2008

Without A Camera

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WITHOUT A CAMERA

by

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ABSTRACT

The method for creating my art is a matter of experimental process, manipulation of photographic elements, and time spent. I am a photographer in a digital age that does not use a camera. My moment of creativity occurs without the snap of a shutter, but relies on my understanding and control of the chemical components of photography.

My work deconstructs the notion of duplication commonly found in photography. The procedure can be repeated but the results are variable. The process of creating my work often results in a multitude of prints, but the pieces that I select as art capture a number of instinctive characteristics which convey an emotion or message to me.

When I present my photographs I offer the viewer an experience—an opportunity to see the work through my mind’s eye as it makes sense to me. It is within this open dialogue that the work is complete: part process, part intuitive participation.
For Kathryn, My Dearest Friend
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ vii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 2: MATERIALS AND METHODS ................................................................. 3

  Physical and Chemical Process ................................................................................. 3
  Intuitive Process ........................................................................................................ 4
  Titles ......................................................................................................................... 6
  The Grid .................................................................................................................... 7
  The Installation ......................................................................................................... 9

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ............................................................... 11

  Summer 2006: ....................................................................................................... 11
  Fall 2006: ............................................................................................................... 13
  Spring 2007: ......................................................................................................... 14
  Summer 2007: ....................................................................................................... 18
  Fall 2007: ............................................................................................................... 20
  Spring 2008: ......................................................................................................... 23

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 25

LIST OF REFERENCES .................................................................................................. 26
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Wheat Field With Crows, Vincent van Gogh, 1890 ............................... 6
Figure 2: Untitled (6/19/2007, 01:40), (Gelatin Silver Print, 2007) ......................... 7
Figure 3: Installation shot from UCF Juried Show, March 2008 ............................... 9
Figure 4: Early experiments with exposed paper .................................................... 12
Figure 5: Early experiments with exposed paper .................................................... 13
Figure 6: Two untitled prints created on 11/02/2006 (Gelatin Silver Print, 2006) ...... 14
Figure 7: Untitled (1/29/2007, 10:02), (Gelatin Silver Print, 2007) ......................... 15
Figure 8: Untitled (3/19/2007, 11:21) and Untitled (4/23/2007, 02:19), (Gelatin Silver
Print, 2007) ........................................................................................................ 16
Figure 9: Jackson Pollock Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950 (1950) .................... 17
Figure 10: Untitled (3/11/2007, 02:11) and Untitled (3/12/2007, 01:23), (Gelatin Silver
Print, 2007) ........................................................................................................ 18
Figure 11: Untitled (5/27/2007, 2:22) and Untitled (6/1/2007, 10:36), (Gelatin Silver
Print, 2007) ........................................................................................................ 18
Figure 12: Untitled (6/18/2007, 3:19) and Untitled (6/13/2007, 9:51), (Gelatin Silver
Print, 2007) ........................................................................................................ 19
Figure 13: Untitled (5/9/2007, 02:24), (Gelatin Silver Print, 2007) ......................... 20
Figure 14: Untitled (9/11/2007) and Untitled (9/7/2007, 11:48), (Gelatin Silver Print,
2007) ................................................................................................................. 21
Figure 15: Installation shot from Winter Park Library solo show, November 2007 ...... 22
Figure 16: Installation shot from Winter Park Library solo show, November 2007 ...... 22
Figure 17: Installation shot from MFA Thesis Show, March 2008 ......................... 24
Figure 18: Installation shot from MFA Thesis Show, March 2008.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In our society, digital technology dominates our way of life. We can’t even go to the grocery store without checking our email, finding out who is online or listening to any musical album ever released. We want information quick and the technology to be even quicker. The struggle between non-digital and digital creation has created a fissure in the art world. Art is the product of human activity and perception with the intent of rousing the human senses as well as the mind. It transmits emotions and/or ideas. And although digital art can rouse the observer, my art is a response to the removal of the literal human touch from photography.

It can be argued that photography has always been predisposed for the digital shift. Photography has been evolving since its earliest foundations in the 1800s. Since its inception, it has been used to record events like births, deaths, and other momentous occasions, and it wasn’t until the middle of the last century that photography was allowed by a wide audience into the world of fine art. But for many artists, the process of working with the photograph, and physically manipulating the image was just as important as capturing it. Nowadays, though, cameras are considered the “extra” on things like phones, music playback devices and other compact, portable technology. So for most photography practitioners, the less time one must spend producing the image, the better. With countless darkrooms around the world closing down their wet facilities to make way for digital labs, the “hands-on” science of photography is endangered. It is hard to believe that future generations of artists may never get developer on their hands or breathe in the vinegar smell of the darkroom. It’s unfortunate that, for many students,
the gray tonal gradation traditionally created by chemical reactions on a gelatin silver print will be simulated by a computer’s printer ink.

