The Shoreline

Yosaif Cohain
Title Page

THE SHORELINE

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Master of Fine and Applied Arts
of the

Rochester Institute of Technology

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Advisor: Brad Hindson
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Dedicated

To My Parents
# Table of Contents

Thesis Proposal  d-f  
Thesis Proposal Acceptance  g  
Thesis Report  1-16  
  Thesis Concept  1  
  Visual Framework  2  
  Development of New Approach—First Year's Work  2  
  Discovery  4  
  Choice of Thesis  5  
  Need for Research  6  
  Technical Development  7  
  Aesthetic Research and Progress  9  
  Researching my Approach  12  
  Developing the Approach  13  
  Implications of New Approach  15  
  Thesis Exhibition  15  
  Thanks  16  

Footnotes  17  

Photographs From First Year's Work #1-5  
Photographs From Thesis Exhibit #6-13
Title Page

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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts

Submitted by: Yosaif Cohain
Advisor: Brad Hindson
Date: November 6, 1970
Approved by Graduate Committee:
Chairman:
I. Purpose of the Thesis:

To demonstrate in a portfolio of photographs, the graphic beauty and visual excitement of the shoreline, its beach and water.

II. Scope of Thesis:

This study will deal with the visual manifestations of the interaction between the water and the shore. Feeling a sense of awe of the shoreline, I will try to show it as I feel it: as a living entity which is constantly changing, and which exhibits many exciting visual happenings. At the same time I will study the work done by the classics, to help catalyze my progress. The final thesis will consist of a portfolio of about twenty-five 11x14 photographs, which will cover the scope of this study.

III. Procedures:

I plan to study the shoreline intensely, to try to understand its unique qualities and subtleties. My research will help me to understand the visual excitement which others have found in the shoreline, and the product of these new insights will be shown visually in my thesis project and discussed in my thesis report. Hopefully, I will
add new insights into the understanding of the shoreline.
Subject: Your Thesis Proposal: The Shoreline

This memorandum is to state -- for the record -- that your Thesis Proposal has been accepted by the Graduate Committee (MFA) SPAS, subject to the following conditions.

1. The majority of the Committee felt that, literally interpreted, your statement might be taken to describe a series of cliches. Rather than delay acceptance over what might be only a semantic issue, the Committee assumes that your approach will be visually sophisticated enough for a Master of Fine Arts degree.

2. Upon your request, Mr. Hindson and I will serve as your Thesis advisors. You should make arrangements to seek guidance during the progress of your Thesis. You should also be prepared to show some of your work to the Graduate Committee and to discuss possible further directions on Friday, March 12. Please sign in for a time on the schedule posted outside my office.

3. The Committee is concerned about accepting a proposal conditionally. Even in the case of a normal acceptance, there is no guarantee that the completed Thesis will be accepted. Unless the Committee rates the Thesis and the Thesis Report both as "Satisfactory" the degree will not be granted, regardless of registration for the required number of hours.

Arnold Sorvari, Coordinator, M.F.A. Program

xc: B. Hindson
THESIS REPORT

Thesis Concept

The concept of a thesis, especially in the fine arts is one which cannot be regimented into a completely academic definition, and therefore takes on many personal and subjective meanings. For me, the concept of a thesis was to display a certain level of mastery over the classical techniques of printmaking in the black and white medium, both visually and technically. I did not want to consider for this work any of the techniques of picturemaking which were new or which did not show a mastery over the medium such as posterization, Kodalith prints, color transparencies, silk screening, etc. I am not trying to disqualify everything other than "straight" black and white photography, however I felt that for a thesis, one should try to master the form of photography which is the most competitive, in which criticism of the print can be somewhat objective. I wanted it to be a very new endeavor and a challenge, but I also wanted this newness to be expressed in the medium which I knew, and did not want this to come about through a shocking technique or process.
Visual Framework

For the thesis I set for myself the 11x14 picture format with the hypothesis which my first year instructor put forth; that if one can maintain good visual qualities in a large print, he can clearly do so in a small one. I felt that this format would be a test of strength; to see if I could maintain control over the tonalities and qualities of a large print. To me the thesis was to be a culminating experience which I wanted to be a very personal achievement— one which has me produce work which would supercede that which I have done in the past. I wanted this work to show a deeper understanding of the subject, the media, and the aesthetics of the print. This work should surpass all my other work, technically and visually, in order to have the degree of "Master" mean anything to me.

