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by

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New Moon Over Sea

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New Moon Over Sea

by

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Report

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Dedication

To my parents, Bruce and Sally Martello, for letting me always make my own decisions.

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Abstract

New Moon Over Sea

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Anna Collette

This Master's Report is a discussion of the ideas, research, and methods I have developed over the course of my three years of study at the University of Texas at Austin. As an artist I am interested in queering the convention of photography and rethinking the idealized landscape. I use photography to transform subjects, shifting their significance and worth. Throughout this report, I discuss my image "New Moon Over Sea" as a microcosm for the themes and ideas present throughout the past three years.

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Timeline

2010: Graduated from photography program at Massachusetts College of Art and Design where I became well versed in the medium's technical and aesthetic traditions.

2012: Travelled to Iceland for a three-month residence on the west side of the country. During this time, I brought my view camera for the opportunity to make beautiful photographs out in the world.

2013: I began my graduate studies at the University of Texas at Austin where I started a studio-based practice. I used my studio like a photographer's studio, shooting all my subjects inside against a backdrop.



Figure 1: *Waisting*, 2014

2014: “Waisting” was made. I became interested in the inherent trust embedded in a photograph and began to explore ways to expose the seams of a photograph. I used my body to create a fiction for the camera.

2014: “High Heal” was made. I began to make images of objects and adornments that have the ability to transform the body. A flimsy cardboard heel supplements the body, creating a statuesque figure.



Figure 2: *High Heal*, 2014

2015: “Low Tide” was made. I began to explore ways to photograph objects that shows a transmutation. A found mussel shell was filled with plastic beads, transforming a barren object into something with life.



Figure 3: *Low Tide*, 2015

2015: “Strand” was made. I began to play with the taboo nature of retouching photographs and considered that to be another type of transformation. I wanted to make a photograph where the evidence of change was visually embedded in the photograph.



Figure 4: *Strand*, 2015

2016: “New Moon Over Sea” was made.



Figure 5: *New Moon Over Sea*, 2016

New Moon Over Sea

...and it went and searched day and night and since nobody was left on the earth it wanted to go up to the heavens and the moon was looking at it so friendly and when it finally got to the moon the moon was a piece of rotten wood and then it went to the sun and when it got there the sun was a wilted sunflower and when it got to the stars they were little golden flies stuck up there like the shrike sticks 'em on the blackthorn and when it wanted to go back down to earth the earth was an overturned piss pot!

George Büchner, *Woyzeck*¹

In the summer of 2012 I traveled to Iceland for a three-month residence in the lava fields of Hallmundarhraun on the west side of the country. I worked as a tour guide for the magnificent Víðgelmir; Iceland's largest lava cave. I spent every day traversing the dark channels of the cave for hours. I decided to leave my life in Boston because I thought I needed to "get out" to make pictures. I photographed every weekend. On one occasion I went to the ominous black sand beaches of the south. As I stood on the shore looking out onto the horizon, I could see the island of Vestmannaeyjar: the last landmass for over ten thousand miles before you hit Antarctica. The day was dark and over-cast and I had never seen so much vastness before.

¹ Büchner, George. "Woyzeck". Olsztyn: Teatr Im. Stefana Jaracza W Olsztynie, 1978. Print.

I spent a lot of time out in nature while I was in Iceland trying to make beautiful photographs that continued a tradition of picture making I learned in my undergraduate degree. I took hundreds of photographs that were technically strong, but those images didn't stick for me. Years later I find myself looking through my archive of photographs, and there is one image that still stands out. It's a picture of a dark ominous sea; I took it on the beach facing south towards oblivion. When I took this picture, I removed my camera from the tripod, walked a few steps into the cold sea and tried to steady my hands. When



Figure 6: *Original Photograph from Iceland, 2012*

I processed the film, I found an underexposed hazy image that tried to claim its identity as a sea and horizon. The image is soft with very poor tonal range. This image lacks the technical strength of the other photographs, but it still remains one of the most powerful.

