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Waiting for the Sun

Terrance Murray

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WAITING FOR THE SUN

by

Terrance Murray

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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PREFACE

The intent of this thesis report is to communicate to the reader the creative process that evolved before, during and after the completion of the photographic portion of my thesis. I will organize my thoughts on the creative process into a clear and concise statement, this will help one to better understand the creative process of artists, a process that often defies analyzation.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I studied visual arts at the State University of New York at Purchase and graduated in 1980 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. My main studies were in painting, drawing and photography. I have also been employed in several jobs that directly involved fine and applied art, and photography.

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INTRODUCTION

The original concept of my thesis was to develop a body of work which was based on the formalist visual qualities of color, light, and form. This is, for me a very simple statement that basically encapsulates my feelings and thoughts on the aesthetic aspects of my photographs, although to someone who is not familiar with my work, or with formalist color photography in general, it may seem ambiguous.

My photography has for sometime now been dominated by the concept that the quality of light is the single most important aspect in creating successful photographic images. This concept is based on the idea that it is the action of light that is responsible for the initial creation of any photographic image and therefore the quality of that light is directly correspondent to the quality of any image produced by its action.

This concern for the quality of light is coupled with a great concern for color and its respective characteristics that evoke emotions in people in a way that is very different from black and white photographs. This concern arises at least partially from my studies in painting and a great deal from an indepth study of color theory, as taught by Josef Albers. The theories that Albers teaches are explained in his book "The Interaction of Color", the seminar and the book had a great affect on my ability to observe color and its importance to all areas of the visual arts.

The third dominant concept in my proposal is my sense of form and composition, which has developed over the years of my involvement with, drawing, painting and photography, and has been influenced by many artists and photographers.

My intense concern for these three aspects of art and photography eventually led me to base my thesis proposal on them. It cannot be said that they are the only concerns to be dealt with, but they were foremost in my mind at the onset of my thesis project and remain so today.

COLOR AND LIGHT

In terms of my work as a photographer and an artist, I feel that there are no visual elements of more importance than color and light. My interest in the formal qualities of color and light are not without a background, but started when I was an undergraduate studying fine art. My principle disciplines were painting and black and white photography. I pursued these two mediums despite the fact that at the time I felt that they had very little to do with each other. My paintings and my photographs had almost no visual similarities, although I thought that each was contributing unique attributes to my storehouse of visual skills. However, since I started my involvement in color photography, I have come to realize the connections that my photography and painting had then, and that they still have today. The more experience I gain, the more I realize the connections that exist between photography and all the visual arts. For me color is color, whether created with paint and a brush or with photographic dyes, the method of construction does not in any way dissuade me from accepting it for what it is, a successful or unsuccessful image. It is with this mindset that I try to learn from various philosophies of art, despite their seemingly contradictory statements. This is also why I can state with all honesty that my art has been influenced by artists as varied as Monet and Man Ray, Carravaggio and Callahan, and of course many, many others.

The concept of using light as a creative visual tool is one that has fascinated artists for centuries. The Italian Baroque painter Michelangelo Merisi Carravaggio was one of the first artists to realize importance of light, and he used it to create depth, contrast, color and a sense of drama in his paintings. The Dutch painter Jan Vermeer used light in a similar manner to create some of the worlds most exquisite paintings. Vermeer was such a master at rendering the subtle nuances of the effect of light falling on objects that the art historian Ariane Ruskin states in her book on the 17th and 18th Century Art, "he painted light itself - the most difficult feat of all for the artist".¹ Vermeer's intense concern for the effects of light can clearly be seen in such paintings as "The Painter in His Studio" and "Woman at a Window".

During the second half of the 19th Century the impressionist painters were to use light as no other artists had before. They were to elevate the importance of light in their work, to the point of it actually becoming the subject of their paintings. Claude Monet took this idea perhaps further than anyone else, his observations of light and the concurrent colors helped to change the course of art. Monet would paint the same scenes of cities and landscapes over and over again, recording each time the subtle nuances of the changing natural light. This concept has had an affect on my own perception and powers of observation, and made me more aware of the subtle effects of changing light and its relation to photography, especially color photography.

Artists have continued to be interested in light through the early part of the 20th Century and up to the present. During the twenties and thirties, artists such as Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy used light to create photograms, and Man Ray also constructed light modulating sculptures. Master photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston were aware of the importance that light had on their images and exerted a high degree of control over their materials, as well as having an exquisite sense of observation of the effects of light.

There are several contemporary photographers whose work, I feel, has certain aesthetic similarities to the work I have been pursuing. Among those are Len Jenschel, Joe Maloney, Langdon Clay, and Joel Meyerowitz, all of whom are discussed in Sally Eauc Claire's book "The New Color Photography". Joel Meyerowitz has a sensitivity about color and light that seems to come closest to my own. Meyerowitz makes a statement in his book "Cape Light", which I feel is quintessential of my thoughts on color and light. He states "It makes everything more interesting. Color suggests more things to look at, new subjects for me. Color suggest that light itself is a subject."² The statement rings true for me, in terms of my interest in color photography, color is a subject, and light is a subject.