Development of New Approach- First Year's Work

During my first year of work in the Master's program, I was concentrating my efforts on photographing the beach of Lake Ontario. I had nothing special which I wanted to express, and my photographs could be compared to a collection of objects which one finds on the beach. The subject matter which I found on the beach united my work.
After a while I found it very difficult working there as I felt that I had almost exhausted the different possibilities which were available. This was very understandable. I then had the philosophy that I, the photographer, was out to find beautiful images, and that when they presented themselves, I would see them and record them in my own personal way. To a certain extent this philosophy is true, since I was at least looking while others were just passing by. But this type of looking was one which involved seeing with the preconceived ideas of ones mind, and when those ideas presented themselves, the shutter clicked. There was very little room for growth. This approach, I believe, is well-rooted in the minds of photography students, and not much is done to discredit this philosophy. After walking the beach for half a year, my vision was naturally exhausted and my only new images were of new objects which washed up onto the shores.

The quality of my work did not excite me. The found art of the beach was becoming repetitious, and although the print quality was fair, the images said very little about anything. The fact that I had been on the beach for a long time showed, as my work reached a standstill.
Discovery

For a relatively long time I could not make any photographs. I knew that the solution was not in seeing new beaches, but rather in the way I saw them. I had to see things more intensely. One sunny afternoon during the last quarter of the year, an unusual thing happened. On that day, and in a relatively short time, I made two very new and exciting discoveries about water and sand. I had been looking at the water for a while and suddenly I realized an exciting relationship between the reflection of the clouds in the water and the shape of the sand which closed in on this reflection. In that image, all perspective was lost and the sand which was close to me could have been a hill in the distance. That image and a second one of a very different nature were among the best photographs I had done of the beach so far. The excitement of the new insights clearly came through in the photographs. I tried to understand what had happened. Confronting the fact that after months of being on the beach looking for photographs, and not having seen these two exciting qualities of water and sand, I started to think in a new direction. I went through all of the pictures which I had done of the beach until that point and separated out the images.
which I liked, to see if they shared any common factors. As I had suspected, almost all of them represented a discovery, a new understanding, a new insight which I had then learned about the shore. In each photograph I had listened to my subject and heard something new. I wasn't placing my old values upon it, but rather, was trying to express a new idea which I had just learned. I now had a new possible approach with which I could start photographing the beach again. This new philosophy needed to be tested.

Choice of Thesis

During the third quarter of the first year we were told to start thinking about a proposal for our thesis work. Most of all I wanted the thesis to be a challenge for me. I also wanted to explore the new approach towards photography which I was developing, and in order to do so I would have to continue photographing something which I had done before. For my philosophy to work, I had to be able to discover new things about old things; new excitement which I had never seen previously. I also wanted to limit the subject matter to something which had lost its visual excitement to me, to prove that I could find new excitement in it. It was a very natural and fair conclusion
for me to continue working on the beach. By doing so I could try to surpass my previous work in every way, thus satisfying my personal objectives in the thesis work, and also test my new approach towards taking pictures.

**Need for Research**

There were certain areas of work which I needed to research more carefully than others before starting and while working on the thesis. The consistent tools which I had been using were my Mamiyaflex, Tri-X 120, D-76, Dektol, and Kodabromide paper. These were the standard materials which I used and knew. I thought that if I was then dissatisfied with my results after properly exposing and developing the negative, the seeing of the original tonalities was at fault, not my processing. The very difficult problem was that very consistently the shadow areas were lacking something, which my advisor clearly pointed out was shadow contrast\(^4\). The greys were there but unless the contrast was great, they appeared muddy—without enough separation. This could not be corrected by using a higher grade paper since the highlights were good, and any higher contrast in them would cause a loss in that area. This problem was compounded by the fact that the beach
of Lake Ontario in this area consists of a dull grey-colored sand which inherently lacks contrast\textsuperscript{5}. I tried to overcome this problem by relying on bright subject matter such as fish\textsuperscript{6} or refuse for strong tonalities, but the result was usually of little visual impact.