I'm interested in making images that reconsider the aesthetic choices of a well-made photograph; sharp detail, full tonal range, high depth of field, un-cropped composition. I reconsider the importance of making pictures in the world and reexamine the desire to create an untouched image. I am interested in the inherent trust embedded in a photograph, and question the accuracy of their records. I think about using photography as a way to document a psychological condition, one not able to be represented in a concrete manner. My work challenges the notion of an idealized image and plays with the ways photographs skew an idealized landscape.

An image of the beach or the ocean epitomizes the idealized landscape. The beach represents an idyllic escape from reality. We send postcards from our tropical vacations, paying forward a stock image of paradise. These images frequent self-help brochures and motivational posters as a symbol of tranquility. The beach is a place for contemplation; in literature and film it is a setting for change and transition. I'm drawn to the way Virginia Woolf describes the beach as setting in her short story *Solid Objects*.



Figure 7: *Detail*, 2016

The only thing that moved upon the vast semicircle of the beach was one small black spot. As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from a certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men.²

In this excerpt, Woolf uses a description of the beach to begin her story. The vastness of the landscape lingers as Woolf describes consecutive moments of bodies coming into focus. By initially describing the two main characters as a mere small black spot, Woolf reminds us of the insignificance of being and the expanse of the world. The

² Woolf, Virginia. "Solid Objects." *A Haunted House, and Other Short Stories*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. 79.

beach becomes a stage for the characters to comb through, looking to creature purpose for outcast pieces of debris.

In my own practice, I seek to repurpose the unwanted rubble. The production of my photographs occurs entirely in my studio, I use whatever means possible to construct an image. My studio acts as a laboratory; everyday matter is captured in the process of changing states. There is a transformation, a power shift, where the pathetic and awkward become glamorous. Instead of going out into the world with my camera, I bring the world into my studio.



Figure 8: *Detail*, 2016

One piece of detritus that has been collecting dust is the photograph of the sea I made in Iceland. I enlarge the photograph, making all the grain and scratches visible. I hang it up as a backdrop in my studio and it transforms from a palm-sized image to a window into a dark world. This photograph's persistence to remain an object of importance remains. Queer filmmaker and performance artist Jack Smith's film "Scotch Tape" demonstrates a touched image with a sticky persistence. A piece of scotch tape gets stuck on the lens of the camera and is visible through a portion of the film. This intentional piece of detritus shapes the film and becomes the title of this work. Smith writes about "moldiness," the things that have been lying around for too long, things

carried over from the past.³ Their time to go is overdue, yet these things still remain. They are over-touched but under considered, and they possess a stickiness. My photograph of the sea is moldy. It should have been canned long ago, but it's now



Figure 9: Jack Smith, *Scotch Tape*, 1963

managed to stick itself onto the wall of my studio.

Another item sitting around in my studio is an old bathroom mirror. I found it at a thrift store in a bin with a bunch of other miscellaneous junk. It caught the reflection of the harsh florescent bulb bolted to the ceiling and shined an S.O.S. to be saved at my direction. It's often been suggested to me to use mirrors as a tool to help focus my images while taking self-portraits. Instead of using the mirror behind my camera, I put it in front of the camera, right on the backdrop of the photograph of the sea. The mirror brings attention to the surface of the image itself, the dust and the grain, but also reflects my image and bridges the distance between photographer and subject.

³ Smith, Jack, J. Hoberman, and Edward G. Leffingwell. "Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith". New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997. Print.

Photographing things that are identifiable but derailed from their prescribed function is a queer gesture that acts as a refusal of an object's intended use. In an interview between Jennifer Doyle, critic David Getsy discusses this idea. "It is also the kind of queer gesture that might easily be overlooked as inconsequential or quizzical for some viewers presuming such things as



Figure 10: *Detail*, 2016

proper use and common sense. But for those viewers searching for sites of resistance to the enforcement of the normal and the supposed 'natural,' the mutual recognition ushered in by identifying with this move could offer the embrace of solidarity. This gesture's reversal is a refusal of common use, demanding an 'unnatural' (just because unconventional) relation to the book as object."⁴ It is not natural to mount a photograph on the surface of a photograph. The prescribed function for this mirror was to function as a behind the scenes tool to assist the photographer. The gesture of placing the mirror on the surface of the photograph is a rejection of common use, and enhances the mirror to promote new ways of seeing.

