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INVESTIGATION OF THE HOME: A METAPHOR FOR BELONGING

by

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B.F.A. University of South Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2013

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Figure 1: Untitled #26, A Home Divided Series, Photo by Author, 2012.

ABSTRACT

The research done for this investigation deals with both the motivation of the artist, the personal history and the individual's artistic process. This process is examined through two bodies of art work dealing with the home as a metaphor. The shared themes of belonging, loss and longing are further reinforced by "visual cues" represented in the photographic works. For the *Home Divided* series, I approached the style of the photographs and the subject matter through indexical photographs of multi-unit homes and the visual representation of a distinct and bilateral division of the structure. The imagery presented in this series deals directly with the historical use of landscape in photography and the house or home as the subject. This series is motivated by my personal experience with a fractured family unit and experience with the fractured notion of the home. The second part of this study examines and records the artist's exploration of space and surroundings in the series, *Chez Moi*. The images document occupied structures at night with a visual focus being on a light source within the structure. There are shared elements that exist between both bodies of work that elicit feelings of searching and belonging. The separation from the viewer and the subject is further reinforced by the layer created that separates the photographer from the subject through the lens of the camera. The concept of the *flâneur*, introduced by Charles Baudelaire is an integral part of the artist's process, finding a sense of place and belonging in a foreign environment.

The written portion of this investigation gathers materials and information that deals with the conception of the family unit and the house that is literally, and metaphorically, utilized in the notion of *home*. This focus on the structure as a metaphor for *home* has further reaching

implications than the structure itself. Findings show that a Western view of community and belonging is rooted in a place of stability in one's community. The basis for personal growth within that community has a direct impact on an individual's development in it. (Goldburgh, 67)

The fractured nature of my experience and emotions tied with the notions of home, are expressed through both A *Home Divided* and the *Chez Moi* series photographic series. Within this investigation there are references to the artist's memories and experiences that are in contrast and discord with the traditional concept of acceptance and belonging.

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INTRODUCTION



Figure 2: #4124, House Hunting Series. Photo, Todd Hido, 1976. <http://www.toddhido.com>

Todd Hido is an American photographer who has had a significant influence on my work. Hido's use of the landscape and structures to investigate his issues of loss and abandonment is evident in his body of work *Fragmented Narratives, 1999-2003*. Lucy Lippard explains in her book, Lure of the Local, published in 1982, how Hido utilizes familiar landscapes to elicit an emotional response from a relatively banal image of landscape. The photographer's work

employees a combination of urban and suburban housing in America, which Hido produces as large traditional photographic prints that exhibit an evident luminosity.

"Hido's photographs reveal isolation and anonymity in contemporary suburbia. Eerily lit rooms and suddenly abandoned homes increase the effect of loneliness and loss."

(Lippard, 45)

There is a certain familiarity in his work that speaks directly to me as an artist. His use of one-point and two-point perspective often elicits an emotional response; this further engages the viewer with the subjects of the photograph, the building and the light source within. The building in the images creates a starting point for an implied narrative that opens the work to more than one meaning or interpretation. This open-endedness in his images allow the audience to identify with the structure as more than a house with a lit window, but as a metaphor for something more meaningful. I find that the distance from which Hido photographs further reinforces the distance he as an artist feels from these structures and their implied, unknown occupants. "Think of a traveler of a century ago, seeing a lit window up ahead on the lonely road and cheering up at the prospect of hospitality – that has vanished without a trace." "The lit window no stands between you and the unknown." (Merriam, 45)

Not only does Hido's work speak to me and my process, but his exploration of the landscape and ultimate discovery of subject matter runs parallel in some ways to my own artistic process. My determination of location and subjects for my work are a derivative of explorations of the neighborhoods and communities that surround me. My process begins by exploring my local community – one with which I feel no connection. The neighborhoods that I photograph are not my own but they serve as a platform as I search for a place to belong. Being the product

of a family that was often uprooted and transplanted, my sense of community and belonging is fragmented. In photographing these homes one might argue that the images are voyeuristic and intrusive. The line of thought discussed in Susan Sontag's book, On Photography is that the photographer is a predator and the camera lens acts as a scope to a rifle to select and capture its prey. (Sontag, 112) This is in conflict with my motivation. It is not my intention to intrude or pry, but to feel included or part of something that resonates inside me with each home I select to photograph. My motivation is to find a sense of place and belonging within a community that is foreign to me.