Although I have been influenced by many artists and by many different schools of artistic thought, I don't feel that there has been a single dominant influence in my direction as an artist. I feel that I have been influenced as much by the content and context of my learning experience as by any particular artist.

The sequence in which one learns is as important as what or how one learns.

My introduction into photography was in black and white, and I spent a great deal of time learning to see in black and white. When I started using color materials I basically had to unlearn that seeing process, and I began to explore the qualities inherent in color photography. The medium seemed to be much more inflexible than black and white materials, there were no variables in development, no variable grade papers, and limitations on exposure. I felt that there were fewer choices in terms of a creative response to color photography.

This apparent lack of flexibility and control only made me strive for more control and manipulation of the materials. I wanted the materials to bend to my needs and did not want to be controlled by its apparent limitations. I began to experiment and to manipulate the materials in two ways, one way was to use color filters and gels to change the color of the print during the exposure of the paper. This method seemed awkward, clumsy, and artificial, the results were generally not acceptable to me. The second method I tried, involved changing the color of the light source before the exposure was made, also using color filters and gels. This method proved to be much more successful and was much easier to control. This method also allowed me to pre-visualize my images rather than post-visualize. The moderate success I had prompted me to believe I could have much greater control over my

color images if I could control the color of the light.

At the same time I was also regaining an interest in photography outdoors, being that winter was finally over. I proceeded to take my newly acquired knowledge of light and color and its effect on color films, and closely observe the changing light of the sun. What I had begun to observe was the light of the late afternoon sun, which would bathe objects in a warm raking light, changing the colors of objects, blues would become violet, greens would become ochre, grey would become orange. The objects that were left in shadow areas were bathed in an intense blue light which changed the color of the object to a cooler color. One interesting result of this phenomenon, was that an object of a single color, could be transformed so radically that it became hard to believe that this color change was brought about as a natural course of events, by the movement of the sun. The direct light also created strong shadows that were to become dominant graphic elements in my work. My initial results were so successful that I eventually based my thesis on the concept and I am still pursuing this idea. The end result of my initial search for greater control of color materials was a greater capacity for observation and a refinement of my vision, as well as the sought after control. This process has continued right through my thesis project and has been tremendously important in the improvement of my work. This refinement of vision is perhaps the most positive aspect of my thesis project, for it goes beyond the initial scope of a thesis and may be the basis for an even more ambitious body of work.

COMPOSITION

Composition in my photographs, as well as in my paintings and drawings, is an aesthetic consideration that is essentially made up of all the other aesthetic elements. Composition is not something that can be seen or talked about independently of the elements of light, color, form and so on. Any change in these elements will effect the total composition of the image. If the light is changed, this will effect the color, the contrast, the tonality, and the entire image.

The best way I can explain my thoughts on composition, is in terms of music. When one listens to music, one hears the totality of that music, all the instruments and voices combined to make a sound. A person doesn't just hear the bass notes, or just hear the percussion, or the violins, a person hears them all together at once. I don't look at a photograph and just see light, or color or forms, I see them all at once. I know that those elements are in there, but a successful image is the result of the combination of those elements. When I am composing a photograph I try to keep in mind all of the concepts and ideas that are important to my art, but it is done in a subtle and quick subconscious manner.

I feel that there are no formulas or set rules that will work, each photographic situation is unique and has to be dealt with in terms of the individual qualities of that situation.

I have developed my own sense of composition through years of photographing, drawing, painting, and observing. An artist has to get a feel for what's right, for what works, and what doesn't. It is very often the subtle movement of the camera or the last second adjustments that make the difference between just a good negative and a successful image.

The compositions of my thesis photographs were varied in temperament and mood, yet for me they had a consistency. In terms of composition the work could theoretically be divided into two sections. One section would be of a more subtle contemplative sense, the other a more angular and severe aesthetic.

SUBJECT MATTER

The subjects that I chose to photograph for my thesis came out of choices made not so much on the basis of intellectual connotations that subjects might have, but are based more on a subjects formal visual qualities. The manner in which I photograph objects, landscapes, etc., revolves greatly around the idea of transformation of those objects by color changes, light, and the very subjective aspects of composition, angle of view and so on. It is through these transforming elements that I hope to perform a little alchemy, and have these objects and landscapes take on more meaning than is usually associated with them. In a sense the photographs become symbolic, especially the more abstract compositions because they have already lost their contextual settings. I feel that some of the photographs do this more than others, they appeal directly to the subconscious mind. Carl Jung states in "Man and his Symbols"³ "Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend. This is one reason why all religions employ symbolic language or images." The subject matter in my photographs is for me but a jumping off point for my imagination, the photograph may be very abstracted or very representational, but is only a trigger for the subconscious mind.

The actual objects photographed consisted of things such as bridges, rivers, factories, trees, lakes, sand, snow, etc. It is only when combined with the visual elements of light and color, shadow and reflection, that the images would be transformed into something new.

