Thesis report of David Clark Gibney

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THESIS REPORT
OF
David Clark Gibney

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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I am grateful to the following people for the assistance they have given in preparing my Thesis work:

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My Parents, Dr. and Mrs. John P. Gibney
My Wife, Dianna
I dedicate this work to my parents who in many ways supported me through eight years of college education (and continue to encourage further studies), and to Dianna, who spent too much of our first two years of marriage alone, selflessly sacrificing, that I could pursue my selfish, elusive vision.
Foreword

When an audience views a performance, it assumes the responsibility to consider the context in which the show is presented. Whether on the screen or the stage, actors are portrayers of people and of a story. However similar a performance may be to an actual event, the performance is merely a representation of the event. The two are not the same.

You, the reader, should likewise be aware of the context in which this is presented. A written Thesis Report is required for the successful completion of the Master of Fine Arts degree in Photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology. I admit it is solely for the completion of the degree requirements that this is submitted. Like so many other MFA candidates I have dreaded this task.

Writing or talking about my photographic work has never been enjoyable. It seems great effort is invested with little reward. I would much rather be involved in the process of making visual images. This, combined with constant self-evaluation as well as external counsel yields greater, more continual rewards to me.

In writing this report I was determined to accomplish a few goals. I wanted a report that was comprehensive yet brief. It had to be honest, sincere and accurate. I hoped to produce something from which future MFA Candidates could learn. Now, after four revisions and ten months
of indecision, I hope to have accomplished those goals.

The photographs of my thesis were intended to be displayed as a group in an exhibition, not in a book or report. While it is only required to include one image in the Thesis Report, I wished to communicate more inclusively the results of my visual search. Thus, the entire portfolio was reprinted, in a reduced format from the originals. This portfolio is housed in the Archives of the Wallace Memorial Library. I hope you will ask the archivist to pull it from the shelf, and that you will consider my visual work before my written report.

The effect of viewing these sequenced, singular images cannot match the impression left by seeing them enhanced in a gallery display. While the portfolio and exhibition slides will help show the effect given, they cannot replicate it entirely.

Now then, enough of words. Open the box and see for yourself.

David Clark Gibney
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my Thesis is to photographically explore where people have left objects as refuse, and in so doing, to produce imagery which communicates what I perceive to be beautiful and ugly at these sites.
Why Refuse Sites?

A major problem that arises with some Thesis projects is that a Candidate may not fully consider the issue of practicality within his or her proposal. Some have committed themselves to a genuinely intriguing project, yet once real-life limitations arise, they might find themselves having to backtrack, change course from the original idea, or drop the project completely. Artists must consider not just what they want to do, but what they realistically can do. All human beings -- including artists -- exist in a real world. In this world there are real, often limiting factors such as time, money, experience and ability which must be considered. Before I could fully commit myself to such an important venture, I addressed such concerns.

For the purpose of my Thesis it was evident to me that a concise, targeted subject to explore would help give the end product -- the photographs -- greater unity. In past work I have photographed several different subjects, and still continue to do so. The predominant feature of all my work is the representation of decay and transition. By selecting refuse sites specifically, I challenged myself with a more precise, limited goal.

This was a practical decision. I was aware of a tendency to try to accomplish too much at once. This decision to delimit did not dampen my interest in this subject.
Another practical purpose for choosing to concentrate on refuse sites was that they were readily available. I did not have to travel far to find them. "Objects left as refuse" are found everywhere.

A further reason for exploring this subject was that it was new to me. I was aware that many photographers have used refuse as a subject of study. Barbara Crane, Frederick Somner and Lewis Baltz have produced stimulating works based on their own interpretations of refuse. Each one’s approach -- their very purpose -- was unique and, consequently, their representations were "new", thus fitting the "requirements" of a modern artist. Whether my results would meet such a requisite were unimportant in comparison to the excitement I felt towards the unexplored areas (both actual and psychological) which lay before me. This was more than a practical consideration -- it was an essential one.

Why refuse sites specifically? Undoubtedly I could have selected another physical subject to study which would have met the above practical considerations. What is it about other people’s junk that fascinates me?

Conceptually, apathy and its results have always intrigued me. Often, I find "statements" made by mistakes or acts of indifference much more provocative than those made by grand design. An unconscious gesture, a chance
arrangement of forms, a nonsensical babbling of words -- all may prove much more informative and stimulating than the well-rehearsed dance, the flawless invention, or the eloquent speech.

The refuse sites that mankind produces are rarely the result of great deliberation. Usually, they evolve from actions which are essentially apathetic. The results of such actions are not merely by-products of humanity, but also revelations and puzzles for those who search for them. I am one of those who do.