Figure 3: #31 chez moi, Series, Photo by Author, 2011.

INFLUENCES



Figure 4: *Splitting*, Gordon Matta-Clark, 1974. <http://www.davidzwirner.com>

Gordon Matta-Clark is an American born sculpturer and architect that utilized buildings to start a conversation about urban decay and landscapes of places that had lost their utility and importance.

“His best-known works of the '70s, including abandoned warehouses and empty suburban houses that he carved up with a power saw, offered potent commentary on both the decay of the American city and the growing sense that the American dream was evaporating.” (Ouroussoff, 75)

The subject for Matta-Clark in this series of work was the collapse of the Broadway Central

Motel on his cousin a year earlier. (Ouroussof, 77) The artist refers to the violence that surrounded the building creating the division in the structures. It was his experience that the roof over your head presents not a basis for stability but the potentiality of the structure to directly and indirectly destroy. (Lee, 12) Although the motivation for Matta-Clark was to engage the structure in a way to show instability and danger, I respond to the work in a different way. I find that the correlation lies in the division of the work, the physical manner in which the homes are divided. The bilateral nature of the separation speaks to me in a way that echoes my investigation of division within one household. My response to the work is a reflection of the fractured and unstable notion of home and community that I experienced growing up in a divided home. I found there was a disconnect between my idealized vision of family, and the reality of my own families circumstance.

There is an innate division architecturally designed into the homes I use as subjects of my photographs. The aggressive dividing seen in Matta-Clark's *Splitting*, is something done deliberately (see figure 4). Although both the divisions seen in Matta-Clark's work and in the *A Home Divided* series are intentional, their visual impact varies in subtlety. The immediacy of Matta-Clarks work is directly focused on the visual separation one side of the home has to the other. The emotional response to the work is immediate. It is my intention for the viewer to respond in a similar way, however my approach is less direct visually.

INSPIRATION

At an early age I found myself as many in Western society do, the product of a “broken home.” This dynamic led my family to relocate and move frequently throughout my childhood. This constant upheaval and relocation of community and friends left me with a fractured sense of what and where exactly my *home* was. The segmented nature of what my experience of community was has defined and carried over into my adult life and ultimately to my art practice. Lippard refers to this feeling as, "Finding a fitting place for oneself in a story." (Lippard, 12) This ultimately is a major motivating factor for both of the bodies of work referenced in this thesis and the conceptual fabric of my entire art practice.



Figure 5: *The Slide*, Death and Desires Series, Photo by Author 2008.

The cornerstone of my focus on personal experience was first discovered in an intermediate undergraduate photography class. The catalyst for one assignment was to develop a series inspired by the simple line; “Death, Dreams and Desires.” I was inspired to focus on issues of internal conflict caused by abandonment and to try to understand the impact of my father’s absence in my life. It wasn’t a conscious decision; I came to understand my motivations later on. The images I shot for the series are black and white and printed on matt paper which I hoped would add a quality of age to the images. I used a Holga toy camera, to photograph for this series, the amateur nature of the equipment referenced my youth – a time that I was trying to return to conceptually. There is a definite “look” that images have when shot with a Holga camera. The lens is plastic and there is no adjustment for aperture or focus and the images often have a vignette or darkening that clips the corners of the frame. The characteristic of the plastic lens often softens the focus of the image. This slightly soft focus helps to convey the notion of memory in the work. In various compositions I added life-size headshots of my father taken from my mother and father’s wedding photo. (Slide 5) This supported my method in creating a body of work that included my personal experiences within my family.

The chemical process of printing photographs is an intimate one. For this series, I used a private darkroom that measured four feet by ten feet. A small, dark place that I could go to and experience the images coming to life under developer and fix. The tactile nature of the printing process evokes a haptic relationship that a photographer has with a handmade print. For my process, this hands-on approach to printing is very important. It brought me closer to my subject matter with the care I took in printing these images. But it wasn’t until a group critique that I understood the impact of the work. I was asked to introduce my project and speak about my

inspiration for the series. I hadn't seen all of the prints hung together before that moment; it was then that I realized how powerfully these images spoke of my struggles as a fatherless son.