But all is not lost. There has been a resurgence of historic photographic techniques in the art world by such artists as Adam Fuss, Susan Derges, Steve Pippin and Abelardo Morell. Although their techniques of creating their work differ from my methods, they have all chosen to forgo a complete shift to digital techniques and instead explore the medium from its roots. I join the ranks of these artists to capture not only my own impressions of art in the new millennium, but to preserve the integrity of a classic form. Indeed, engineers can design an animal’s habitat in a zoo, and skilled craftsmen can copy a famous painter’s work stroke for stroke, but there’s something innately, fundamentally comforting to know the “real” thing is present. Surely someone will be able to recreate the look of my art in a computer, but what I seek to achieve is the genuine artifact – a full realization of the interaction between the artist, the chemicals, the paper, and light.

I play several roles in my art – a scientist with repeatable procedures, a curator and guardian of the craft, and an artist whose pieces are one of a kind. My work not only seeks to protect the realm of traditional chemical photo processes and physical contact of the photographer to photograph, but seeks to add another dimension – one that not only deconstructs the definition of a photograph, but also invites the viewer to be conscious of what and how we see, and how images trigger and shape our emotions and understandings of the world. I believe artists can still have a “hand” in this digital age – preserving traditions, and breaking rules simultaneously.
CHAPTER 2: MATERIALS AND METHODS

Over the course of the three years in graduate school, my materials and methods have evolved, but the fundamental elements of photography remain. The supplies include: photo chemicals, light sensitive paper, plastic trays, water, toners, and light (both artificial and natural). Note: each of my works begin as an experiment without the use of a camera. The process is two-part: first, the actual creation of the works, through experimental, step-by-step processes that can be duplicated, but with results that are predictable only to a certain degree; and, second, my conscious organization of the resultant prints to my satisfaction. It is when the technical merges with the intuitive that the work takes form.

Physical and Chemical Process

To begin, I thoroughly clean the work area to ensure that the trays, work surfaces and chemical containers are free of dust and foreign materials that might affect the reactions. I prepare each of the darkroom chemicals – developer and fixer, which are made of a variety of highly sensitive chemicals, diluting them with water to a concentration of my choosing. I pre-expose the photo paper, which carries a light-sensitive emulsion similar to film, however, the paper is much slower to react to light and finer-grained, allowing crisper detail to the image. A majority of papers with which I work use halides of silver bromide on a resin-coated paper base. Silver halides are compound salts of silver (silver bromide or silver chloride) that break down under the introduction of light to form tiny grains of black metallic silver. Even after exposure, the emulsion still appears blank, or
white, until the developer is introduced. When the developer is added the areas that have been exposed to light gradually darken. Silver bromide paper, given full development (placed in developer for the set amount of time as directed), produces a silver image that is neutral black in appearance. Silver chloride paper produces a brown-black warmer image that develops quicker than one on silver bromide paper. Warm tone paper, also called chloro-bromide paper, is coated in an emulsion containing both silver chloride and silver bromide. If it is under-developed or a slow acting developer is used, the print will have a distinct brownish tonal range. One can therefore control the image’s color by type and degree of development. Additional changes can be made using color toning in order to modify the image further. My understanding of the chemistry of photography is similar to an architect’s understanding of mechanics: without the basic knowledge of the components involved, we are unable to enter the creative and intuitive processes.

**Intuitive Process**

Initially, my experiments involved instinctive choices regarding the materials I used and the timing of the chemical reactions and exposure. I flipped the prints around. Some stuck together. Sometimes I separated them. Other times I left them to react with each other. Once, I mixed the chemicals in such a way – ignoring the directions – that the combination released visible fumes. When I was finished adding the chemicals to the paper, I didn’t know what to expect.

