

Notes on work for *gun shy* and *spent*

1.

"We are given terms from nature and from the utilitarian everyday – apple, mouse, web, Blackberry, windows, laptop desk top, word, personal assistant, Firefox – to describe an environment that – as of yet – has no taste or smell." - from *After Photography* by Fred Ritchin

"What do we see in our mind's eye when we talk about "nature"? Where do those images come from that haunt our minds – of the forest primeval, the river of life, and the sacred mountain? Are they myths or were they once real places?" – from the Introduction of "Landscape and Memory" – by Simon Schama

2.

While finishing up the final photographs for my *small game* series over the past year, I began thinking about how the work was engaged by and informed through its connection to the landscape. Much of the work dealt with either the seasonal changes that occurred over the span of 5 years, or with what transpires upon the landscape via structures and long walks. I came across several abandoned duck blinds scattered around the various areas on the property I inhabit. While photographing them, I noticed - and subsequently gathered - the many spent shotgun shells that signaled its' former (and sometimes current) use. At first, I simply wanted to collect them. I found their various colors, shapes and degrees of decay – curious as objects.

I created a white box hood for a flatbed scanner and lay the actual shell directly on the glass. This gave me a high-resolution image, as well as the subsequent direct effects of the depth of field consequences of a film-based camera. I decided to print them in various sizes, and in doing so, found that the shell inhabited various guises, both anamorphic as well as prescribed. The shells seemed to absorb or reflect meaning depending on its scale, or the juxtaposition of another image hanging next to it. I liked this.

3.

With the recent publications of Geoffrey Batchen's reappraisal of Roland Barthes seminal text, *Camera Lucida*, and Fred Ritchin's redefining and provocative book *After Photography* – I find it an interesting moment to be making photographs while teaching others to do the same. It seems to me that for the first time in my generation – that I actually wasn't sure if I was teaching, or being taught. Or maybe just simply there's a chance for Tabula Rasa – a clean slate where no one way of making photos was

privileged over another. At the same time, it has caused me to reconsider my past ways of thinking – to look anew at my seminal sources to see if they do indeed still apply - to re - examine some fundamental ideas, instead of casting them aside, outright.

Written in the short time between his mother's death and his own in 1980, by writing *Camera Lucida*, Barthes may have found some comfort by investigating his complex relationship with photography. This book was, and still is to some extent, unlike any other treatise on photography. Seemingly grounded in the personal, in the ruminations of loss and grief, Barthes situated our relationship with the photograph as an intimate act of grieving - as an act of trying to conjure what has been into the present - OR to locate the viewer's present in the photographs' past.

We may appear to be carrying on a conversation with the subject of the photograph, when in actuality, we are carrying on this conversation with our way of seeing, our way of processing visual information - with the photograph itself. Not with the subject of the photograph. In some ways, we are connecting not only to the past that is embedded in the photograph, but the "object-ness" of the photograph itself...the *thing* that it is. It's materiality.

4.

"What I do, which I have never let anyone know, is I close my eyes every time I have to do something practical apart from daily chores everyone has, and I picture how my father would have done it or how he actually did do it while I was watching him, and then I copy *that* until I fall into the proper rhythm, and the task reveals itself and grows visible, and that's what I have done for as long as I can remember, as if the secret lies in how the body behaves towards the task at hand, in a certain balance when you start, like hitting the board in a long jump and the early calculation of how much you need, or how little, and the mechanism that is always there in every kind of job; first one thing and then the other, in a context that is buried in each piece of work, in fact as if what you are going to do already exists in its finished form, and what the body has to do when it starts to move is to draw aside a veil so it all can be read by the person observing."

- from *Out Stealing Horses*, by Per Petterson

5.

When I began working towards the body of images that would eventually make up the *gun shy* and *spent* shows, it occurred to me that I had become more curious about not just *what* to photograph, but how to go about it. For the first time in my almost 25 years of making photographs I was technologically challenged. Ever since my slow transformation from carefully toned Black and White wet darkroom prints to full on color digital prints I shot film. Not for purely Luddite reasons, but because I like the series of moves from one set of processes to the next. I liked rolling the film in the

darkroom (what if I dropped it, and the damaged results yielded something I could use?). I found the use of contact sheets satisfying. I became for a time, more interested in the spaces between images in the rows of 5 than the actual pictures I took. I liked seeing the image in negative form first, than in it's positive on the contact sheet. The pictures seemed more mysterious because of it. They seemed (and *were* because of it) less tangible, and even less fixed. I think that's why - in the end – my photographs become very object oriented.

6.

When importing landscape footage from Scotland into the computer in 2001, then subsequently examining it, I noticed a corrupted frame amongst the hundreds I looked at. By corrupted frame, I mean a scrambled, abstracted image embedded and surrounded by more representational images. For example, in one second of footage of the Scottish landscape, (18 frames), there was this one frame of digital noise. Most of the time, this frame would be discarded. A mistake. I saw this as an opportunity to synthesize some of my ideas on the process and materiality of how images are made.