The essay, Lure of the Local by Lucy Lippard speaks about how childhood memories had a direct impact on her early work, "Yi-fu Tuan (the philosopher) says that the terrain of late childhood seems to penetrate our lives and memories most intensely." (Lippard, 67) The impact of my father's absence culminated, directly when I started to speak about the images in critique and began to get emotional as I explained the photographs in front of me. It was then that I realized how powerful art could be as an expression of one's inner self and emotions. I found that my own experience was my most powerful source of inspiration.



Figure 6: 6419 22nd Ave., John and Jennifer Cortez, 10/01/56 – 01/19/89, What's Left Behind Series, Photo by Author, 2008.

Following the above-mentioned series, I was compelled to explore the nature of my father's absence and how that affected my family's dynamic and ultimately my own experience. In my series, *Traces*, *What's Left Behind*, I wanted to approach the same subject matter in a more universal way. Rather than repurposed family photographs and personal objects I turned to something more relateable, a structure, a home, to act as a surrogate instead of very personal

objects. In doing so the next photographic series utilized houses as a framework on which to hang my issues of belonging, abandonment, and loss. “The concept of *home* goes much further than the walls that form it. The essence of *home* is the experiences and the memories contained therein.” (Lippard, 345) In this series, I photographed abandoned homes and a object found within the home. (Slide 6) The two corresponding images were presented as a diptych. In this way, the object serves as a surrogate for the families and a symbol for the individuals that lived there. I researched the last known occupants of the structures and utilized that didactic information to further push the absence of the identities defined by these structures. The relation of the occupants’ names and address to the object and house provided a starting place for the narrative I hoped the work would produce. The precedent that the *Traces* series provided for me is a direct catalyst for the two bodies of work presented in this paper. The subject matter of the *Chez Moi* series and the images from *A Home Divided*, both visually examine and challenge my concept of home and what the structures personify, metaphorically. “The image of the city formed by the flâneur should be part of his/her reflexivity; it hermeneutically reveals both modernity and the projections, inhibitions, repressions and prejudices of the flâneur” (Baudelaire, 64).

THE FLÂNEUR

Flanerie is the activity of a person strolling and actively observing in order to experience an unfamiliar place. The flâneur is the person engaged in this act. Charles Baudelaire is credited with coining the term flâneur in his collection of essays “The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays” Walter Benjamin’s response to Baudelaire’s poetry and observations of 19th century France prompted scholarly interest as an emblematic figure of urban, modern experience. (Shaya, 109) The motivation for Benjamin and Baudelaire in their writing differs from the contrast or comparison approached in my work. The essence of the flâneur is a key part of my experience in a new environment. Much like Baudelaire’s experiences through the streets of Paris, I am looking for belonging and a place to make me feel the essence of home in a community that I see as foreign.

“The stroll of the flâneur in the *derive* [literally: ‘drifting’], is not purposefully from A to B, not along the boulevard to the les Grands Magasins, and not initially up and down the Arcades. In the *derive* the explorer of the city follows whatever cue, or indeed clue, that the streets offer as enticement to fascination.” (Tester, 133)

Drawing from the inspiration of these writings and my own personal experience, I find that my process of “strolling” neighborhoods immerses me in the experience of searching for a place to belong. A sense of belonging comes from the familiarity of these homes and their relation to one another. As innocent as my motivation and practice within these communities is

there may be other unintended viewpoints such as intrusion or voyeurism that may be associated with my practice of flanerie. Susan Sontag argues quite strongly that the mere act of photography is predatory and voyeuristic.

“The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, and cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world 'picturesque'.” (Sontag, 13) Although I do consider my practice as somewhat voyeuristic, I contend that there is no predation in my intent. These homes and experiences help to ground my identity and belonging in unfamiliar surroundings and a location that I cannot call home, but yet long to.

THE PROCESS: A HOME DIVIDED



Figure 7: *Untitled #26*, A Home Divided Series, Photo by Author 2012.

