Straying from conscious intention: A Self-portrait based on last year's diary

Christopher Harrold
STRAVING FROM CONSCIOUS INTENTION:
A SELF-PORTRAIT BASED ON LAST YEAR'S DIARY

BY

Christopher Harrold

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Charles Werberig, Chairperson
Professor
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences

Brad Hindson
Professor
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences

Keith Smith
Instructor
Visual Studies Workshop
The following text is submitted as the report for my thesis project: STRAYING FROM CONSCIOUS INTENTION: A SELF-PORTRAIT BASED ON LAST YEAR'S DIARY. At the beginning there is a brief technical introduction describing the scope of the work and the methodology used in arriving at the particular solution/configuration of the work.

The remaining text is made up of two parts as follows: Part 1 consists of fragments of my journal for, roughly, a two-year period arranged to resemble the mood and structure of the thesis exhibition; Part 2 is a presentation of the actual text used in the exhibition. Originally it was typed on 4"x6" cards and tacked to the walls and floors as part of the installation.

I hope you find it accessible and in some way a source of positive inspiration.
BACKGROUND

My involvement with self-portraiture began about one year before my thesis show, some time in 1982. I had just finished working on a long series of family pictures; images of my mother, my sisters, brothers and father. I was using old snapshots as well as shooting new images and experimenting with a number of imaging techniques: color xerox, kwik printing and drawing.

These family pictures prepared the ground for my investigation of self-portraiture. It was a kind of emotional preparation in that the family pictures became increasing an articulation of my own feelings about past events, people and places. Although they were depicted in the pictures, I began to see that the imagery was more about me and who I was than it was about my family.

Naturally, my next step was to include myself in the pictures. By placing myself as subject in the context of the familiar, my parents' home, the park I played in as a child, my parents' church and a number of other places which were part of my past. there was a sense of returning to the scene of an event - of place, time, and environment.

By early 1982, a couple of significant concerns had been formulated in my work: 1. self-portrait as a way of "self examination;" and 2. the use of memory as a resource in that process.
In most of my attempts at self-portraiture, the way I felt while I was taking the picture was equally or more important than the way I looked. At first I introduced text with the images to try to bring these two elements together. Then I saw the potential of installation as that which could introduce and, if handled properly, induce a feeling. Also, I began to suspect that, just as photography could make a likeness of a person's face, perhaps installation could create the likeness of a feeling.

At about this time, I began to experiment with installation as a way of extending myself three-dimensionally and as an attempt at recreating events, environments and emotions.

That point of experimentation really marks what I consider to be the beginning of the research that made my thesis work possible. Installation was just the track I needed to step onto in order to get at the wide range of emotional qualities I was trying to express in my work. It afforded me the opportunity of creating a feeling or ambience using photographs, words, light and objects - a bit like arranging a room to recreate my feelings.

Throughout 1982 I continued to experiment with installations, often using the unused space in the MFA gallery to construct new works for a couple of days or a couple of hours. Increas-
ingly, I saw this way of working as the most comfortable for me. At one point, in December of 1982, the poet Galway Kinnel, speaking at the University of Rochester, said: "There is a disparity of working one way and wanting to be more... searching to find a creative form to be set free (creatively)."

I felt that, for me, installation was the right form at that particular point in time. I submitted my proposal in February, 1983, writing:

"Display will be an important part of my thesis exhibition. I am exploring alternatives to the framed print on the wall, in an attempt to bring the work away from the wall and into the gallery space.

One of my goals is to have an exhibition that is less a 'display of prints' and more of an 'environment' using photographs, words and even sound. Toward this end I am doing research in three areas:

1. installation art; environment as context
2. sound: considering the audio environment
3. words and pictures: creating and manipulating contexts."

I scheduled the gallery with my good friend Carl Yusavitz for October 1, 1983 and continued working.
THE FORM

I came to the gallery with a number of strategies as to how I might arrange the space; no one particular arrangement was firm and sure in my mind. I knew what I wanted to depict but wasn't 100% sure as to how to achieve it. I waited until the gallery was empty and the walls in place to begin actually planning what would go where and how the installation would look.