Further, this search allowed me to photograph in the way I find most satisfying. I am a slow, but consistent photographer. I need time to study my subjects, with privacy. That which I photograph is usually examined on a fairly frequent basis. Often I return to a scene to rephotograph. I need to be quiet and alone when doing this.

Photographing in most dump sites (but not all) was usually pleasant. I could park the car and walk with a camera, going from object to object, looking them over. Often I would just sit and daydream, thankful for the solitude. These shooting sessions gave me time to explore, think about the implications of the artifacts before me, and most importantly to look. The sessions were not just enjoyable, they were also great learning experiences.
What Did I Learn About Refuse Sites?

The purpose of my Thesis was not specifically to learn about garbage, but to visually investigate refuse sites and then produce imagery of "beauty" and "ugliness" based on these explorations. Since I did spend so much time in these places which most people avoid, I have written some observations and am including them here.

Primarily, refuse is **everywhere**. I was unaware just how much garbage is overlooked in our surroundings. It is truly amazing. We walk or drive by infinite amounts of it each day. Whether I was in a "good" neighborhood or a "bad" one, if I searched long enough, I would find a place chosen by people to dump their junk. Some sites are less disguised than others. Depending on their location, some seem almost appropriate, while others appear to be intended to offend their surroundings.

Each refuse site has its own character. This character depends on the people who left the refuse, its arrangement, and its location. In this sense, these places serve to identify their creators or contributors. Some examples show only one type of refuse (a wrecking yard or an industrial waste yard), while other sites demonstrate that many people have left their garbage, with little thought or planning.

Quite often the artifacts left behind, (or the actual
existence of the dump area) tell or imply a story. Usually there is not enough information to read the whole story and I can only guess what actually happened.

One example of this is found in the third photograph in this portfolio. During the past year I had lived in a large apartment complex, which I estimate is about twenty to thirty years old. It is located at the end of a half-mile road which has few residents. It is a quiet place.

Across the road from the complex, out of sight from passing cars, is a wooded area thick with bushes. In this area I found lots of refuse.

What distinguishes this site from others is the great predominance of toys. Many of the toys are unbroken, although exposure to the elements has made them no longer desirable.

The implications I placed on this multitude of toys was that families with growing children were moving from the apartments and they did not want to move any unnecessary possessions. Thus, as a matter of convenience, toys and other unused household furnishings were left discreetly in this area where they would not be seen.

Photographing these dolls was a disturbing experience. It seemed irreverent for them to be left there. I suppose I have this notion that certain things
should never be thrown away. Those dolls could have been handed down to another child, or given to the Goodwill, or something, anything than be left to decompose in a trash heap. Doing this seemed more that just wrong -- it was immoral.

It is impossible to completely deduce the background of any object of refuse I might find. And I think it would be pointless to try. However, it fascinates me to look at refuse and wonder about who put it there, why, and when. In this mode of thought I am playing the role of a detective, or an archaeologist, perhaps, realizing that the mystery can never be solved. This game of speculation is one of the most satisfying aspects of the process.

Refuse sites are quite organic in nature -- they change constantly. They do so much more quickly than I realized. As people collect from them for recycling they may grow smaller, but normally they grow larger as people add to them. Objects are moved. Nature, with its complex process of decomposition, works quickly and assuredly. Plant forms conceal much of what is left behind, in a sense swallowing the debris before consuming it. In this process much refuse becomes hidden from view. The effect that nature has on these places could be noticed within an interval of a few days.
One final significant revelation I found was that the presence of many objects together diminishes the salience of any single object. There was always more in these sites than I saw on the surface, or from a distance. Often what was underneath proved to be much more curious to me than that on top.

One strong example of this realization is found in the fifth photograph. While photographing in a desert refuse area in southern Idaho, I started to walk towards another pile of junk. In my path were some branches from a tree pruning, and as I stepped through them I saw the foot of an animal. One more pace and I would have stepped on it.

The presence of a dead dog did not surprise me. Dead animals are common in many of the places that I explored. But upon closer examination of the carcass I saw bailing twine tied around its neck and cinched to a sagebrush. I can only imagine that this poor animal was tied and abandoned, left to die slowly in the desert. No other conclusion explains the evidence.

I wonder who left the dog there. I wonder who piled the branches on top of it. I wonder, most of all, why.
Why Beauty and Ugliness?

What is beauty? When is something ugly? I looked up the definitions of beauty and ugliness in several dictionaries varying in age, detail and origin. I expected to find lengthy interpretations of these words, but all were relatively short, averaging three to four listings each.