My approach to my next series “A Home Divided” was that of an observer of the division found inherent to duplex homes. To utilize metaphorically the divided nature of multiunit homes, I hoped to introduce the idea of the broken family and family dysfunction as a representation of the division that I have experienced. My approach to creating these images is a traditional one. The photographs are captured in one point perspective and with a deep depth of field. This flattens the image and heightens the importance of the structure. The horizon line is almost centered directly, thus placing the structure in the vanishing point further heighten the importance of the subject. All of my work is captured using a medium format film camera. It is

important for my practice to be very deliberate and patient when choosing my subject matter and the information that surrounds it. Using film ties me directly to the precious nature of the image and the tangibility of the negative. It is this correlation between my method of capture and the stability of the subject that tie me so closely to the images. When using, film as opposed to digital capture, inherently consumes more time in image preparation. It is this slowing down of the process that allows me to form a unique and emotional bond with each structure. This gives me a sense of ownership and ultimately a relationship with the homes.

There are conscious decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of visual elements that make up the photograph. The elements that distract the viewer from the home as a focal point must be distilled out. The time of day and weather conditions are technically and emotionally key components in the conveyance of mood. The banality of the series is intentional, I control the color and atmosphere or environment surrounding the home to emphasize a sense of bleakness. For this body of work I found that the overcast and cloudy skies create an introduction to the underlying emotional current seen in the work. There is an obvious separation that must be sensed and seen in the home for it to convey the intended emotion. As seen in figure 5, there is a distinct bilateral separation of the structure. The contrast of the brown and green paint show us instantly that there is a divide between the two sides of the home. The separation of driveways and the color cast of the cement further reinforces the segmentation of the structure. Although there are apparent differences in the frame, it is the subtle references that introduce an implied narrative to the image. On the left side of slide of figure 7, we see a lone, empty chair on the porch facing the right side of the frame. The chair serves as a visual element and catalyst for the viewer to create a narrative about isolation, longing and the relation to the

home and its occupants. To further the division, and implied narrative it carries, the facades of the homes also have received different treatments. The left side of the frame is open, vulnerable to the viewer. In contrast, the right side of the frame presents us with a less accessible space, closing off our access to the doorway. Foliage obscures most of the homes critical elements that can be seen on the right side of the frame. The window and door of the dwelling are hidden, the curb is filled with detritus and stands in contrast to the opposite side of the photograph. The obvious and subtle cues act as signifiers of my experience in a fractured and divided home.

CHEZ MOI



Figure 8: *Chez Moi*, Photo by Author, 2012.

In this early investigation I was focused on what lay behind the windows it was the physiological terrain that existed there. It was not my intention to photograph through the blinds or in open windows to capture the actual occupants, but to isolate a shadow blocking the light, an artifact of what lay behind. Regardless if that silhouette is an actual person or a piece of furniture, it was a signifier to give some visual prompt to push an emotion behind the imagined happenings within the dwelling. The implications here were leading the work more into a less open ended, voyeuristic scope and one that I didn't think carried completely the feeling of longing and a narrative imagined by the viewer. I feel that the ambiguity of the interior was

more important than a single visually discernible silhouette being utilized in order to prompt a less directed reaction. The unknown landscape of the interior emphasized my attraction to the source of the light, not what obscured it. There is an old add campaign used by Motel 6, started in 1986, that says “We’ll leave the light on for you.” (Paulin, 12) This tag-line resonated with me as one of the anticipated return and a welcoming light guiding you home. The light source seen in the homes photographed speaks to me on a similar level in my practice, thus giving me a sense of place in the community. There was a familiarity to these houses, places that I did not recognize as my own home but one that represented that idea of home to me.

“The derive entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho-geographical effects; which completely distinguish it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll. In the derive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the attractions they find there.” (Debord, 112)

Once again I found the act of flanerier, introduced to me by the writings of Charles Baudelaire, was the starting point in my artistic process. The act of walking the streets and experiencing the community in that way is a common thread that links several bodies of work aforementioned in this thesis. The *Chez Moi* series is an evolution of me taking on the role of the flaneur to facilitate the creation of my photographs and the conceptual inspiration for my subject matter. There is a pace that is inherent to the act of walking the streets of the communities. The experience of walking as, opposed to driving past these homes is a different experience. Everything that surrounds me slows down and the subtle nuances that once went unobserved

were now the symbols that served as indicators in my investigation of home and belonging. In Society of the Spectacle by Guy Debord the author refers to a phosphorescent glow illuminating the windows of his neighbors, “There was what seemed as an imbalance of time, variable intensity of light an implied movement of the occupants within, with no resolution of their story.” (Debord, 112) It is this implied narrative that compels me to capture homes and a light source suitable to give enough indicators of the occupants, to personify its occupants.