EXHIBITION

The thesis exhibition was the culmination of a very intense period of work, which really gave me an opportunity to survey and evaluate all of the work I had completed. I feel that it is very important for an artist to step away from his work occasionally and take notice of the changes that are taking place in his work. Artists are always so emotionally wrapped up in their work, that it becomes difficult to get an objective viewpoint of their work, the thesis exhibition provided me with the opportunity to do this. It also gives an artist the opportunity to receive praise and criticism from friends, colleagues, and teachers. I personally found it interesting to hear comments from people who had not seen any of the work before. Sometimes it is very constructive to get criticism from a person with a completely detached viewpoint, as well as from those people who are familiar with your work, both past and present. I was glad to have had the chance for this kind of interchange.

The actual preparations involved in the exhibition were, producing the prints, securing gallery space, making arrangements for a reception, producing a poster, cutting mattes, framing the prints, sequencing and hanging the show. The results were 27, 14 x 14 inch color prints, window matted with conservation board and framed in 20 x 24 inch aluminum section frames. There were also 50, 8 x 10 color posters produced for announcing the show to the public.

The reception and exhibition went well and I was pleased with the results. At the reception I also showed a videotape I produced, which was an extension of the ideas set forth in this thesis, a copy of which is now with the Film/Video Department of R.I.T., School of Photographic Arts and Sciences.

As a last remark on the exhibition I should say that the only negative criticism I received was about the sequencing of the prints. As I stated in the section on Composition, the prints could have been divided into two separate sections. I had trouble deciding whether to arrange the exhibition with this concept in mind, in the end I decided against this in order to keep a certain consistency within the show. This did draw some criticism from other students and board members, in retrospect I would say that there were valid points brought up about sequencing, and I would advise others to allow for more time to sequence their work.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Camera

The camera I used for my thesis project was a twin lens reflex Yashicamat with an 80mm Yashinon lens, it produces 6 x 6cm negatives. It is a fairly small and light camera that uses 120 film, it is easy to make adjustments on shutter speeds, F-stops, and focusing. All of these attributes made it very suitable for working during the cold winter months. I hand held the camera using a pistol grip which enabled me to keep my gloves on except when changing film. Using this format camera enabled me to get excellent depth of field at a fairly rapid shutter speed, eliminating the need for a tripod, this freed me up in terms of mobility. The camera proved to be sturdy and practically impervious to the cold and I felt it was most suitable for the task. It provided negatives that were sharp and large enough to stand up to an enlargement of 14 x 14 inches with no disturbing grain pattern.

Film and Development

The film I used was Vericolor 120 ASA Type S. This film provided high quality color negatives at a fairly fast film speed (120 ASA), the grain was very small and presented no problem during enlargement. The film proved to be very consistent in both exposure and printing. Because there is no variation in

the development of color negatives I opted for processing of the film at a local professional color lab.

Exposure

Exposing the negatives for my thesis was based on the idea that I would use the films' characteristics to my advantage as much as possible. Since Vericolor film cannot be pushed or pull processed the same way black and white films can, it presents certain limitations on exposure. I would take light readings and using a modified zone system, I would calculate the light ratio of a given situation and decide whether or not the film had the capacity to give detail in both highlight and shadow areas. If the film would accept a certain light ratio then the exposure would be made based upon my calculations, if the film would not accept a given ratio then the decision was made to either accept the loss of detail in certain highlight or shadow areas. The other choice was simply not make the exposure based on the premise that the negative would not be acceptable. However, this system proved to be very effective and most negatives were within acceptable density ranges. This system eventually became second nature to me, having become so familiar with my film, camera, and light meter.

Printing

All negatives were printed on Ektacolor 74 color paper and processed in either a Hope or Kreonite color print processor. The printing of the negatives presented no major problems and each print was color balanced on an individual basis, considering the aesthetic qualities of each negative.

CONCLUSION

It is rather difficult to come to any final conclusion about my thesis project, for the concepts and vision are still an integral part of my artistic and photographic activities, and for this I am glad, because the project was not simply something dreamed up in order to fulfill certain requirements for a degree. I feel that my project was a natural part of my artistic growth and is successful enough to warrant further work and most certainly will evolve into a larger body of work. My thesis project has prepared me mentally, spiritually, and visually for projects more ambitious and complex. It has helped me to improve my visual and technical skills in addition to having achieved my stated goals. I also used the same visual concepts and skills to branch out into video, producing a videotape which later won an award. This further strengthens my belief that these concepts have meaning and depth and will endure. I feel that my vision and concepts on art and photography, that have been the basis of this project are cohesive and have integrity. It is only with these kinds of convictions that an artist can continue to create. In the end the work must speak for itself, images are my language of communication, and will remain so.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Arianne Ruskin, 17th and 18th Century Art, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1961), p. 95
2. Joel Meyerowitz, Cape Light, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978).
3. C.G. Jung, Man and His Symbols, (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 21.