However, with my work today, I have a general idea of what will happen when I allow certain sequences to occur. For instance, I typically start out with an empty tray, and
insert a stack of 12 to 15 pre-exposed papers at a time. The papers’ exposure to light may be for only seconds, or for several minutes. Thus, the developer is the dependent variable in the reaction. Without the developer, the paper, whether exposed or unexposed, will stay white. The stacked papers are usually a mixture of sheets, both emulsion side up and emulsion side down, many facing each other. Then, I select a developer, which I place in a 500 mL measuring pitcher, and pour a small amount over the top of the stack. I will then pick up the tray and rotate it around, allowing the developer to roll away from its original location. Usually then I pick up the prints, and rearrange them within the stack. Where the developer was directly poured onto the paper – and the paper was most saturated – the result is the darkest shade. Where the developer did not reach the paper at all – the result is the lightest, or the untouched white color of the paper. The gradation between light and dark occurs for a number of reasons. For one, if the emulsion sides of two pieces of paper are touching each other the developer may seep between them and slowly crawl through the fibers creating a gradual range of tones. Likewise, if either side of a piece of paper rests on top of the emulsion side of another, the developer runs off the edge and leaves a distinct line on the bottom print. When I feel the movement of the papers is complete, the prints are then placed into the fixer.

In the fixer, undeveloped halides convert into complex, invisible silver salts, and the image is “locked in” and will not be affected by light. In other words, if I should decide to affect the image further, by adding more developer or introducing light to the paper, I will do so prior to applying the fixer. The byproducts, silver salts, diffuse from the emulsion partly into the fixer and partly into the following wash stage. Washing the
prints in water removes remaining soluble chemicals leaving the print with a black and silver image. I use a squeegee on the large prints and then hang them to dry in a negative dryer while smaller pieces are run through a print dryer.

**Titles**

I record the time when I am finished with the chemical process as a means of distinguishing one print from the other. By placing a word or phrase onto my work I might instill a false thought or emotion onto my audience. To clarify my position, I use an example from John Berger’s book *Ways of Seeing* (1990). He presents a reproduction of a Van Gogh (Figure 1) and asks the reader to stare at the picture and then turn the page. On the following page, the same reproduction is presented with text below it telling the reader that this was Van Gogh’s last painting before ending his own life. The words that followed the image have undeniably changed its meaning.

![Wheat Field With Crows, Vincent van Gogh, 1890](image_url)

**Figure 1: Wheat Field With Crows, Vincent van Gogh, 1890**
The Grid

I am often asked why I create the largest of my pieces at the scale I do. The reason is both practical and personal. First, I am fond of balance and conscious of magnitude. I find something interesting about the perfection of a square, with two like sides. And since the majority of the prints I combine start out at the size of eight inches by ten inches, there are only a few options I have available to create a perfect square (and fit in the confines of most gallery spaces) without cutting the paper: 1) a 40-inch by 40-inch (5 prints across and 4 down), or 2) an 80-inch by 80-inch (10 prints across and 8 prints down). The larger of the two simply communicates to me more so than the smaller. In most venues where I have shown these installations, the piece usually fills the floor-to-ceiling space, creating a striking presence for the viewer. As for the smaller of the pieces (Figure 2) I create – the diptychs, triptychs, or other groupings – I find the prints contained therein more intriguing on a smaller scale, or create them specifically to work together.

Figure 2: Untitled (6/19/2007, 01:40), (Gelatin Silver Print, 2007)
Another consideration before completing the prints is whether or not I intend them to tie in with the adjacent prints. Some of my works involve a set of individual prints that are like pieces to a puzzle. When arranged together, the forms on each of the prints seem to organically flow from one sheet to the next. To create these, instead of layering the papers in a tray as described earlier, I lay multiple sheets in a larger tray side-by-side and then continue the chemical procedure. Most of my works, however, are an organization of 80 prints (the “80 by 80s”) in a grid in which none of the prints literally connects to those surrounding it.

Despite “expert” literature that instructs us on the conventions of balance and design, there is something innate to every person that tells us what just looks “right.” This is the intuition I use to assemble the “80 by 80s” (Figure 3) in their final composition. There is no real rhyme or reason other than the fact that when I’ve finished placing the prints in the order that the viewer sees, it feels complete. Perhaps it is the balance of color and contrast, with an even distribution of dark and light areas, or, perhaps, it is the sense of movement and harmony in the overall grid. And the arrangement does make a difference. To illustrate this, I share the anecdote from an exhibition before which my wife assisted me in the hanging of four “80 by 80s.” After completing the installation, I looked back at the walls, the four pieces, with their 320 individual sheets of paper, and noticed something was wrong. Unbeknownst to my wife, she had switched the placement of two side-by-side prints within one of the pieces (or, perhaps, she did it to
test me). I instantly recognized the inaccuracy, and put the prints in their correct place. How do I know what’s right? It’s hard to explain, but I know when “right” is achieved.