Technically speaking, it was vital for me to reproduce the source of the light that drew me to the home in the first place. This light source is a vital element in conveying my concept to the viewer. Traditional printing methods seemed inadequate to have the same luminosity as the subject matter. I experimented with different types of printing media and traditional techniques, such as metallic paper and specialty printing papers, none of these options were effective in reproducing the intensity of the light source. I turned to a different type presentation utilizing the same principle element, light. My focus on the light source in my photographs was then reinforced by the LED lights that I chose to illuminate the reverse of the prints. I chose a material used in commercial light box advertising, Duratrans. Duratrans is an opaque printing medium that allows for light to be shown through it without the actual light being revealed. By selectively lighting the photographs I then could convey my experience with the homes to those viewing them. I had the ability to produce a similar involvement visually with the elements that attracted me to the home during my exploration of space.

The characteristic of light and the supporting visual information surrounding the homes I photograph helps to convey the visual space that attracted me to the structure originality. As seen in figure 8, small objects such as the statue of Saint Micheal and the ceramic bird bath help

to give the viewer a sense of the personality of the home owners. The treatment of the home itself is one that is feminine and somewhat delicate in its decoration. This creates a platform to identify with the structure as an extension of the occupants. Compositionally, the light source on the right of the frame is a visual starting point when navigating the photograph. This light source leads first to the statue and dominate wall of the structure. My motivation in selecting the homes for the series is primarily the light source and the characteristic of the light within. In this example the light source emanating from the window causes reflections in the glass and a scattering of light as it hits the walls of the structure. The light has a character of its own that is further complimented by the actual light source that I have utilized in presentation to further strengthen the importance of the light in the images.

The home serves as a metaphor for something much larger than the place that we store our belongings and sleep in. It is a metaphor for security, stability and safety, something that I searched for conceptually in my entire body of work. In this case the home serves as a framework for me to hang my ideas of belonging and longing, identity both as a member of a community and a member of my own family.

CONCLUSION

Though my investigation in to the home as a metaphor for belonging, I found that it has strengthen my conceptual motivation of using personal experience as the basis for my practice. The absence of my father at an early age and the circumstances that surrounded being a product of a single parent home gave me a fractured concept of home and belonging. This need for belonging and to feel rooted with in my community and home manifests itself in many ways though out my body of work both now and in my earlier work in undergraduate study.

In the *Home Divided* series I was motivated by the visual cues contained in the sculptural work of Gordon Matt-Clark. Although our motivations and treatment of the homes was quite different, the metaphor contained in the division of the structures spoke to me in the same way. The physical division of the home echoed my experience with a fractured sense of belonging and an absence with in household. The act of experiencing communities that surround me, ones that I feel no connection with has been an integral part of my practice. This act of strolling the streets to experience and be a part of the communities I live in was introduced to me by the writings of Charles Baudelaire.

Again I found that the act of flaneire again was the starting point for my series *Chez Moi*. In this series I found my self compelled and inspired by the light sources I found emanating from the windows of homes at night. The artist Todd Hido in his series *Fractured Narratives*, I found a contemporary artist utilizing lights in homes at night as subject matter to compliment a different conversation about community. I found that his images were compelling but did not truly translate the luminosity of the light source within the structure. The experience of the light in the homes I photographed was vital to convey my experience to the viewer in the *Chez Moi*

series. The psychological terrain held within these structures was personified by my use of the light source as a surrogate for what lay behind the window. The narrative held within the interior of the home was further made a focal point in my images by the use of a real light source. The back lighting of my work allowed for my experience to be related to the viewer in an effective and inviting manner. The images invited a closer examination of the piece by its audience. This engagement with my work and subject matter I hope conveys my inspiration for the viewer and my desire to have them a part of that experience.

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