery, I provide an opportunity to see what is hidden in the commonplace. Through the juxtaposition of the banal with moments of everyday surrealism, I highlight a reality not yet fully revealed. Through this pairing of common and not so common speaks to the veneer of the mundane; what seems to be the ordinary often has the extraordinary woven in, it just usually takes a bit of wandering to be witnessed.
Bibliography


Evans, David. “Wolfgang Tillmans and the Wandering Image.”
