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Within the Hour

by

Jacob Dowis

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Abstract

In our hyper-connected, present-day reality, many people think of solitude as a strange or lonely aspect of life. Over the last two years, I have been exploring themes of solitude by isolating individuals in composition. I first began the project primarily by photographing myself and the landscape around me, including both residential and public areas that I would find myself in. The concept grew from the isolation I felt when first moving here for school during the Covid pandemic. It was the first time I was living on my own, and in addition, I was moving to a new city without knowing anyone. This project became a part of not just my photographic practice but a part of my weekly routine.

This body of work focuses on instances of solitude and small moments woven into one's day that grant a person an opportunity to unwind and take time for themselves. While every person experiences these instances differently, this series aims to provide a glimpse through the walls we have built up when we are alone and expose the profundity of a private moment that can be experienced together.

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In our hyper-connected, present-day reality, many people think of solitude as a strange or lonely aspect of life. Even throughout the isolation brought about by the global pandemic in the last few years, people struggle with the thought of being by themselves, disconnected from the world around them. It seems like no one else is experiencing these same feelings, leading to a more uncertain and negative perception of solitude.

Over the last two years, I have been exploring themes of solitude by isolating individuals in composition. At the beginning of the project, I primarily photographed myself and the landscape around me, including residential and public areas in which I would find myself. Before this project, I had never included myself in my images, but I thought it would be a challenge not only to ask others to be open in front of the camera but also for me.

The concept grew from my isolation when I first moved to Rochester for school. It was the first time living on my own, and in addition, I was moving to a new city without knowing anyone. With Covid still leaving the world sheltered in their homes and while I was attending predominantly online classes, I found myself in new physical and mental spaces. This project became a part of not just a photographic practice but a part of my weekly routine. Besides shooting in my apartment, I would set out to drive around the hours of dusk and dawn, searching for places that could evoke the same or similar feelings I had felt throughout the week. The feeling of uncertainty about the future played a pivotal role in my work in the beginning and carried throughout the project as it progressed.

As the project continued, I became more comfortable in front of the camera. I would not necessarily say I was ever acting or "playing a part," but I created visual representations of my state of mind. This relationship is an essential and defining aspect of my work, allowing me to be as vulnerable as the people I photograph, balancing the scales and ensuring comfort between

myself and the subjects. A close interaction between two people is usually somewhat intimate, whether that be a friendship, relationship, or something else. I wanted to create an environment, not just visually but personally with the people I chose to photograph. This in turn created a place where we both could feel at ease about this brief interaction. The project expanded to photographing others in their private residence or locations that could metaphorically represent their mentality when feeling isolated and uncertain.

Figure 1   The Meadow, 2020

The Meadow was one of the first photographs I composed when beginning this project in Rochester. It is a self-portrait and is still one of my favorite images I have created during my time here. It explores themes not just of solitude but of the unknown and the unexplored. This image takes place early in the morning, just as the sun rises over the trees behind the landscape. The golden spotlight of the sun hitting the field struck me as I drove by, and I immediately pulled over. I positioned myself in the center of the dampened grass still wet with morning dew, and hit the shutter. Looking back on this photograph, I did not know what I was creating that late August morning. It was not until the project progressed that I began to understand: that the faceless

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figure in this enigmatic landscape metaphorically represented where I was mentally then. I was looking into the unknown of what my life was about to be, something beautiful but unfamiliar. When discussing her series *Untitled Film Stills*, Cindy Sherman stated, "What I did not want were pictures showing strong emotions, which was rare to see; in film stills, there is much overreacting because they are trying to sell the movie." Much like Sherman, I am not trying to convey a heavy emotional draw with my work through facial expressions. Instead, I engage with people through the atmosphere and settings throughout the photographs and allow people to place themselves within the frame and understand the story through gesture, location, and the unfamiliar.

This work focuses on instances of solitude, small moments woven into one's day, which grant a person an opportunity to unwind and take time for themselves. While every person experiences these instances differently, this series aims to provide a glimpse through the walls we have built up when we are alone and expose the profundity of a private moment that people can experience together.

In *On Solitude, Conscience, Love and Our Inner and Outer Lives*, Ron Haflidson argues against the dangers of replacing moments of solitude with constant connection. Many people think that connecting with others should be a continuous practice. Haflidson points out that to further connect and understand another, a person must first understand themselves. Haflidson discusses the importance of instances of self-reflection and realization throughout the text.