Figure 3: Installation shot from UCF Juried Show, March 2008

The Installation

Over the two years during which my “cameraless” photography has evolved thus far, I have attempted to keep the method for hanging the images somewhat incidental. It is my intent for the viewer’s consciousness to remain unfettered by the hardware involved. For instance, I have never shown my experimental pieces in a frame, under glass, or matted, although my choices for presentation have changed over the years. At first, I mounted the pieces on MDF (medium-density fiberboard), and then foam core board. The
diptychs, triptychs, and other smaller pieces are still typically mounted using foam core board, primarily due to its practicality – it is lighter and more portable than MDF.

Ultimately, though, for the “80 by 80s” I have chosen to work with common clear push pins, placing them at the top and bottom centers of the individual prints contained therein. While this may seem common or unrefined to some viewers, it has become a functional part of my work – a primitive means to an end.
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of my cameraless photography experiments represents a two-year journey from a happy accident to a polished presentation. Each semester’s work references the previous semester’s discoveries and adds to them, maintaining the assertion that this work cannot and should not be created without the physical contact of artist to art. Although there will never be the decisive moment when this work has finished evolving, I am comfortable in saying that I have organized it to a point of closure for myself, for now. Of course, this closure is not permanent and experimentation for me is both fascinating and inescapable.

Summer 2006:

When I first began this process, I was already working towards a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the Computer at the University of Central Florida (UCF), and was working as a Lab Instructor for the Full Sail Real World Education Black-and-White Photography class. My previous experience and interests included film and video, and traditional photography. In fact, I had already completed two semesters at UCF with photography as my medium, using both film and digital cameras. Luckily, my curiosity, and displeasure with letting supplies go to waste led me, quite by accident, to a breakthrough in my academic and art career.

In the summer of 2006, I collected discarded paper left behind by my students, knowing
that the paper was costly, and would end up in the trash anyway. Unsure of the integrity of the paper for reuse, I decided to test a few pieces by dipping it into the developer. To my delight, an unusual and unexpected image appeared on the exposed paper (Figure 4 and 5).

![Figure 4: Early experiments with exposed paper](image)

The discovery of these images on reclaimed photo paper opened my eyes to a world of possibilities. Unlike paintings or illustrations, photography’s final product is commonly an image that can be duplicated multiple times from one negative. The technique I had discovered, however, was exciting and new, breaking the rules what is considered photography. But, after all, the process still involved the conventions of photography – except for the camera. In truth, I had no idea if the art world was familiar with, or even interested in, this approach at the time. I didn’t know how these creations would be received or critiqued, but I felt complete artistic freedom.
Like an unearthed treasure, I only shared my discovery with a few people, some of whom enjoyed the art and others who scoffed. But before I would share it with my fellow students or academic advisors, I felt it necessary to understand my own process and to develop a sort of standard operating procedure for creating the images.

Fall 2006:

During the first weeks of the Fall 2006 semester I presented my new photographs (Figure 6) to my classmates and professors. Simply put, the response was great. Everyone was enthusiastic, intrigued, and encouraging, but they were not sure why they liked it. Was it my techniques that they liked? Was it the depth and texture of the paper? These unknown factors guided me forward and gave me questions to solve.
I was offered some old, out-of-date paper that was larger than the eight by ten inch paper I had previously used, and my work progressed.

With larger paper, my list of variables grew. The increased dimensions of the paper made it possible for the developer liquid to flow further, which meant more surface area upon which to create an image. A number of my classmates and professors suggested I expand the idea of size and shape to ones not typically seen in the photography world – something other than the usual rectangles.

**Spring 2007:**

I approached the Spring 2007 semester with an impetus to magnify the size and impact of my new “experimental photography.” In order to stretch out and increase the size of my “canvas,” I bought a large tarp and spread it out on the darkroom floor. I then carefully, but randomly, laid out 80 sheets of exposed 8-inch by 10-inch photo paper. In the dim, red light of the darkroom, I saw my first large scale piece come into existence.
My first “80 by 80” installation (Figure 7) commanded attention. Despite its collective nature, the whole piece provided more visual interest to each individual component. The viewer’s eye could flow easily through the piece, capturing the light and dark areas, the branching drip marks carving a natural path.