At my disposal I had a thirty minute video tape of me lying in bed asleep, a box of 20" x 20" color prints (all self-portraits), a handful of quotes and diary entries relevant to my life at the time, clamp lights and gallery track lighting, along with a variety of miscellaneous objects (a large plate glass circle, 3 goblets, a chair, sheer curtains and 250 pounds of sand). Above all, I wanted the installation to be fresh and alive, to be a new configuration of space, image and feeling.

I chose to create a cumulative expression of my experiences, a singular piece using diverse but related elements. The substance would be a self-portrait, a "picture" of me intended to be a distillation of many pictures of me. It was an opportunity to make a giant three-dimensional diary entry.

My thesis show seemed to call for an appropriate summarization. As I reviewed the recurrent images in my work, I saw that they
all had, increasingly, to do with spaces around me: my bedroom, the ocean, the beach and the desert. In the end, the entire exhibition was based on a group of nine still photographs and the video tape, all of which were chosen for their thematic references to these particularly significant spaces.

The pictures provided a starting point, a foundation on which to build. In a sense, creating the installation was like arranging a space into which the pictures could be seen and read. Always at the fore was the concern for activating the space; more than devising a scheme of exhibition for the pictures, it was a matter of creating an environment that would in some way augment the pictures. As I worked, the two elements, environment and image, became interlocked and interdependent. Not only did the space augment the pictures, the pictures seemed to determine the feeling of the environment. Indeed, as I had discovered in the execution of earlier installations, visual and environmental elements worked off one another, each determining in part the reading of the other.

Logistically, it was a matter of working out the final arrangement by trial and error; building and tearing down. In hindsight, I wished that I had allowed about two or three days longer in the gallery to put the piece together. Of the two days I had, one was spent painting, moving and trying to concentrate while another show was being hung next door. I would advise anyone
doing this kind of work in the future to allow four or five days for working in the space. This kind of time frame allows you to consult with your thesis board and edit thoroughly. The nature of installation work is such that the traditional "hanging of the thesis show" is in large part the creative execution of the work. Because of this, it is of great importance that there be sufficient time and privacy to work through ideas and configurations of the space.
As I mentioned earlier, the final work was based on a group of nine still photographs and a thirty-minute video tape which were conceptually and thematically related. Briefly, I will discuss this relationship to provide a better understanding of what the work was about.

The three dominant themes in the work are: desert, ocean and sleep, each a strong, recurring place or condition in my life. Reviewing my work of two years, I perceived how each of these stood out as strong thematic elements. The execution of the work: STRAYING FROM CONSCIOUS INTENTION: A SELF PORTRAIT BASED ON LAST YEAR’S DIARY was an opportunity to combine these three places that so potently described where I stood at that point and where I had walked before.

Although each of these locations at first represented only a place, they came more significantly to function as metaphor, as a description of my emotional complexion. I saw them in my mind like this:

- DESERT (as metaphor of a real space, a condition experienced)
- OCEAN (as metaphor of a real space, a condition experienced)
- SLEEP (as metaphor of a real place, a condition experienced)
Each of these elements was autobiographically descriptive of how I saw myself. They were simultaneously unbound and in motion, static and bound by time. They describe personal growth and journey and in so doing they illuminate the past and give fuller meaning to the future. The imagery is built on emotional, intuitive responses to my struggles and fears, victories and joys, solitude and relationships.

At the risk of obscuring understanding by excessive explanation, I will say no more except that the following text taken from my journals should provide greater insight into my way of thinking than any explanation I devise ever could. Be aware of these three places I have described; they are evident on a number of levels, some more than others.
When children build, they build with no intellectual barriers. Crossover between intelligence and feeling is a place where an image can mean a feeling and not an intellectualization of that feeling. This allows images to retain their power.

- Michael Chandler
  (Taken from text presented with Mr. Chandler's work at the ICA in Boston, 1983)
winter 1983

out of quite a bit of confusion i stand firm and sure
on something more

it is a lot more
it doesn't just feel like a lot more

my space has been enlarged
significantly

oh boy, oh boy it feels so good to be standing in such
a large space free from the encumbrances
for so long tight around my body

how i glorify god for his right hand that saves me from
the snare
from the false strength of my own right hand

that so easily surrenders now
that so easily surrenders now
six years later
six years later
18 December, 1982

I wrote about loneliness yesterday and here I am sitting on the couch hoping that no one will come and disturb me. I'm enjoying the solitude.