We frequently connect back with ourselves as a part of our daily routines. Whether it be a break after work, on your drive home, or even in the bathroom, it is in these moments that people can relive and resonate with themselves. In the psychological study *By myself and liking it? Predictors of distinct types of solitude experiences in daily life,* researchers focus on identifying

both positive and negative experiences of solitude in everyday life, recognizing patterns of individuals to determine how and who deal with isolation negatively versus people who experience it positively. This experiment exposed the extremes of this state of being, concluding that most people who had time to themselves felt a sense of relief. Many people seem to think of solitude as a negative aspect of one's character, while in reality, most people need to take time to themselves to readjust and step back from their daily routines.

In the article *Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future,* the argument is that "nostalgia is essentially positive, allowing people to be "self-relevant, and social emotion serves essential psychological functions.[1]" The authors discuss nostalgic events through moments of solitude; nostalgia offers a person time to remember and resonate with instances of the past and move forward with a new understanding of both the present and future. While nostalgic fantasies have positive and negative attributes related to memories from one's history, it is in these moments that a society or group can share these feelings and connect with others. Revisiting these thoughts alone can help a person reach their conclusions when remembering moments from their past. When people can come together with others who have experienced similar circumstances, they grow together through these shared experiences. The photographs that I create do not exist in a specific time but rather a state of being, representing the progression of life through these shared instances. I hope that people can connect with the work visually and personally, relating experiences of their own to those expressed in these photographs.

When discussing aspects of nostalgia, American literary critic Fredric Jameson*'s "Nostalgia for the Present* states," "it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history: that is, a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and

[1] Constantine Sedikides et al., "Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, no. 5 (2008): pp. 304-307, https://doi.org/10.1111/cdir.2008.17.issue-1.

allows us that distance from immediacy."[2] My work acts as a perception of a person's life, allowing an individual the opportunity to separate themselves from their own life and relate with that of the moment portrayed in the photograph. In turn, forming a new relationship between each person and image, presenting elements that can relate to each individual differently, hopefully provoking thought into a memory of the past or the present. Instances where I found myself reflecting on life, or a memory from the past were also moments that I was alone. The act of being secluded in a new place and in a new chapter of life, drew me more to my past than I ever expected. It was in these moments where I was inspired to create photographs of the present that represented me longing for my own past. I wasn't wanting to go back in time, rather reignite a certain feeling or emotion from the past. With my work I think a sense of longing for something else, something more, is a prevalent theme throughout the images. Unsure of the future, while figuring out the present.

In chapter 4 of *Photography, Narrative, Time: Imaging our Forensic Imagination*, Greg Bettye, argues that the genre of narrative photography captures the specious present, a term E. Robert Kelly describes as an interval of time experienced in the seeming present. This speciousness can also speak to the past or future, thus conflicting the reality of the actual time the photograph was created and inherently constructing a vague or new interpretation of the moment photographed. Having an image exist in the "specious present," the actual time and date of the image are unknown, creating a place of self-exploration and discovery. Bettye states, "The present, then, lacks duration because it is no more than the interface between the future and the past; the past has neither duration nor any other property…."[3] Time is an attribute of life; each person undergoes this endeavor personally and tries to hold onto different stages that they find

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[2] Frederic Jameson, "Nostalgia for the Present," in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2019), p. 192.
[3] Greg Battye, ed. 2014. *Photography, Narrative, Time: Imaging Our Forensic Imagination*), p. 74.

comfortable or memorable. Regarding time in images, Gregory Crewdson says, "Since a photograph is frozen and mute since there is no before and after, I don't want there to be a conscious awareness of any literal narrative. And that's why I really try not to pump up motivation or plot or anything like that."[4] Thus creating our own time in the present from the past or even looking forward to the future.

Figure 2   Untitled, 2021

For Cheyco Leidmann, the goal of his work is to display an inner experience to make space for a viewer to "feel the same thing he felt" when making the work, bringing them into his internal landscape.[5] In some circumstances, work that reflects some personal aspects of the photographer tends to resonate with others on a deeper emotional level. Granting access to a part of them, even if it is just a tiny detail of one's life, allows art to have a greater connection with its audience. The photograph then acts as a form of communication without words; the work shares

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[4] Hatty Nestor, "Gregory Crewdson: 'I Wanted the Photographs to Feel like a Suburban Window, to Give a Sense That the Viewer Is Looking into a World'," Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/gregory-crewdson-interview-cathedral-of-the-pines-photographers-gallery-london.