For the final critique of the semester I presented two “80 by 80s”,Untitled (3/19/2007, 11:21) and Untitled (4/23/2007, 02:19) (Figure 8), which faced one another in the empty white-walled gallery, approximately 20 feet apart. The resulting feedback by students and professors described how the pieces echoed each other and the contrast in light and dark gave the viewer a sense of tension and dialogue between the walls.
It was around this time that my work was compared by peers to the large and energetic works of Jackson Pollock (Figure 8), including the action required to create both types of works, the splashes and splatters of liquid on a surface, and even the coloration of the finished pieces. However, the pieces also contrasted each other: in medium – Pollock’s paint on canvas versus my photo chemicals on paper; in texture – Pollock’s three-dimensional versus my two-dimensional prints; and Pollock’s single large piece versus my mosaic combination piece. In fact, it became a deliberate and conscious act for me to deconstruct the pieces from their original layout on the tarp when the chemicals were applied, and reposition them for the installation. Had I not reconfigured the prints, carefully ensuring that most of them did not align color or shape with those adjacent, my work might resemble Pollock’s pieces even more. However, the comparison to this famous artist, I must add, is quite gratifying.
Although not displayed for the critiques, this same semester I worked with expanding not only the size and presentation, but also the color. Indeed, there is a certain limit in this realm when working solely with black and white images. I decided to experiment with photo toners (Figure 10). In order to add a new chemical dimension to the work I mixed the photo chemicals together in ways they shouldn’t be to see what would happen. A chemical and physical reaction occurred once the liquids combined. My print actually started smoking. Believing I might set the darkroom or myself on fire, this experience marked the first time I felt anxious about creating my art. From this point onward, I made the decision to always wear protective gloves, and work in as well a ventilated area as I could find.
Summer 2007:

During the Summer of 2007, I continued to explore the fluid element of the chemicals by using a painter’s brush to paint the chemical onto the exposed photo paper (Figure 11).
Even though these prints have more of a graphical realism to them than my other work, they demonstrate an important part of my experimentation process.

At this stage, my understanding and control of dilution, time, and amounts of chemicals were starting to direct my method of execution. Even after the success of the large tarp in the darkroom, I opted for working on a smaller scale, in plastic photo trays, perfecting the methods I use today. Figures 12 and 13 show some of the smaller combinations that I discovered while working towards my large installations.

Figure 12: Untitled (6/18/2007, 3:19) and Untitled (6/13/2007, 9:51), (Gelatin Silver Print, 2007)
Fall 2007:

With the methods I learned over the summer, I returned to the use of larger sheets of paper (20 by 24 inches). By stacking multiple 8 by 10-inch sheets on top of a large pre-exposed sheet of photo paper inside of tray, and applying the developer, a distinct impression of rectangles resulted on the surface.
In the exhibition of this series, many viewers asked if I was using a macro lens to photograph cups of ice (Figure 14). This response was interesting to my research, and proved to me that people seek an immediate explanation of the unknown.

At the end of this semester, I installed my 80 by 80s in the gallery space at the Winter Park Library, which was my first experience with showing four of my largest works simultaneously. It was a unique and interesting opportunity to see my pieces stand alone outside of the university setting (Figures 15 and 16).
Figure 15: Installation shot from Winter Park Library solo show, November 2007

Figure 16: Installation shot from Winter Park Library solo show, November 2007
Spring 2008:

My final semester at UCF has culminated with the final thesis show (Figures 17 and 18). With two years worth of work I had a decision to make on which pieces to include. The space I was allowed called for scale and this gave me the opportunity to install some of my larger works along with some of my smaller groupings. I selected three 80 by 80s and three groupings of six. The large pieces demonstrate my intuitive selection of the prints contained within the complete work, and the deliberate act of arranging each one of the prints in such a way that is pleasing to me. In this venue I am conscious of the importance of scale to these pieces. The best space in which to appreciate these pieces is one where the viewer can stand both up close and away from the pieces to capture their detail and magnitude. Up close, the viewer is drawn to the intricacy of the textures and gradations of tones. From afar, the viewer can appreciate the almost organic quality of the work, as if it was cut from stone, or reflected off the surface of water. These pieces sum up my work until now, with much promise for the future.
Figure 17: Installation shot from MFA Thesis Show, March 2008

Figure 18: Installation shot from MFA Thesis Show, March 2008
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The beauty of working in a medium for a number of years is the reexamination of the progress that has been made and the knowledge gained. I feel my work has a place in the international world of art because it not only invokes a response from the viewer, but is something meaningful to and defensible by its creator. And while it preserves a traditional process in the darkroom, it confirms that new progress can be made using old ways – ways that are seemingly becoming extinct. We all live in this ever changing world where information, whether wanted or needed, flies at us at the speed of light. But this process is to digital art what a stroll through a museum is to a student – a chance to disconnect from the present and let oneself appreciate what we take for granted: the methods that got us where we are today. Without this past knowledge, we can never fully utilize our future potential.
LIST OF REFERENCES