The title, *how to survive your own death* came about after a conversation with the poet Bernard Welt. We had been talking about how we sometimes are more invested in the making of something than in the finished result. This led to a conversation about the nature of photography. How we look at photographs and, while knowing it is a piece a paper with ink or chemicals on it, are easily transported to the very place and time that the photograph represents. Photographs have the potential to transcend a particular fixed place or time. Photographs embed time, freeze it, and carry it forward. Each time it is looked upon, it lives, with new eyes giving life to the fixed image. This is most common with family snaps, and it was in that spirit that I wanted the *how to survive your own death* series to be indicative of.

7.

Brian Dillon, editor of the magazine *Cabinet*, wrote a quiet, meditative memoir in 2005, about clearing out his parents' home after their death. Called, *In the Dark Room*, pertinently enough, it is also a reiteration in part, of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (which is roughly Latin for "Light Room"), and its' struggle with memory and the photograph. Dillon writes, "The photograph rehearses with uncanny accuracy the clarity of images of my parents as I recall them. My parents' remembered features, their hands, their hair – hover – in my memory, just above their photographic doubles."

This "hovering", more important – this perceived "doubling" of the memory and the photograph is the place, the site, if you will, that the photograph gains its resonance – it's persistence.

8.

When planning the shows that are *gun shy* and *spent* respectively, I wanted to exhibit new work and work from the *how to survive your death series* together for a couple of reasons – firstly to create a visual narrative for the viewer as they walked in and through the show. I wanted the color - the abstracted bursts - to set the tone, both formally and conceptually, by establishing the disintegration of the image as the crux of the show.

Over the past three years, I have spent a great deal of time and thought considering the ideas of nostalgia and memory, and how they are embedded in the practice of photography. This has led me to again - examine the materiality of the medium. This coincides with what is probably the most significant shift in how photographs are made and shared: digital media. The influx of digital media, and the transfer of information via 1s and 0s has seriously undermined our understanding of what exactly constitutes the materiality and indeed, the concepts of a photograph.

Is it the tools, the equipment, the paraphernalia such as cameras, film, paper, chemistry, hard drives, monitors, printers, running water and the like, or is it the unique occurrence of time and light - as suggested earlier - in conjunction with the interaction and engagement with a subject? Indeed, are the tools and gadgets the true subject of photography, while what it represents just residue?

This may seem beside the point, but with the current trend to take all forms of information, whether visual or sound-based, and convert them to 1s and 0s, and push them through the same portal aka some form of the computer screen - thus rendering everything in the same experiential realm, I feel it is a vital point to carefully consider forms and methods of working.

In his recent book, "Capturing Sound", Mark Katz makes many interesting and provocative statements: the general premise being that advances in music making and composing lies not only with the musician and composer, but more tellingly, in the continued advancement in tools and technology. Composers such as Stravinsky, Louis Armstrong, and The Beatles, all crafted songs to *fit* the technology of the time. The CD itself was developed to be able to hear Beethoven's 9th symphony from start to finish without interruption, hence the seemingly arbitrary time of 72 minutes of sound on one CD. The 3 minute pop song is not a product of our collective A.D.D. – but more tellingly - the amount of time that would fit on one side of the early 10" 78rpm record recordings...thus "All the Single Ladies" by Beyonce from 2008 has more in common with Stravinsky's "Serenade for Piano" from 1925, than you'd think.

9.

"I think that every format really is a different way of listening. If you take a different sort of psychological stance to it-- like, I think the transition from vinyl to CD definitely marked a difference in the way people treated music. The vinyl commands a certain kind of reverence because it's a big object and quite fragile so you handle it rather carefully, and it's expensive so you pay attention to how it's looked after. And, of course, very importantly, it comes in 20-minute chunks, and after 20 minutes you have to do something-- listen to it again or whatever. So, I think it's a big difference from having a CD, which you can play on random shuffle and which is going to play for an hour or more. And then, of course, that's quite different from downloads, where you can listen infinitely without knowing often what you're listening to." - Brian Eno

10.

What did Roland Barthes find while looking at the image of his mother? Was it truth? Was it an answer to an unresolved dispute? Was it peace of mind? Was it the sense that he was not only looking at an image of his mother, but a premonition of what was to become of himself? Could it have been the realization that though we all eventually leave this physical world - that what is left behind, the materiality of the images, the pictures, the art - the visual residue we pass to others - holds a kind of knowledge unlike anything else, tangible or intangible?

11.

"Back in the envelope went the fuzzy, too-red pictures except for one which I tacked to my bulletin board as a reminder that photographing the landscape is a triangulation involving three mysterious variables: time, place, and people." – from *Landscape* by Ferdinand Protzmann