**Technical Development**

There were two distinct areas in which I did research. First I had to improve my control over the medium and learn how to get exciting shadows and richer tonalities. Second I had to increase my understanding of my subject matter so that I would have something to say in my images. One without the other would be of little use;-- and I did not yet feel competent in either area.

I was now ready to study and appreciate Ansel Adams' book on the negative\textsuperscript{6} and apply it to my work. This too was at the suggestion of my advisor who commented that the problem was probably in my "well-exposed" and "well-developed" negatives. The old adage about deceiving looks might very well apply here. He was correct. After carefully reading the book I learned how to control certain tonalities by repressing others. This was important in order to achieve exciting shadows.
I adopted a modified zone system in which I used six different developments depending on the tonalities and contrast of the original subject. My work now being done with a Graphic 4x5 camera, this was not a difficult transition. I also changed my developing techniques. As standard procedure I now use a modified water-bath developing process which adds the needed contrast to the shadow areas. By doing so, I can also attain a richer black than before. I use D-23 for the developer and Kodalk as the compensating agent?. With this procedure I find that I do not need to tone prints in order to attain the appearance of what is considered a rich print.

I could not adopt the zone system as Adams or White describe it, since I was dealing with the very real problems of fast-moving water and subjects which would not be still while I delicately measured their shadows and highlights debating with myself as to whether I wanted them to fall in zone eight or nine. When my shutter is freezing and my fingers are sticking to the tripod, there is no time to play that kind of game. The fine accuracy of the theoretical zone system is a lovely scientific excercise, but an impossibility in my work. If I was within an f-stop of where I wanted to be,
I was very satisfied and also a little lucky. I was usually within two stops of where I wanted to be.

I also changed my printing techniques at the suggestion of my advisor. I printed the thesis work on Portriga white glossy paper and developed it in Ektaflo #1 developer. This combination of paper and developer gave me good shadow tonalities, and its green-brown-black hues were very well-suited to the subject matter of the shoreline. After arriving at these new technical improvements, I felt that I could control the image and do with it exactly as I wanted.

**Aesthetic Research and Progress**

Coupled with the technical research which I was doing, I was also looking at images which related to the shoreline. Now trying to learn new visual or aesthetic qualities about the shore, I could look at all kinds of photographs which dealt with this subject matter. I did not have to judge them, but rather, I could try to compare experiences with the photographer; try to understand what he saw, before I imposed my own ideas upon the image. By trying to understand everything which was happening in the image, in both
my work and others, I became familiar with the vocabulary used in images of the shoreline. This vocabulary was something which I began to understand and be able to verbalize. I was now very willing to talk about my photographs and tell verbally what I was trying to do visually. This is something which I could never do before, since my previous found art was not necessarily understood but rather something which appealed to me while walking on the beach. The vision in those photographs was superficial, and verbally, nothing could be added to them.

Magazines, movies, and the work of the classical photographers was the essence of the pictorial research which I did for the thesis. Historically these images covered early work of photographers on the American landscape, to recent issues of *Aperture* and camera annuals. Of all the work studied, I found the most perceptive images in Edward Weston's *My Camera On Point Lobos*. Many of these images dealt solely with the visual and graphic qualities of the shoreline without being sidetracked by beautiful landscapes or by the superficial qualities of water in relation to the landscape. It was interesting for me to see how little many of the classical photographers really became involved with the subtleties of water. Steichen for instance, was satisfied in pre-
senting an image of water which represented an almost obvious visual quality. In his picture which consists of stones and ripples\(^\text{10}\), he relies solely on his discovery to hold the image together. This discovery which presents the light focusing on the sand below as the ripple passes by, is the essence of the photograph. Cedric Wright also presents an image which is held together only by his discovery of the reflection of the sky in the water\(^\text{11}\), another almost apparent quality of water. The least sensitive image of all is the one which varies on the theme of waves smashing against rocks while the sun sets in the horizon. Very few photographers actually dealt with water and sand without relying on the surroundings to help make a nice image. I returned to many of Weston's photographs at different points in my thesis and saw new qualities in his work which I had not seen before. It was most interesting for me to find that when Weston talked about his choice of subject matter, he too was fascinated by the discovery of new qualities which he had not seen before.

