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Looking to Entangle

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Looking to Entangle
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BFA in Studio Art
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Abstract:

What kinds of images stick with you? Are they the ones that are readable, understandable right from the get-go? Surely not. Likely, they're the ones that challenge you, frustrate you, and entangle you in the process of trying to understand them. This thesis argues that the semantics of looking, and the way in which the art-object is experienced through the process of looking, creates the opportunity for the unique engagement of the viewer as more than a bystander. By frustrating them with a lack of information, or rewarding them for looking harder, the artist can make the viewer aware of their role in the work's experience. As such, the unique rewards and inseparable shortcomings of how we look become just as important as what we are looking at. Embedded in this conversation is a discussion about what the viewer is looking for in a work of art – the contemporary consensus being that the viewer is looking for knowledge, for some truth that constructs meaning in the work of art. By changing what this truth is, and how its accessed, the viewer becomes entangled by their own desire to find it. They become attached to the looking process as an assurance that they can use it to excavate whatever there is to be found in the work. Instead, the only thing the viewer finds is themselves – their willingness to look becomes the activator of the work, and their own methodology of looking and entangling becomes the content of the work.

Thesis:

Contemporary art is fraught with potholes, bear traps and beehives of jargon – and I plan to partake as much as the next. Yet I want to start with a simple question beyond the scope of art. How do you look at something? With your eyes, to be sure. And then your eyes send information to your brain which processes it against some learned standard. Often, the joy in looking at art comes from its deviation from whatever standard our brains have learned. It challenges a truth that we thought we understood. In the largest sense, this is what my work is about – it's about you, the viewer. It's about using art to make *you* aware of how you look. In my work, I delve into the process of looking as a way to engage and entangle the viewer in the work of art, to make them aware that the art knows it's being looked at. Whether by hiding information, reflecting images, or epistemological investigations, the work always returns to the question of how it functions when being interacted with. In this thesis I will argue that the viewer's place within my work of art is activated by the content, form, and viewing condition of the work itself. As such, my interest in looking as a set of intersecting and variable semantic outlines by which we experience art circles back to the viewer as being more than a passive observer, but a subject to engage and entangle.

My practice is multimedia and spans a variety of making techniques and methods for conceptualizing work. Yet for the purpose of this thesis, I am going to use my photographic practice as a basis to look at primary concepts and ideas. This is for a handful of reasons. Primarily it is because the scholarship surrounding photography deals much more with the relationship between maker, tool, experience, and viewer. In that sense, using it as a foundation to talk both about photographic work as well as sculptural, print, and other multi-media work makes sense in the scope of my practice. Photographer and photographic theorist Jeff Wall

argues that in contemporary art, the practice of photography, cinema, and painting can be boiled down into a new medium – that which he calls the “essential pictorial” (Cohen, Streitberger 28). As such, cross-pollination between media in my body of work makes it so that a discussion of the work can meaningfully use scholarship from one realm to talk about the other.

PHOTOGRAPHIC LOOKING AND OBSCURING LOOKING

To begin, it is helpful to define the “process of looking” that is referenced throughout this paper. Charlotte Cotton writes in *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* that what is apparent when viewing photographs is “that they offer experiences that hinge on our memory’s stock of images: family snaps, magazine advertising, stills from films, surveillance and scientific studies, old photographs, fine art photographs, paintings, and so on” (Cotton 192). She notes that because a photograph proposes reality, how we process a photograph is predicated on our bank of learned imagery. Photos of an apple recall not just an apple, but Christian creation stories, as well as mega corporations and posters teaching us how to eat healthily. This offers an extension to the ideas of visual perceptual theory proposed in the late 1960s, which argues that sensory data is processed against knowledge stored in our brain before we make an inference about what we have seen (Gregory 66). Applied in an artistic context, this theory begins to recognize that looking at art is an act that is a constantly shifting relationship between the work and the person viewing it.

On the other hand, it’s impossible to ignore the real and tangible process that surrounds the making of a photograph. Photographic theorist Estelle Jussim writes that “it takes a serious effort of distancing oneself from the immediate appeal of an image to discover its context and what implicit messages are being conveyed simply through its existence.” (Jussim 13). Jussim

argues that the fact that a photograph exists is significant in its own right – the context of where, when, and how it was made tethers the photograph to reality. She argues that this context and subtext in the photograph is just as powerful as what is pictured. How was this photograph made? Was it taken ethically? Are we being lied to? In this sense, the way in which viewers deconstruct a photograph considers the politics of the camera, the role of the photographer, and the role of the camera as parts of the larger proposition of the photograph.