Writing is so much more immediate than photography. I want so to be truthful in the pictures that I make. The pictures must come from inside; or maybe just the motivation to make them can come from inside.

Right now I've been enjoying the disclosure of my personal struggle with sin. I approach it hesitantly, not knowing how honest to be, and afraid of just languishing or revelling in it. Should these be pictures of struggle and frustration or pictures of hope and victory? Maybe they should be both; without wallowing.

Contrasts: sin and grace, past and present, sleep and waking, desert and ocean. A continuum of elements in conflict. The presence of one thing pitted against another.

Yet I don't really see this as conflict; I see these conditions working together. It is a true reflection of myself, for within me I see elements in conflict.
July 16, 1983 (Saturday Evening)

occasionally
i am so consumed with the
lust
of my all too
temporary
flesh
that i became
in a trance
which seeks to alleviate
the desire that presses
against my body

i get distracted
and for just a little while
i sorta get off the track
and return to the familiar
feeling
heavy and
sorry and
perfectly incapable of being
anything else but divided

i am gently reminded that if
my eye causes me to stumble that
i should
for all intents and purposes
pluck it out
28 December, 1982

It was warm today (in the 60's) I went for a walk on the beach; it was beautiful. The wind was blowing and the sunlight was filtered by great bunches of clouds. The sky was even nice colors, sort of dusty and pastel.

I took pictures and thought about how familiarity is a nice feeling.

It felt kind of strange being alone on the big beach; the lake was choppy and everything seemed so big. I took pictures of the water and the sky and thought about going to the beach early in the morning.

I prayed and I felt good about it.

I walked down the beach and collected some objects to bring back: rocks, shells, steel and a stick.
2 April, 1983

i see how things are forced together into spaces not usually large enuf

and the dream occurs only once
not enjoyed fully within the confines of sleep
like that which fades when exposed to light
2 April, 1983

floating in and out of something which is not really clear
moving steadily toward
someplace i've never been

the uncertainty is reassuring

and i see the progress as a collection of days

whose end will come to a point of beginning
The desert took on a new meaning after the news about my brother. It was the place of repentance and purification as well as the place of unbounded possibility where the sky dominates the landscape. It was the purging and cleansing of heat and light. I knew that experience in my own life. I knew repentance; I was coming to understand its relief.
I grew up living on a large body of water but the hugeness of the ocean fascinated me. It was so immeasurable and vast, yet contained on all sides by land. It, like the desert functioned as metaphor and poetry. I assumed it as an element in my work. When we were at the Cape I took lots of photographs of myself at the shore. There was something primal and raw about the ocean. I felt none of what it was and all of what it was.
14 June, 1983

so schön war das ozean
es gab nichts für tausenden miles
only the waves that had foam from salt
suspended belief

salt seals the covenant
preserves the original agreement
the commitment

von dem herz muss es kommen

das ist mein ohr, ich hab' das bild beim see gemacht

suspension

gaps and spaces

silence

These conditions yield to their opposites. They are the beginnings of what naturally follows them. I notice things when they are interrupted and suspended; there is time and space to see, to hear to feel what is actually happening. Suspension, gaps, silences are exceptions and their presence is defined by the absence of something else which appears to have been interrupted. The separation of the gap from the rest of time and activity is created by the absence of what is normal or uninterrupted. The gap exists only because of the "non-gaps" which have come before and will resume activity after.
June 25, 1983

those times that my sleep dissipates
into being awake i
stand up
not sure of what to do next
and think of you
i know your vision is
much clearer than mine
so i'm hoping that i no longer
wake up for me

spaces

the interval

stopping all those things that naturally continue to look,
to inspect

GAPS
and interruption

was passiert zwischen die Bildern?
(what happens between the pictures?)
June 13, 1983

In May 1982 I went to New Mexico with my two brothers, Bobby and Jack. Jack is a priest and Bobby owns a bar called The Ferris Wheel. We drove Jack to a retreat center in the canyons outside of Albuquerque. He said he was going there to make some decisions about his life and future.