"The flame started first by amazement over the subject matter... not the emotional pleasure of the layman, but the intuitive understanding and recognition relating obvious reality to the esoteric...\(^\text{12}\)"
After a period of work at Point Lobos, Weston writes:

I should find a new place to work:
the excitement over new subject matter
is no longer there. Not that I have
done everything, or even done as well
as could be, many things already
worked with,- but that necessary thrill
of discovery, amazement over new mater-
ial, I no longer have.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Researching my Approach}

The most important part of my visual research
was the time which I spent on the beaches studying
the same object, or quality of that object, trying
to understand it better. The theory of mine
whereby I would give credit to the object as hav-
ing something new to offer me was working. The
more I would look at the same object, the less I
was impressed by its superficial qualities, and
the more I was impressed by its inherent or subtle
ones. The visual excitement of water as it re-
turned to the sea\textsuperscript{14} became more exciting than the
water smashing onto the land. The small ripples\textsuperscript{15}
were more graceful than the large wave, and slowly
moving water started to do very interesting things
to the light which hit it\textsuperscript{16}. In seeing all of these
new qualities which I had never seen before, my
work started to take on new meaning and excite-
ment.
Developing this Approach

As a result of the thesis, I have clearly developed an approach to taking pictures. First I was intrigued by the initial discovery, very much in the same way that Steichen and Wright were stimulated when they made their images of the shoreline. These photographs tried to show the new insights which I felt and the photograph presented a singular idea. By accenting this quality and by choosing a fine example, I felt that I would have a meaningful image. Soon afterwards, I tried to combine these new insights with others. After storing these new qualities in my mind, I began to find, and look for, combinations of these qualities which I could incorporate into a single image\textsuperscript{17}. After reaching this stage, I started to feel a little uneasy. It was almost like going out with the same old ideas and looking for new subject matter. This was the approach I was trying to leave behind! I felt that by relating these new insights to the shore, I would be more objective and more involved with the complete entity of the shoreline. I then began trying to relate the new insights and excitement to the overall landscape\textsuperscript{18}. 
This was a very meaningful approach, but I began to feel frustrated by the fact that in many instances I could not properly relate the small area to the larger whole. I would find a very fine illustration of a certain quality of water, but in that particular area the rest of the landscape lacked any visual interest whatsoever.

Most recently, I have tried to relate my new insights on a graphic level. In photographing in this manner, I try to distribute and control the use of light, texture, and content throughout the different areas of the photograph. In these images it is not enough to discover and relate new insights. I must also deal with the qualities of the print as the final image. The excitement of the new insight must be coupled with the full graphic beauty which a print can offer.\(^1\) This is quite a bit more difficult than merely trying to show off a new discovery, and is more meaningful to me than trying to force the image into a larger one just so that it would relate to the larger more literal landscape.
Implications of New Approach

This approach to photography has branched into other aspects of vision. There is now no need to look at a photograph and have to give the godly judgment on it. Instead, I can enjoy new things without having to look for weaknesses or faulty techniques. When one accepts a new humility that he does not necessarily see everything after looking at an object for a few seconds, the same humility would apply to looking at a photograph and to many other branches of vision.

With this approach to vision, there is room for additional intellectual curiosity. Consequently, there is room for additional understanding. There is even room for studying the exhibitor and asking him for additional help in understanding his images. There is even room after all of this to say, "I don't know", and leave the door open for a later understanding of the image. One of the great satisfactions of this approach is the feeling that my new ceiling is much higher than it ever was.

Thesis Exhibition

The photographs in the thesis show were ferro-
typed, and dry-mounted on acid-free boards. They were matted with Crescent Olive-grey, 16x20 boards, and presented for exhibit from May 26 until June 6, 1971. The matting of the images also served the purpose of protecting the fine surface of the prints when they are in storage.

Thanks

My thanks is extended to all of my instructors and class-mates, and especially to my wife Ruth.
Footnotes

1. See photograph number 1.
2. See photograph number 2.
3. See photograph number 3.
4. See photograph number 4.
5. See photograph number 5.
6. See photograph number 4.
13. Ibid. p. 156.
15. See photograph number 7.
16. See photograph number 8.
17. See photograph number 9.
18. See photograph numbers 6, 9, 10, 11.
19. See photograph number 8.