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PLACE, SPACE, AND FORM CAPTURED
THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDITATION

by

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B.A. Rollins College, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the Computer
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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Buddhist philosophy, the photographic series *Architectural Zen* attempts to beautify banal and pragmatic architecture through limiting and preexisting artificial light conditions. The selective illumination of artificial light eliminates the non-essential details and enhances the pure forms and saturated color presented by the camera lens. This encourages the photographer and the viewer to enter a state of meditation.

The resulting process is similar to a Zen approach to image making. The ancient Zen artist’s compositions are strengthened by a meditation on form and subsequent elimination of the non-essential elements of the subject. Through embracing this Zen mentality and mindfulness, aspects of Eastern aesthetic and balance also appear through the work. The warm glow of artificial lights, long recessed shadows, and surreal colors contribute to the feeling of rest, contemplation, isolation, and solitude.

Although the work in *Architectural Zen* is not directly about Buddhist doctrines, the process of creating the art parallels the ideas and practices of Zen Buddhism and meditation, finding the Buddha nature of typically unappealing architectural forms during a different time of day.
For Mom and Dad
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: *Building the State*, Digital photograph, 2003

Our perception of the world changes at night. The serene nature of this time of day is quietly inspiring, and gives a new perspective even to the most urbanized surroundings. As the dark sky closes down and specific objects are illuminated by artificial light, the world can seem less intimidating to me. The responsibilities of a hectic life are eased by the solitude and contemplation during hours late at night and early morning. Photographing at night requires skill and the ability to see light in the right way to capture an intriguing and technically sound image at night, and a challenge to improve and grow as a photographer.

At night, the comforting glow of artificial lights, the long, recessed shadows, the compressed chromatic range, are all appealing to the eye, and even better exaggerated by the
sensor of a camera. The neon greens of grass are the most captivating, which encouraged me to photograph at night more often, and are also commonly featured in my recent nighttime works. Although the current work is typically captured when the sky lacks any color to emphasize the black recesses in the forms, images acquired at twilight are able to achieve a beautiful orange or blue glow. The photo entitled Building the State, in Figure 1, is the first example of this photographic discovery. While it was taken in 2003, the impact of this discovery was not evident until four years later at the start of the graduate program, when stressful situations encouraged finding a new form of relaxation.

The stresses of my everyday life can easily disappear behind the lens of a camera. The experience is similar to the practice of meditation, a ritual performed as a Zen Buddhist takes time for zazen. The Buddha’s teachings encourage meditative awareness during any activity and in any position, which could include bending over a tripod and peering through a lens. This meditative process of capturing images is crucial to the final appearance of the images. Since Buddhism is generally designed to be flexible in execution and practice, its mentality can be applied to making art (Fletcher 30). Through a clearer perspective and view of the world, photographing as a meditative practice can uncover new methods that enhance the creation of art.

The following chapters detail discoveries as the work progressed from a very straightforward visual representation of meditation and Buddha-nature to one of a much deeper comprehension and appreciation of Zen concepts.
Figure 2: Charlottesville Ramp, Digital photograph, 2003
CHAPTER 2: EARLY WORK DEVELOPMENT

“Manifest the ancient way and express the inexpressible.” (Fletcher 25)

In the initial stages of the work, the concepts and ideals of Zen Buddhism and meditation served as inspiration for the subject in both content and creative process, but without detail. As the work progressed, pinpointing and defining those specific personal beliefs became more essential to understand the greater purpose of the series. Works from the earlier series are influenced by an inexplicable feeling when the captured image was “Zen-like” or “just right.” This method was haphazard, difficult to achieve, and required a refined eye to understand how the camera would capture a scene. Through further refining one’s eye, the images begin to translate more successfully to the camera. This is evident in the progression from Buddhism in the Modern World to the Gas Stations at Night, which served as inspiration for the thesis series.

Buddhism in the Modern World

Figure 3: TV Examining, Digital photograph, 2007
The first series, *Buddhism in the Modern World*, depicts how a modern-day Buddhist can live today without sacrificing technology and contemporary ideals. Lit only by artificial and electronic light sources through inspiration by Matthew Pillsbury’s *Screen Lives* series, the images represent the ability to attain enlightenment, despite the impact of technology’s chaotic nature on our lives. Everyday activities expressed in this series include: watching TV, using the computer, using electric-powered kitchen devices, and playing video games.