[5] Allyn Salo Salomon, "Settings," in *Advertising Photography* (100 Park Avenue, New York, NY: Amphoto Books, 1987), p 146.

a certain feeling or experience that a person can indicate by viewing the image. A visual

representation of a person's life or understanding, whether a literal display or a metaphorical one,

does not just connect to the artist but also to the people who view their work. (Fig.2) is an

example of linking two stories to create an entirely new narrative, not just a collaboration

between the artist and the viewer, but of myself and the model presented in the photograph. The

initial idea for this photograph changed on the day of the shoot. Upon arriving at his house, I

could tell by his attitude that something was wrong. After a long talk, we came up with a new

direction for the photograph. I decided to photograph him up close without a shirt on, standing

right in front of his bathroom mirror, looking away from his reflection. I wanted the image to

represent the vulnerability and uncertainty that he felt that day, creating a visual representation of

a private encounter with oneself.

American Realist painter Edward Hopper created work that has an inherent visual

discrepancy between the way things appear to casual observers and the way they are. This work

presents a duality between mundane and mysterious, creating a space to question the image.[6]

Highlighting the subtle details within his beautifully composed scenes leaves the story or

meaning of the image ambiguous. Hopper created these beautifully crafted scenes referencing

the natural world, containing prolific stories from his internal landscape. His paintings are not

just representations of what he saw but rather interpretations of everyday life that he gave

meaning and voice to through his artwork.[7]. Hopper did not just depict a scene but rather a

feeling. He leaned into the emotional draw of his life and illustrated that through his medium.

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[6] Erika Doss et al. *Edward Hopper: A Fresh Look at Landscape*, edited by Küster Ulf (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2020), p 103.
[7] Ibid, p100-101.

Composing not just a symbolic image of introspection but also a literal visualization of an instance in time.

Figure 3   Untitled, 2021

For instance, with this photograph (Fig. 3), I wanted to emulate a moment of pause at the crossroads of movement. I had imagined a woman sitting in her car stopped at a traffic light, gazing out the window to decompress or replay instances from her day on the drive home. The lighting in the image was intended to resemble street lights or headlights from another car. The lighting creates the illusion that even though she is still, the world around her is still in motion. This is acting metaphorically to how even with the chaos and actions of life, we can find brief points of introspection throughout the day that allow us the opportunity to reflect and deepen our understanding of not just ourselves but of others.

We engage in metaphorical efforts aimed at expanding our modes of knowing[8]. We use metaphor to deepen and broaden our knowledge of life through things we see, read, and hear to understand what is presented to us. When looking at art, our primary connections become

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[8] Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *Psychic Suffering : From Pain to Growth* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), p.117.

obscured, questioning if our interpretation of a work is correct and wondering about its intent.[9]

Thus, creating a link between our personal stories and the artist's narrative deepens our

connection with the work by relating to it both visually and emotionally.

When we try to understand the intent behind a work, we fuse our personal experiences

with the artist's concept, combining our narrative with theirs, thus constructing our meaning and

understanding of the work. "What the artist attempts to do is to try and tell a story. Attempting to

give physical expression to a story that's internal."[10]Arguably the most popular medium for this

occurrence today would be through cinema. When we turn on our television or go into the

theater, we become immersed in a multisensory experience, transporting us into another world,

visually engaged with the story unfolding before our eyes. We can relate to characters, instances,

and themes throughout the feature, tying them to our experiences.

Figure 4   Untitled, 2021

[9] Ibid, p. 118.
[10] Hatty Nestor, "Gregory Crewdson: 'I Wanted the Photographs to Feel like a Suburban Window, to Give a Sense That the Viewer Is Looking into a World'," Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/gregory-crewdson-interview-cathedral-of-the-pines-photographers-gallery-london.

Like cinema, photography takes a person on a journey into a story. It is transporting them out of their own life into the world of another. The genre of cinematic or narrative photography enables people to place themselves within the frame, creating a story that they resonate with through the medium of photography. Images that do not include a figure generate a break of ambiguity and introspection, a pause between "scenes." This allows one to unpack elements from the current photograph while also relating aspects to other images in the series. With the inclusion of these photographs, the story stays vague. However, it gives a context of place, intertwining storylines together, letting an overlap occur between the people and places within the images.