The most common words used in defining beauty were "an assembly" or "combination of qualities" that were "pleasing" or "gave pleasure" to or of "the eye, mind and/or the senses." Those used to explain ugliness were "offensive to the sight", "loathsome", "deformed" and, significantly, "contrary to beauty."

The two terms are easily, and naturally contrasted. One is defined by the other. I presume most people see beauty as "good" and view ugliness as "bad", one "desirable" and the other "unappealing."

I find it most intriguing that these two qualities often exist in our world in a symbiotic relationship. In comparison one is used by contrast to define the other, quite like opposing colors both distinguish and accentuate one another.

There does not seem to be any strong, cohesive basis for accurately defining what is beautiful and what is ugly. While it does seem there is a universal recognition
of the concepts, it does not appear that there will ever be a universal agreement on what constitutes beauty and ugliness. Nor do I feel there is any need. I believe it is best we do not all agree on these aesthetic issues.

For this project I did not expect to answer any concrete questions about the nature of beauty and ugliness. I wanted to involve myself in the perceptual and representational aspects of these two qualities. During this point in my life I have felt the need to explore beauty and ugliness with the aid of a camera. This has been my goal.

What Did I Learn About Beauty and Ugliness?

I did not learn anything about beauty and ugliness. More precisely, I reinforced some ideas of these issues. Other concepts became further from my comprehension. Much more room for exploration lies ahead for me.

The most important, and obvious, reinforcement is this: beauty and ugliness do not exist. There is no such thing as something having an absolute state of beauty or ugliness. Rather, following from a summation of many definitions, and more importantly from experience, it is correct to state that human beings assign these qualities. That which we find pleasant to contemplate might be
considered beautiful. That which is loathsome to consider could be labeled as ugly. These assignations are based on the multi-faceted components of human psychology. In essence, the old saying is, indeed, true: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. (And so is ugliness.)

I believe this perception of beauty and ugliness is confusing because perception is not a fixed, constant thing. It fluctuates a great deal. As we experience different things -- the time of day, the mood we are in, who we might be with -- all of these seemingly unrelated variables can, and do, affect how we might perceive an object or scene whose physical presence might be stable and non-fluctuating.

Occasionally I look at an image I made in the past and wonder why I created it in the first place. Was it worth the trouble? What did I see then in the image? What do I see now? If there is a difference, what accounts for it? It must be something about me that has changed -- after all, the image has remained the same.

All of the photographs that I created for this Thesis have self-evident elements of beauty and ugliness within them. I cannot view any single piece and label it "beautiful" or "ugly". Each has both qualities. While it may be possible to isolate them, when I try, I become confused.
This does not surprise me. It actually seems natural. As I explored these refuse areas the great duality between beauty and ugliness never became overpowering. In fact, there was a continual display, to my eye, of an appropriate plurality. Each needed the other to not only survive, but to become truly manifest.

Thus, I incorporated the beautiful and the ugly elements within these areas into the photographs. These two qualities, beauty and ugliness, I have represented in an interdependent, almost interchangeable manner. Sometimes, I have a difficult time trying to tell which is which.

It has come to the point that the beautiful and the ugly in my photographs are all but identical to me.

**Procedure**

With so many photographic options available to me at RIT, I was asked occasionally why I was doing my Thesis work in black and white, rather than color or some alternative process. I do have ample experience in color printing as well as a few other different photographic processes. Most of my previous work has been in black and white. When I arrived here in Rochester I set a goal to become more proficient in the use of various black and white materials. I still have this goal.
Thus far, black and white photography, especially in a straight approach, has been more that satisfactory for communicating my own visual interpretations. I do not feel that any particular process is superior. Each has its own advantages and limitations and an assignable language.

I believe the capabilities of black and white photography far outweigh any limitations it may have. Its directness and simplicity allow me to include and exclude information in an honest revelation. There is no conjure in my approach. Each piece of visual information has its own separate value. Because these different pieces contrast with one another, all are equally important to the collective image. Black and white photography is superior in its capacity to show the effects of light. Value, shadow, line, surface, mass, balance -- all of these formal issues are simplified, and therefore best studied, in a black and white image.

These issues are important to me. As I view the world, I often think in these terms. Any other process, none the less valid, would confuse these matters for me. At this point in my life, I feel my approach with black and white photography is valid, disciplinary and personally intriguing.

My procedure for producing these images was simple. I would normally photograph about twice a week, sometimes
more frequently. With few exceptions I would process my film immediately after shooting. I would also try to print the negatives within a day. It was important for me to be able to have some actual proof of how the image could look as a final print. Even if the results were less than encouraging, seeing an image soon after the event of exposing the negative helped me to see new potentials for the same objects or places. I would also think of possibilities at other locations.