I was fascinated with the desert; never before had I seen anything quite like it. All the sky, so blue and so dominant over the dry landscape. It was a beautiful, open space so drastically different than the east coast where I had grown up. There was a sense of space and air in the desert.

We left my brother with his car and decisions in the desert and flew back to New York. It seemed like a good place to be left to think and make decisions. For all its openness it (the desert) bred a kind of heavy introspection.

At the same time I was becoming interested in imagery of the ocean. I visited Cape Cod in May, 1983 and for the first time saw the ocean.
Wedged

The only course of action was to lay aside the weight of encumbrance. His shoes seemed heavy and his clothing had doubled in weight; swimming had become very difficult.

Why had he gone into the water with his clothes on? He can't remember...

The water seemed unusually warm for June. I'm sure it's because of all that warm weather we've had. Over one week of temperatures in the 90's.

It seemed odd that just by changing your location by 10 or 12 feet you can be floating, buoyant through the water. I cannot move the same way on land, through air as I can in the lake, through water.

Really my existence is quite tenuous. All those unchanging conditions that define my life daily are really tentatively balanced close to the edge of a whole bunch of variables ignored by most people. My life, which seems as though it will go on infinitely is, in fact, a vapor.

It seems odd that by taking twenty steps to my left, my ability to move weightlessly is greatly increased.

He couldn't remember why he had worn his clothes into the water. The weight made him feel as though he would sink.
I look back at much of what I have written, much of what I've tried to express, and I see truth veiled with a layer of qualifiers.

my imagery means feelings i have had
"...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue."

R.M. Rilke
July, 1903
PART 2 TEXT FROM THE EXHIBITION
ONCE MORE EMPTINESS STRETCHED OUT INSIDE ME AND I WAS A DESERT WITHIN A DESERT.

Henri Bosco, L'antiquitaire
Clarity came in the spaces
"As soon as we become motionless
we are elsewhere
we are dreaming in a world that is immense.
Indeed immensity is the movement of motionless man."

Gaston Bachelard,
La Poetique De L'espace
"ALL HARD WORK," he wrote, "NO SHORT-CUTS OR POWER TOOLS."
he was telling about carving wood in a southwest (desert) canyon
he wrote me a letter whose words were conceived in innocence and made real by our (difficult) lives
I will extol thee, O Lord, for thou hast lifted me up and hast not let my enemies rejoice over me, O Lord. My God did I cry to thee for help, and thou didst the alme, Psalm 30:12.
i experienced the enormity of the sky and the expanse of dry ground.

I HAD BEEN TOLD ABOUT IT.
THE DESERT THAT IS
I first went there in May, 1982 with my brothers.
sometimes i feel like i'm back there again
Impressions linger in my memory, allowing me to return to that place where the sky dominates.

I see similarities between the desert and myself...
the complicated pattern no longer weighs me down. IT IS a free man sleeping under scraps of the PAST
IT SEEMS DIFFERENT THESE DAYS
I love the habitation of thy house and the place where thy glory dwells. My feet stand on a level place in the congregation. I shall bless the Lord. Psalm 26:8,12
there is a space that is much bigger than anything i've ever known.
i feel it when i am lying in bed looking up.
above me there is water and sand,
within me is sleep and sometimes dreams.
there was a sound that steam made
allowing me to sit at my window
and listen to nothing intently.
edges are a dangerous place, i thought as i walked down the beach. now and again the waves came up over my feet. it sent me scrambling up to drier ground. my feet got dry but i remembered what it was like to be wet
i go back to the same part of the letter time and again, watching while it becomes true
the Lord is my strength and my shield, my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped there fore my heart exults and with my song I shall thank Him.

Psalms 28:7
onethingihaveaskedofthelordandthatshalliseekthati
maydwellinthehouseofthelordallthedaysofmylifetobehold
thebeautyofthelordandtomeditateinhistemplepsalm27:4
APPENDIX

VIEWS OF THE INSTALLATION