One of the key elements in my work is that the time of day stays constant throughout these images. I do so by photographing around the hours of dusk and dawn, bridging the ideas together through a shared time. I keep the time of day consistent, connecting the images using artificial and natural light. My intent behind this is to depict individual moments from each person, creating a sense of community and togetherness within moments of solitude, all happening within an hour. With the photographs overlapping in time, each image tells an individual story. Whether it be about a person or an environment, the scene is still, but the story is fluid. I am creating an extended time and space *Within the hour*.

American photographer Gregory Crewdson is best known for his dramatic cinematic staged scenes of suburbia. His surreal images are often melancholic, offering ambiguous metaphorical suggestions that blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. Crewdson sets the psychological and emotional isolation of his subjects against the vast landscape of the natural world, creating a still tension in his work that engages with the viewer. It gives us space to consider the circumstances of each scene while also drawing us into the stillness and familiarity

of the photograph as if it were a memory. Crewdson stated in an interview with Hatty Nestor, "Solitude is tied into the medium. Generally, most photographers are drawn to the medium by some separation they feel from the world. The act of putting a camera in front of one's eyes is an act of separation." In my work, I focus on these occasions people take to reflect, and it is when a person can take a step back and truly recognize the profundity of a situation. Crewdson tends to isolate people as if they feel lost to wandering the world alone. With this series, I am more invested in the positive attribute of the (isolated figure) and how within these moments of solitude, a person can connect not just with themselves but with the world around them.

Figure 5   Untitled, 2022

Film scholar Steven Jacobs argues that film stills "give rise to mystery and tension, by having the subject frozen in time and motion and leaving the audience wondering what exact moment they are a part of"[11]. He highlights how a still photographer operates as a director, arranging and setting the scene to encapsulate somehow the narrative that played out in the film.

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[11] Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p 119.

Unlike film stills, my work is not a re-creation but captures a frozen moment with no beginning or end (Fig. 5). The viewer is placed in a transitional space, not knowing the circumstances that unfolded before or after this moment.

Jacobs also posits that tangible photographs featured within movies, when presented, are mute, intransigent objects from the past.[12]. Referencing still images present in films allows the audience to stop and understand the importance of this shared moment and how it has affected the lives of people around them in this story. My photographs can act the same way, allowing the audience to resonate with the work and remind them of memories or instances from the past. The project emphasizes metaphorical glimpses of transition and introspection through the use of a subject in a landscape. When contemplating my images, I hope viewers can enter each photograph and relate aspects of their lives to those in the picture. Looking to one's past can take them out of the present to a more favorable moment in time, relieving them from pressures and constraints they are currently facing in life.[13].

Figure 6   Untitled, 2021

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[12] Ibid, p 121.
[13] David Sander, and Nathalie Herschdorfer, *Emotions*.(Salenstein: Benteli, imprint of Braun Publishing AG, 2017), p 140.

This photograph (Fig.6) is set under a carport around the hour of twilight in an almost empty parking lot. I introduced artificial lighting to the scene creating a deep magenta hue that coats the scene. By introducing small amounts of light, I was able to blend the scene by matching the colors of the environment to those of the person within the frame. Thus, creating a staged image could also be a chance encounter. With each photograph, light and color play a crucial role in the atmosphere that I am trying to convey, lending a sense of drama while still being a practical and believable element. With this body of work, the visual time of the images is unclear. I intentionally omit objects and settings that could reference a specific date in time, giving the work a sense of timelessness, in turn maintaining a sense of mystery that allows people in the future to resonate more effectively with the work.

Walking the line of believability behind a highly staged image is difficult in photography. In *The Crooked Path*, Jeff Wall argues that the cinematic aesthetic approach to photography is compelling and part of the medium. It allows the audience to connect with the work instantly, but the subject matter and its importance make them stay and genuinely understand the intent and meaning of the photograph.[14] Photography, like cinema, takes the viewer on a journey through a story, transporting them into a world of another. The cinematic or narrative photography genre enables the audience to place themselves within the frame, creating an account that resonates with them through the medium.

The work of American photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia encompasses both aspects of documentary and staged photography, lending his large-scale color prints a narrative mixture of truth and fiction. Philip-Lorca diCorcia's work is cinematic; he insists that his pictures suggest

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[14] Jeff Wall, and Hans De Wolf, *Jeff Wall: The Crooked Path* (Brussels: Bozar Books, 2011), p 148-150.