As seen in Figures 3-4, the compositions of this series are relatively consistent, and feature the photographer as subject seated in half-lotus position. Cropping so the top of the photograph begins just below the nose, the subject’s eyes are excluded to emphasize the interaction with technology and the anonymity of the subject helps viewers place themselves into the scene. The images of similar nearly symmetrical compositions convey a sense of balance, express the importance of repetition in the practice of meditation, and foresee the eventual ability to meditate during any activity throughout the day.
Zen concepts remained a source of inspiration as a loose scholarly reference, a mood, an ideal, and a way of creating art. Interested not only in the Buddhist’s use of modern technology, this series aimed to conceptualize and present that anyone’s life could benefit from practicing specific elements of Zen. American artists in the 1960’s are proof that one doesn’t have to be from the East or a practicing Buddhist to apply the principles of Zen to everyday activities, including making art. John Cage served as an inspiration for his use of Zen in his “silent” musical pieces, emphasizing silence as emptiness and nondiscriminatory sound. As Frederic Leiberman stated, Cage felt “no need to adopt an entire system of aesthetics for the sake of a few of its principles” (9). Although he did not practice Zen, he used concepts of the philosophy to inform his work. Artists like Cage and writers of the ‘60s in the West appreciated Zen for its artful, poetic, and succinct verbalizations, and focused on it as a way of life.

_Buddhism in the Modern World_ finds a happy medium between the art of today and pure simplistic Buddhist-inspired art of Cage and Paik. It was not radical or revolutionary, but the series began to bridge photography and Zen through image and process. However, the concepts expressed in the this series required a less straightforward approach, since the extremely obvious representation of the figure meditating in this position seemed a bit too transparent. Exploration into different subject matter evolved from the figure to other elements of focus.
Outlets / Switches

Further experimenting with new subject matter, the next series *Outlets/Switches* stemmed from a fascination with the design of wall outlets, light switches, and wall fixtures. Particularly of interest are the household elements of an eccentric wealthy man’s, where the eclectic mix of furnishings includes stainless steel fixtures, white fixtures on blue textured walls, fixtures covered with white textured wallpaper, and each in very different lighting conditions. The most intriguing are those in natural light, particularly that illustrated in Figure 6, with the simple forms of the wall outlet.
The installation of these images played on the concept of perception in art with the images of life-size outlets, vents and switches blending in with the actual fixtures in a room. The light and shadow cast on the fixtures made them appear three-dimensional. The success of this series is attributed both to the near flatness of the original objects, as well as the medium. As Keith A. Boas stated, “Photography is the ideal medium in which to challenge assumptions, because of all art forms, it is one people most expect to represent reality… The creative photographer grapples with these expectations, shaping or altering reality by the way he or she approaches a subject” (Gross 61). As an experiment in transforming spaces through photography, this work greatly affects the current thesis series.

Interestingly enough, the process of photographing this work still has Zen undertones. The act of photographing fixtures on the wall is a play on the Zen practice of wall examining,
which has ranged in interpretation from more metaphorical meanings to “the suggestion that it refers to the simple physical act of facing a wall in cross-legged sitting posture,” in meditation (Broughton 67). The use of the term in this way is a satire on the purest literal definition of the act, examining the wall through the lens of a camera. As seen through this series, Zen-inspired themes continued to surface in the work.

Gas Stations at Night

Gas Stations at Night is the first attempt at achieving this vision, but without the figure. This series projects a vision of emptiness, solitude, and calmness, while still capturing the aura of the Buddhism in the Modern World series. The photographs emphasize the form of the space, the bright glow of electric lights, and the eerie nature of a seemingly deserted gas station, particularly seen in Figure 10. Patience and adaptability were essential to capturing the gas stations in the absence of humans. Figure 9 illustrates how the deep shadows, the contrast of the light and dark recesses of space, and the flattening quality of the artificial light create a mood that cannot be replicated any other time of day.

This series brings photography back to a simpler medium, focusing on the composition and technical precision of the images. In order to achieve my vision and retain image quality, photographing in low-level light requires a slow and methodical process that aligns with the photographic meditation in the past series. A nighttime focus and more methodical capture process differentiates Gas Stations at Night from Ed Ruscha’s snapshots in 26 Gasoline Stations, which served as inspiration for this series.
These images required planning in order to capture the emptiness of gas stations in a busy city, where people are constantly coming and going. This series began to shape visions of how to capture and portray a place or space. Figures 8, 10, and 11 are significant inspiration for the series. The next step was to seek out a subject matter: one less specific than gas stations, but with a more specific genre: architecture.