The reflection of the mirror exposes the crack of my ass creates, creating a line down the center of the circular frame. The mirror transforms into the eye of some animal, watching over the landscape, or maybe it's transformed into a moon. I pull down my

⁴ Doyle, Jennifer, and David Getsy. "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation - Art Journal Open." *Art Journal Open*. *Art Journal*, 31 Mar. 2014. Web. 01 Dec. 2015. 3.

pants and use my body as a way to supplement the landscape, giving the moonless sky a new moon. This gesture is a type of Camp; converting the mirror into something else, a moon or an eye, while remaining in the form of a mirror. “The Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken... To camp is a mode of seduction – one which employs flamboyant, mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders. Equally and by extension, when the word becomes a noun, when a person or a thing is ‘a camp,’ a duplicity is involved. Behind the ‘straight’ public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing.”⁵ This duplicity allows for multiple reads of the photograph and operates as a visual pun. There is a common understanding of a moon, but also a vernacular understanding of *mooning* as a gesture of revealing one’s behind.

This image is a photograph that bridges the space between photographer and subject. As the photographer, I am able to be in front of and behind the camera simultaneously. This image allows the ability to see at surface level while also being able to see through something. The distance between photographer and subject is heightened by the presence of the image reflected in the mirror. Distance, in relation to the idyllic, insists that things begin to break down and dissolve when you get too close. Rebecca Solnit writes about distance beautifully. “And I’m not sure the island was meant to be arrived at, for up close its glowing gold would have dissolved into scrub and soil.”⁶ When

⁵ Sontag, Susan. “Notes on ‘Camp’,” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1964); 515-530; reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 275-292.

⁶ Solnit, Rebecca. “The Blue of Distance”. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.

you move closer to the photograph, the image dissolves into small dots of grain. When you look up to the new moon, you see blemishes and hairs. Up close, things fall apart.



Figure 10: Ansel Adams, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941

This image is a queer cousin to the crisp and strong landscape photographs of those like Ansel Adams or Carlton Watkins. It becomes a queer cousin to Adams' iconic image *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. My images are often *over touched*, a play on the pure and un-retouched images championed by so many straight photographers. It is my belief, however, that "straight" stands for more than technical detail. It is not simply a matter of style but of moral imperative, commanding a relationship to truth and the absolute.⁷

⁷ Coleman, A.D. "The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition," *Photography in Print*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1990) 480-91; 482.

As a queer image-maker, the effort of queering art history and the medium of photography is about the construction of a useable past. I look to surrealism as an alternative history to fulfill this need. The films of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí influence me. In *Un Chien D'Andalou*, an eye becomes a moon and a row of clouds becomes a sharp razor. The objects in these films have the ability to shift and transform, similarly to how I photograph my objects. "[Surrealist] objects are particularly



Figure 11: Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien D'Andalou*, 1929

enviable in their sheer power of evocation, overwhelming us with the conviction that they constitute the repositories, in art, of that miraculous charm, which we long to recapture."⁸ In his *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, André Breton writes about the surrealist object. Breton describes the juxtaposition of two distant realities united to create a new one. In my image, the two distant realities use the mirror to converge.

I pull down my pants and use my body as a way to supplement the landscape, giving the moonless sky a new moon. "New Sea Over Moon" acts as a microcosm for the ideas I've been interested in for the past three years. This work aims to challenge the traditions of photography and an idealized image.

⁸ Breton, André. "Manifesto of Surrealism," (1924) *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Paris: 1962; Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969/1972), 3-47.

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