One of the ways my work aims to target this critical mind of the viewer is by withholding information in a way that exposes the limits and frustrations of the role of viewership. Works like *Crate* (figure 1), do so by telling the viewer how to open the crate, but not permitting them to see what's inside. This disjunct between knowing and seeing points towards looking and viewership as part of an act of truth uncovering – a relationship which interests me greatly.

Taken one step further, seminal postmodern works like Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* (figure 2) function completely on unknowability – or at least unverifiability. Whether or not there is actual feces inside the can is unknowable. Yet the distance created by the object withholding this crucial information ropes the viewer in. It hangs in the back of their mind as an unresolved question. Manzoni was wildly aware of how his work related to viewers. His proposition to make a work that was – to some extent – unknowable, animated the object as a work constructed precisely for the viewer to be frustrated by.



Figure 1



Figure 2

In *Crate*, viewers are presented with an object that is knowable from the surface – it’s a crate, just like *Artist’s Shit* is a can. The accompanying set of instructions (figure 3) tells the viewer how one could open the crate without revealing what the crate is holding. Yet it also brings up another layer to our uncertainty – namely how truthful do you think the work is being. Am I, as the viewer, convinced by the functionality of the object? Does it do what it says it



Figure 3

does? What’s inside it, and does it really matter? By obscuring knowledge from the reach of the viewer, yet alluding that there is something there to be had, *Crate* targets the viewers frustrations of inaccessibility to make them aware of their own inherent shortcomings.

LOOKING TO FIND TRUTH

The proposition that we understand truth through looking is another part of how to dissect the semantics of looking – we look to gain knowledge. Photographer Ron Jude notes in an interview about his photographic series *Lagos* that his photos “exploit, to varying degrees, our willingness to accept photographs at face value, and how this trust leads to certain expectations” (Wolukau-Wanambwa 14-15). Jude notes that one of the easiest ways to call the truthfulness of looking into question is by showing something untrue or uncanny. In my photographic work, constructing images that are unnerving operates to deconstruct this phenomenon of truth-seeking in looking.

My photographic series *The 23rd Century Goldrush* references this concept directly. By proposing a world (the 23rd century in a world after environmental collapse) that is *only* viewable through the photographic lens, the body of work constructs truth through photographs instead of making photographs from a truth. As such, the series not only engages looking as a way to build a world, but also as a way to propose photographs that reference a truth which isn't tangible to the viewer. When the viewer looks at an image of a man gazing out at you with a pill on his tongue (figure 4), the strangeness creates an amount of distance between the photograph and the viewer's experience of something "real".



Figure 4

In this sense, *The 23rd Century Goldrush* is built on the idea that the photographic lens is not limited to just reproducing reality. Instead, the photographs use the camera's unique relationship to looking and truth-seeking as a tool to construct and add – not simply reproduce.

To contrast the confusion and untruth presented in the work itself, my practice engages a pointed use of text as a way of offering the viewer knowledge. Using titling as a way of telling viewers what to look for is something that I consider very intentionally. *The 23rd Century Goldrush* offers almost the entirety of its context in the title that is given. All of a sudden, viewers know that they're supposed to be looking at some future that is different from the one that they envision. The instructional pamphlet included in *Crate* offers a didactic, formulaic, and text-based instruction on how to open the crate. The language is simple and functions as a touchstone of knowledge for the viewer. In that sense, the use of language and text – whether in the title or in the work itself – is frequently used to give the viewers knowledge that either aids in the confusion of the work, or in its exploration.

A-LITERAL NARRATIVE

Entrenched through my photographic practice – and seen prominently in *The 23rd Century Goldrush* – is the purposeful use of sequencing to structure the viewers' experience of the work. This sequencing borders on what could be considered narrative, i.e., how is the world shaped by sequencing our experience of it? However, it's not narrative in a traditional story telling manner. Instead, photographic sequencing introduces a unique type of relational narrative from photograph to photograph, that creates a-literal narrative – meaning visual threads and contextual elements that form a photographic narrative that isn't necessarily articulable. As a way of engaging looking as more than just a path to understanding, but as an imaginative act itself, a-literal narrative is incredibly rewarding. Clive Scott notes that when photographs are direct references to real life, they leave no room for “symbolistic elasticities.” Yet an a-literal narrative experience of the photograph is much more likely if the primary justification for the photograph is not documentary, but is expansive and non-referential to reality (Scott 240).