Figure 7: *Untitled*, Digital photograph, 2008

Figure 8: *Untitled*, Digital photograph, 2008
Figure 9: *Zazen 22*, Digital photograph, 2008

Figure 10: *Zazen 7*, Digital photograph, 2008
Figure 11: *The Oculus*, Digital Photograph, 2003

Figure 12: *Pittsburgh Steel*, Digital Photograph, 2003
CHAPTER 3: ARCHITECTURAL ZEN

“Form in emptiness and emptiness in form” (Fletcher 8)

Taken in 2003, Figures 12-13 represent photographs of eclectic Pennsylvania and Virginia architecture, which served as inspiration for an architectural focus. After moving to Orlando, the novelty of palm trees, warm weather, and urban sprawl quickly wore thin to reveal the city’s flat and banal nature, modern buildings, and monotonously repetitive housing complexes. Eventually, Orlando’s often-artificial scenery took on an entirely different mood when photographed in artificial light at night. Even the most beautiful cities by day take on a different life at night. These images are more dramatic, powerful, and expressive. The ability to see this light at night also further refined the ability to find a more powerful image in daylight. The images captured at night, however, are the most meditative and have become the focus of this series.

Introduction to the Series

“Indeed, the most enduring triumph of photography has been its aptitude for discovering beauty in the humble, the inane, the decrepit.” – Susan Sontag (102)

This series incorporates the ideas and visual format from the past series into a unified, more cohesive representation of these concepts. It includes the quality of the artificial light achieved in Buddhism in the Modern World, but modifies it through a less straightforward representation. It emphasizes the concept of photography as meditation, and a form of inward
introspection initially discovered in *Modern World* and used in each series thereafter, particularly in *Outlets/Switches*. *Architectural Zen* also incorporates beautifying the mundane and a transformation of space from *Outlets/Switches* and *Gas Stations at Night*. The series translated and grew upon the simplification of form, the balanced compositions, the glow of the artificial light, and the successful removal of the figure achieved in *Gas Stations at Night*.

While function is the primary purpose of architecture, the definition of the term states that a combination of factors are involved. Architecture can be defined as “the art of designing and constructing buildings that are both functionally and aesthetically satisfying. Factors principally influencing an architect are: the use to which the building will be put; the materials obtainable; the resources available in money and labour; and contemporary artistic taste” (“Architecture” MacMillan). The problem lies in three of those factors: contemporary artistic taste, materials, and monetary resources. With advances of concrete, steel and glass building materials in the 20th century, modern urban architecture emphasized functionalism and cost-effectiveness (“Modern Architecture” McGraw Hill). Lack of public transportation and suburbanization following WWII led to inexpensive cookie-cutter houses and mish mash of architectural styles, which continues to be evident today (“Architecture” Encyclopedia of Urban America).

Although all architecture can be considered “pragmatic” to an extent, the focus of this series is functional architecture that is urban and new, and prevalent in new cities like Orlando, Florida. While elements such as gas stations and fast food restaurants can be found in any city, Orlando is rampant with the structures, which permeates the design of cookie-cutter housing complexes like Avalon Park. The focus becomes structures created without the intent of artistic
merit, or backsides of buildings not meant to be seen. This was a key element and challenge to beautifying the mundane and banal structures seen in everyday Central Florida landscapes.

Zen-like Approach to Image Making

Creating the photographs in this series is similar to a Zen approach to image making through attention to detail, a conscious design sense, and a meditative and contemplative capture process, which simplifies and beautifies form. The attention to design elements implements symmetry and near symmetry through a keen sense of balance in each composition (Figure 17). While the photographs have a primarily frontal point of view, and near symmetry in most, some are low-angle or capture multiple planes from a side view. The images still retain the same mood and cohesiveness. Images captured from a side view capture more dynamic, diagonal lines, but the angle chosen flattens specific areas into a single plane, and illuminates the depth of those most important (Figures 14).

Figure 13: *Zazen 11*, Digital photograph, 2009
Seeking out the light and how it fell on a subject, the chromatic quality of the light, and the design of the form were essential when selecting subjects to shoot. Further understanding of night photography’s delicate balance of exposure time, stillness, light temperature, sensor speed, and how the camera captured these qualities became second nature. After extensive practice of photographing at night, it became easier to predict how lights would react in the photograph, and to know what to look for (particularly the light falloff when exposeing for illuminated areas or the areas around it). This is essential in the preparation of finding subject matter to photograph, as you can focus and refine the eye to see the best subject matter to capture to achieve your vision.

Figure 14: Bridge Screenshot, 2010
By using the camera like a sketchbook, I consider all angles and compositions over an extended period of time ranging from thirty minutes to an hour. In this way, I am able to develop a closer connection with the subject, the lighting, and its artistic elements. By shooting and reshooting, and studying the subject further, a more captivating and carefully composed image emerges. The resulting images are much more successful when the subject is investigated fully. Figures 15-16 depict a screenshot of thumbnails from a shoot like this, and the resulting image from the series.