Another technique that I found useful was to enlarge my negative file pages up to 16 by 20 inch proof sheets. This helped especially when I had many rolls of film to examine after traveling. I numbered these and then asked other students to look at them, and jot down which negatives they felt should be enlarged for further study. This strategy made it easier for others to understand what I was doing. By seeing many images simultaneously, they could understand how I approached different situations. Plus I was able to get feedback more quickly than by printing many "work" prints first.

Throughout the production of this work, I made contact with my board members, although not on a regular basis. Instead, I would approach individual members when I needed some input. These sessions became more frequent as it came closer to the exhibition date.
Often we would meet during the noon hour and lay prints on the table. We would shuffle the images around, playing with sequence and grouping, selecting images that complemented and contrasted one another. We sought to make the exhibition a true representation of my exploration. Significantly, we rejected photographs which were polarized to either extremity of beauty or ugliness. In photographing, I did not perceive any situation which was exclusively beautiful or ugly. Therefore, we were careful to choose images including both qualities and discarding those which might be immediately identified with only one of them.

During this process of editing, one of the issues that arose was the very manner in which we were editing. I asked myself, "How should I edit? What strategy will work most easily and most accurately?" This might sound silly, but it was, and continues to be, of immediate concern to me.

At some point I became aware that we were editing in two ways. In one we were grouping photographs that had commonalities, perhaps with the attempt to make a statement or at least establish some kind of narrative. In the other way, we were picking out any photograph that we liked, that was "good". Then these photographs were carefully sequenced within the exhibition, somewhat like picking out
puzzle pieces to fit the final product.

In the end both kinds of editing were used. Since I had many people helping in the process, a sort of mixed strategy evolved. There are several quiet narratives throughout this portfolio. In arranging these into the exhibition, care was taken to intermix these narratives so that each would strengthen other images, while giving the exhibition a greater diversity. Other photographs, whose statements might be more isolated, yet which we thought to be strong and appropriate, were included in the semifinal editing.

Another issue that I discussed with my board as well as some other faculty and students, was the exclusion of a title or statement in the exhibition. I had been giving the subject a great deal of thought during the past year. I felt pressured by some to post a statement on the gallery wall. I did not think it was necessary. In fact, it seemed inappropriate.

At this time in my life I am distrustful of artists who are compelled to present evaluations along with their work. I think it is wrong to subject viewers to visual art simultaneously with "explanatory revelation" -- words designed to tell the viewer what it is that they are looking at. I am not stating that words and imagery should never be presented concomitantly. Indeed, some forms of
photography, photojournalism for example, usually need a written narrative in order to specify meaning and intent. However, when the presence of words is unnecessary, should not the viewer be given the chance to interpret their own meaning?

In the end I stuck with my belief and did not display my Thesis Statement or a title in the show. I did include the Statement in my invitations and announcements displayed around the RIT campus. Plus, it was included in the front of my comment book which was placed in the exhibition. I was neither hiding from my Statement, nor was I hiding behind it like I feel some have done in the past.

If someone was unable to understand what I was displaying, they could find my Thesis Statement. I felt, as did my board, that this was a valid approach, although we did realize some people would be lost without a Statement.

Self Evaluation

It is very difficult for me to critique fairly that with which I have been so intimately involved. There does not seem to be any completely objective means to assess my performance. However, this body of work is the result of an academic pursuit, that is, a Master’s Thesis. Therefore, even though I hesitate to mix words and images,
it seems evident that the only reasonable way for me or any individual to analyze this work is by comparing it with my Statement of Purpose.

For the most part, I feel positively about my performance. I worked consistently and I worked hard. I set a goal for myself and took whatever steps were necessary to achieve that goal. I faced many hardships, occasionally danger, but most importantly, failure. With patience I kept trying, often going back to rephotograph when possible. At no time did I find it too much to go out and photograph, or to stay up late and print. If I could have only one positive comment about my performance, it would be that I kept trying.

I feel that I did explore the qualities of beauty and ugliness at these refuse sites. I tried many techniques for recording my responses there. At many locations I returned throughout the seasons and photographed at different times of the day.