Photographer Ron Jude operates almost exclusively within this realm of non-referential photography and a-literal narrative. In the foreword to his photobook, *Dark Matter*, he notes that he is “struck by the continuing expectations placed on photographs to tell us something specific about their imagery.” (Jude, *Dark Matter* i). In his photobooks he engages the structure of western narration to “subvert its potential through a largely non-associative choice of landscape” (Jude, *Dark Matter* ii). In other words, Jude's use of a narrative sequencing to display photographs that aren't narrative creates an interesting gap of meaning between what we expect and what we are given – a space that is left for the photographer to exploit for the benefit of the work, or for the viewer to fill with their own context and imagination.

In my own work, this gap is often filled with a proposition of placemaking – by which I mean the photographic construction of meaning in places. *The 23rd Century Goldrush* offers a place in its title. The role of the photographs then, is somewhat paradoxical. They propose to explore a place that doesn't exist. In that sense, the place becomes defined and learned through the photographs which point towards this world without explicitly showing it (figure 5). This internalized relationship with placemaking looks at the truth of the photograph as somewhat malleable. It involves the viewer as a primary agent in stitching together the world through the photographic information that is given. In that sense, the viewers' act of world-building becomes the conceptual justification for its uncanny and untruthful presentation. Looking itself becomes the end goal of the photographs, because if they're looked at, they become activated as documents of a fictional world. In the words of Ron Jude, "the photographs sort of stonewall you into looking for what else is there. And of course, there is nothing else there—just you." (Wolukau-Wanambwa 14).



Figure 5

SELF-REFERENTIAL MAKING

My work similarly engages self-referential making to question the process of looking. If what is being proposed as the work of art itself is also the process of making that work, the viewer is placed in an interesting loop between making process and product of that making. This

awkward position forces viewers to use looking to filter through distinctions of what is art and what is process. In that sense, they begin to involve their own biases of looking into the work itself.

For me, the extractive process of uncovering information in a work of art functions most interestingly when it is confused by the presence of the maker. This practice has been around for centuries – Diego Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* (figure 6) shows the artist working to paint the scene that is shown. In the photographic realm, Jeff Wall’s *Picture for Women* (figure 7) photographs the camera as part of a portrait. Yet to go one step further, the act of photographing itself is referential to the camera and photographer.

Microinformation that appears in the photograph – small shadows, lens positioning, footprints on the white backdrop, the way in which a subject interacts with the photographer – are themselves images of the camera and photographer. Critic John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing* that “Every image embodies a way of seeing...every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights.” (Berger 4). This photographic theory about the traces of cameras provided the roadmap for thinking about how to work with the camera and photographer as not just a maker of images but also as a photographable subject itself.



Figure 6



Figure 7

The photographic work that arose from this thinking, *A Roaring Twenties of Sorts*, looks at the camera, photographer, and photographic history as things that are photographable – whether literally, through the traces they leave in photographs, or the histories they reference. The making of self-referential photographs shows the awkwardness inherent in the act of photography, and the strangeness that accompanies the relationship between world and lens. The self-portrait included in the series (figure 8) describes this process literally. In the photograph, I am shown sitting nude on a



Figure 8

rocking chair, with a second camera placed between my pubic region and lens of the camera making the photo. In the photograph, I am also pointing a camera at the lens facing me. While the allegorical construction of the photograph is interesting, and could be dissected further, the largest takeaway is the intrusive, awkward, and humorous presence of the second, censoring, camera – it becomes far more than what it is obscuring. The camera becomes both a poignant reference to the intrusive role of cameras in all facets of life as well as a recognition of the awkward absurdity of the camera/photographer/subject dynamic. The photo also places the viewer in the vantage point of the photographer – behind the camera and up above me. This references both the awkwardness of the subject/viewer contract as well as proposing a role-reversal between myself, the maker, and the viewer who is suddenly behind the lens.

SCULPTURAL WORK AND SCULPTURAL/PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK

When transferring the conversation about self-referential creation and experiential looking to sculpture, the conversation changes in a few ways. Primarily, and most obviously, sculptural work is meant to be seen in the round. In that sense, constructing methods of looking

at the work that reference the viewer's involvement now includes the consideration of physical movement.