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rather than illustrate a complete narrative. He stated, "The more specific the interpretation suggested by a picture, the less happy I am with it."[15] I try balancing both metaphorical and literal expressions of space and emotion within the photograph with my work. When looking at this series, I hope people will not initially think about the construction of the image but, instead, the content.

Figure 7   Untitled, 2021

Figure 7 is an excellent example of an unspecified image because the only context given is visual. When approaching the concept of the photograph in Figure 7, I wanted both the identity of the person and their surroundings to be unclear, providing space in the photograph for people to fill in the unidentifiable context and environment with their own. The exaggerated lighting in this image underlines the theme of solitude. The figure in the photo is visible only through the backlit bus stop lights reflected in the disheveled glass behind her in this dark abyss. The light is

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[15] Maria Short, Kartini Leet, and Elisavet Kalpaxi, *Context, and Narrative in Photography* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic), p. 154.

receding as if there is no end to the vastness of the environment, representing not only this person literally but mentally indicating that something else might be in play.

   Wax & Jardins: Loneliness in the City is a collection of 28 different artists. The book explores the strange dissociating effect of contemporary life, including imagery from photographers whose work falls in line with the genre of solitude and disconnection. In the section *Talking to Myself,* Andres Kreuge states, "talking to myself feels like a necessity because of the comfort and entertainment it brings, but at the same time, it is vaguely irritating and redundant."[16] Most people find comfort when alone by talking to themselves, both mentally and aloud. This section focuses on an individual's story or understanding of solitude. Whether it be a moment from their past or present, it is something they are dealing with currently.

  Throughout my research of gestural demonstration, I found these writings that focus on different elements that propel people to act or present themselves in specific ways. Canadian American sociologist Erving Goffman argues about the believability and truth behind an individual's performance, appearance, and manner.[17]. These are crucial elements when observed and functioning in private and public spaces. When discussing how people present themselves in public, it seems that the majority of the time, it is always a kind of act formed by societal norms, but also self-interest, a way of blending in or sticking out from society.[18]. There is much more performance in public spaces than in private settings. When people are in the comfort of their environments, they are less likely to feel the need to "perform" for others.

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[16] Alicia Framis, *Alicia Framis: Wax & Jardins: Loneliness in the City* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Artimo Foundation, 1999), p 10.

[17] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1990), p 17- 31.

[18] Ibid, p 17-31.

Figure 8   Untitled, 2021

When approaching the composition in Figure 8, the main focus was on the person's

gesture, heightening the aspect of nonverbal communication through action. The gestural

elements emphasize the narrative in this photograph, portraying a straightforward effort that is

immediately identifiable, implementing these aspects of gestural expression within my work and

exploring an individual's comfort in specific environments, in both public and private settings.

Presenting a person in this way lends the photograph's interpretation to rely predominantly on the

unknown elements rather than the literal action that is taking place. Having the scene in (Fig, 8)

enter into a private space somewhat demonstrates how people are not filtering themselves for

others but being true to who they are. This acts as an entry point for people to place themselves

within the frame and understand the story through gesture, setting, and the unidentified.

This project has been one of the more vulnerable series I have created. I have found that

the inclusion of self-portraiture in this series has allowed me to understand the comfort level of

the people I photograph and visually act out emotions or a mental space that I have gone through.

Granting me the opportunity to fully understand and relate with the people I have included in my

work to bridge the emotional gap between photographer, subject, and viewer. Walker Evans stated, "leaving aside the mysteries and inequities of human talent, brains, taste, and reputations, the matter of art in photography may come down to this, it is the capture and projection of the delights of seeing; it is the defending of observation full and felt."[19] This project has taught me that it doesn't matter how technically strong or alluring a photograph is, if it doesn't capture the beauty in life even in grim moments the photograph isn't serving its purpose. I'm not saying that every image must be beautiful but rather each photograph has a function and no matter the story or subject, it encapsulates its own extortionary experience.

Frequently connecting with our interpersonal self's; can be a mental check in of reassurance. In moments of solitude and uncertainty a person can find beauty and meaning in their life, forming a stronger relationship with not just them but with the separation they feel from the world they live in.

Figure 9   Untitled, 2021

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[19] "Walker Evans, *6th Avenue*, 1929, Gelatin Silver Print, 4 3/4x 7 5/16 in, J. Paul Getty Museum, https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KF1.

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