Also, I spent a great deal of time looking at my imagery, those photographs which I deemed both successes and failures. By reviewing hundreds of work prints and contact sheets, I began to recognize my approaches to similar situations. In some images I saw what did and did not work. I analyzed why some were more successful than others.
One final positive note is that I think this body of work is accurate, that is, it truthfully represents the processes, mental and technical, that I took in producing it. Through diligent editing with my board, I believe I was successful in obtaining that which I set out to do. I note this because I have seen exhibitions that seemed expressively false or inadequate. They made an impression on me. I was determined that my work would not be weak and lacking content.

I did have some failures. Now that I have had time to clarify the results to myself a bit more, there are a few things I would do differently, if I could. I have learned from these mistakes and they will help me, actually, in the future with other projects.

I thought I had a pretty good idea of how this exhibition would look once it was on the wall. I admit I was overwhelmed by the effect of seeing my work suddenly come to life in the gallery. Despite my exhausted state, I was really thrilled. This is a good memory for me -- one I’ll never forget.

However, after a few days of rest and recuperation, I was more impartially able to critique the results. I feel further rigorous editing would have helped. It may not have been a matter of fewer prints, but perhaps a more careful process of inclusion and exclusion.
This is so hard to admit because the most difficult part of the whole process was editing, and I felt we (the board and I) had not neglected the issue at all. I do not believe I failed in the editorial process, but I would have appreciated more time -- by more wisely planning my work -- to reconsider the final editing.

Associated with the problem of editing is the fact that I was unable to finish printing my work until the last minute, even though I had worked consistently on it throughout the year. If I could do it over again I would leave myself at least two weeks to have a completed portfolio before it was due to be exhibited. This extra time would give me the chance to review the individual pieces in relation to the show as a whole, and leave time to make changes.

Responses

I received three types of response from the viewing public. One was through the comment book placed on the table in the gallery. Feedback from conversation with viewers was another. The third was the discussion that took place during the Thesis Defense.

People did respond in my comment book. I was pleased that so many (46) took time to write something about my work. This may seem like a small number, but for a show
that was only open six days it was encouraging. This indicated to me that the viewers could see evidence of thought, care and work in the exhibition, even though some responses were also critical.

The critical responses in the book mostly stated that there was too much repetition in the imagery. Also, one person felt the work needed a more narrowed approach or statement, because I took more than one distinct approach to photographing these places.

The positive responses applauded the exhibition's set up -- its design. The technical quality of my printing was very well received. Many appreciated seeing an exploration of garbage which they felt was unusual and refreshing, although "disgusting" as well.

The responses from talking with people were similar to those recorded in the book. Since I was able to personally hear these responses, I trusted their sincerity a bit more. I was pleased that people were not afraid to criticize the work in my presence. But what annoyed me was to have a few people ask technical questions rather than those about the subject matter and my representation of it.

The response from the Thesis Defense was very interesting and also a bit disappointing. A friend videotaped the event, and being able to review it has been very enlightening. I recommend this to future MFA
Candidates.

I was disappointed by the response at the Defense because, instead of concentrating on my imagery, much of the discussion centered round the issues of garbage, waste disposal, and other environmental concerns. This was my fault. Being nervous at the time, I failed to control the discussion and instead found myself acting the role of a mediator of political and ecological debates.

However, I was glad to have an active discussion. Many of the "sharings" that I have been to in the past have been either hostile, pointless debates, or quiet yet equally tense sessions with not much said. I am not sure if the characteristics of group dynamics were working in my favor, but many people raised interesting questions, and there were definite opinions expressed.

Several people commented on how the effect of so many images gave a very oppressed, heavy feeling -- that they could not escape from the presence of the garbage. This made me feel good. I had been somewhat apprehensive about my choice of so many images. While some felt more variety would have strengthened the work, there was a unified agreement among those present that filling the gallery with so many images of a singular subject gave a powerful impression. Despite some of my shortcomings, I was pleased with the response given by that group at my Thesis Defense.
Conclusion

I suppose it would be wonderful if I could conclude this Thesis Report with some metaphysically profound thoughts. But the truth is, I am a simple person in most ways, and I have only a few brief summations that I can, without hesitation, include here.

I am a visual photographer. I photograph to satiate some visual need. I need to photograph. I have to look at my imagery. I must be continually involved in this process. I do not know if I can explain it any more accurately that that.

I want my audience to see for themselves. I want them to see a part of themselves in my imagery, as well as be aware of my sensibilities. I cannot expect them to understand what it was that made me expose a negative and consciously produce a personal interpretation. I do not fully understand it myself.

I have explored beauty and ugliness at refuse sites with a camera. I have experienced many emotions at great intensities. In this search I have grown.

I have pursued questions, not answers. The answers are elusive, ever-changing, and never actually realized. The questions are always there, and from them there is continually more to learn. And it is to learn that I continue my search.