My sculpture *Para-Pelvic Investigation at the Urgent Care on 2nd St.* (figure 8) creates a multi-staged looking experience that requires viewers to look through a telescope, at a mirror, reflecting their vision down a large tunnel at an envelope that reads, "there is a picture of my dick in this envelope." This overly constructed looking process positions the viewer as someone who is searching for some amount of knowledge – which they find in the text. To find this, however, they must partake in this uncomfortable voyeuristic act of walking up to the telescope and looking through it. To parallel this with critic Susan Sontag's photographic theory, the constructed process of looking at an envelope makes the work "an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance" (Sontag, 156). This focus on looking and how that becomes manipulated and targeted with the viewing conditions and available information becomes a connecting thread between my photographic and sculptural work.



Figure 9

These considerations of self-referential creation, the process of looking to uncover information, and the control of information to reference the condition of viewership culminate with my thesis work, *The Princess in Your Email* (figure 10). The work depicts three photographs of myself, each of which depicts a body part processed through some amount of uncanny photographic standard. The foot is splattered with strawberry jam which, at



Figure 10

a glance, looks like blood. My face is completely covered, with an orthodontic stretcher opening my mouth to show my teeth. The last is a photograph of another photograph of my chest displayed on a screen, blurred through multiple layers of digitization. Embedded into each photograph is a flash drive – which is accessible to the viewer if they have the means of discovering what's on it – as well as several smaller collaged photographs. The work engages the multiple constructions of the photograph as central to how its digested. As such, our access, or inability to access, information becomes entirely dependent on the viewer's willingness to search the works for it. Using my own body as the subject of the photographs also offers important contextual meaning. In estranging my own body by hiding it and manipulating it, the images create an inaccessibility to the viewer – only through the context of the work can they tell this is the same subject. In that sense, the act of photographing myself in this context becomes a practice in making myself into an image. In simplifying my own body down into these multiple iterations of simplified information, the work offers me, the artist, as a jumble of iterative information and confused artist-subject relationships. In this mess, the way in which we look at the work and the information it holds, as well as the standards against which we process it, become as important as what we actually are looking at.

As such, my body of work becomes somewhat chaotic if looked at superficially – I make busts of elaborate dick jokes, as well as art handling crates and long-term a-literal photographic series. Yet moving beyond the superficiality of content, the focus of my work becomes the viewer and the basic semantics of how they interact with an artwork. How do you fill in the blanks of a proposed world? How does looking at an envelope containing a dick pic through a telescope and mirror involve you in the work? Is it funny, ridiculous, over-constructed? It's all of those, but with an eye towards recognizing that the work is meant to be reflective. It shows your

place as a viewer *and* as a subject. It demonstrates that how you look at something is just as important as what you look at. Sometimes this awareness is achieved by frustrating the viewer – by telling them that they can't have something they desperately want. Other times, it's by offering them a reward, an amount of inside access that comes by playing along with a constructed looking process. In this way, my interest in interrogating the viewer comes from a desire to probe the shortcomings and unique rewards of this role. The practice of looking is generative, and frustrating, and constantly changing. In targeting this process as something to interjected in, confused, and referenced overtly, my work reassures the audience that it knows it's being looked at, and that how you look at something is just as important as what you're looking at.

Figure List:

Figure 1: McLaughlin, Alex. *Crate*. 2023.

Figure 2: Manzoni, Piero. *Artist's Shit*. 1961, edition of 90, Tate Modern, London.

Figure 3: McLaughlin, Alex. Detail from *Crate*. 2023.

Figure 4: McLaughlin, Alex. Untitled from *The 23rd Century Goldrush*. 2022.

Figure 5: McLaughlin, Alex. Untitled from *The 23rd Century Goldrush*. 2022.

Figure 6: Velasquez, Diego. *Las Meninas*. 1656, Museo Nacional Del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 7: Wall, Jeff. *Picture for Women*. 1979, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.

Figure 8: McLaughlin, Alex. Untitled from *A Roaring Twenties of Sorts*. 2023.

Figure 9: McLaughlin, Alex. *Parapelvic Investigation at the Urgent Care on 2nd St.*. 2023

Figure 10: McLaughlin, Alex. *The Princess in Your Email*. 2023.

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