One element of helping others realize the true nature of unexpected forms is to provide hints that reveal the stark contrast between the subject during the day and night through familiarity. By providing images of buildings that the viewer recognizes, the viewer may better recognize the transformation of space, and have a better appreciation for the representation of the form, as well as create a sense of mystery about how the other images may translate. Illustrated in Figure 17 is the best example of this contrast: the art building on the University of Central
Florida’s campus. I most closely associate the series with this photograph because I see the subject every day in sunlight, but rarely at night. The artificial light temperature is most surprising in its hint of green that is exaggerated by the sensor of the camera. The example of the isolation of form is exemplified in the way the darkness hides the areas that are not illuminated by light: the palm trees, the shrubbery, and the sidewalk. The frenzy of the competing lines and colors of the structure during the day is distracting. The triangular way the structure is illuminated is reminiscent of a Buddhist temple. The simple forms create a restful motion, a cycle of meditating on and moving throughout the scene.

![Figure 16: VAB Day and night (Zazen 9), Digital photographs, 2009-10](image-url)
It is a process of simplifying forms photographically through light and capturing the essence of a subject, just as Japanese artists did with calligraphy and brush painting. Lieberman elaborates: “The Zen artist… tries to suggest by the simplest possible means the inherent nature of the aesthetic object… The job of the artist is to suggest the essence, the eternal qualities of the object, which is in itself a work of natural art before the artist arrives on the scene. In order to achieve this, the artist must fully understand the inner nature of the aesthetic object, its Buddha nature” (3). This series attempts to see the inner beauty and capture the essence of the space illuminated and simplified by artificial lights.

Through perceptive illusions, the images themselves appear simple and minimal, like fake constructed sets of pristine and beautiful architecture photographed. However, at a closer glance, the viewer can begin to notice the imperfections in the scene, such as the cracks on a building, leftover bits of trash by passersby, or functional elements like signs, electrical cords or
outlets. Figure 18 seems serene and perfect, but closer investigation of the image reveals split wood supports, crooked piping, and layers of bugs dotting the lower portion of the wall. The artificial light’s selective illumination, as well as the overwhelm of unexpected beauty in the scene masks the pragmatic elements of the industrial and commercial architecture, making it appear as if it is something much grander than its initial purpose.

Photographing at night also has philosophical implications relevant to the concept. During the day, one can almost never capture the exact same photograph at any given moment, due to the constant change of light. But, at night the photographer may be able to meditate on the same subject day after day, seemingly unchanged. Sudden surprise of the transitory nature of the scene occurs when a light bulb goes out, or a gas station gets torn down. The impermanence is much longer term, but it still exists. Through photographic meditation, one has captured the permanence of the impermanent.

Figure 18: Zazen 20, Digital photograph, 2008
The photos in this series are captured around the same time of night, after there is no longer colorful light in the sky. This enhances the contrast and simplicity of the black voids that do not take away from the structures, only further isolates them. Dark, concealing compositions are also a preferred personal aesthetic. Figure 19 is an example of a reverse negative through nighttime illumination. Areas that are dark in the scene are light during the day, and areas that are light at night become dark recesses during the day.

The simplification of forms is influenced by Hiroshi Sugimoto’s series, *Theaters*, and is a direct inspiration to Figure 20. Sugimoto captured the interior of many movie theaters, as well as drive-in movie screens, leaving the lens open for the entire length of the film. As seen in Figure 21, the interior architecture glows, while the entirety of the film captured on the screen and on his film, is visible in the final image as a bright, white field of light. The stillness and calm, the high contrast protrusion and recession of architectural features, the minimalism and emptiness of the room, all speak to a greater message of impermanence and beauty, and concepts of time and space. In *Zazen 5*, the bus stop’s backlit sign is reduced to the white expansive light of the form, as the long exposure eliminates detail. The horizontal composition and repetition of lines mimic Sugimoto’s *Theaters* series. The emphasis in *Zazen 5*, extends to the area of illuminated grass below the light, as the composition cuts off the top portion of the white glowing sign.

While many relate to the meditative quality of the photographs in the series, some viewers note an ominous, mysterious, film noir tone to the images due to their stark nature and theatrical lighting. Although I have always been highly inspired by the ultraviolent and stylized cinematography of Quentin Tarantino, this tone was not imparted consciously. Tarantino is a prior influence to my work, but the current series is not directly related to this style. It is
possible that the tone and imagery is ingrained in my aesthetic, and it became evident to some viewers.

Figure 19: Zazen 5, Digital photograph, 2009

Figure 20: Cinerama Dome, Hollywood, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 1993
The images in this series represent something much deeper: a personal state of Zen, a reflection of the mind during meditation. Nighttime and artificial light enhances feelings of isolation, solitude, emptiness, peace, quietude, and contemplation. They show traces of people who were once there, spaces where people are meant to be, transitory environments likened to the scenes in History Channel’s “Life After People.” The low levels of light amplify the lack of human activity, and they transcend both space and time.

Although the series parallels practices and ideas of Buddhism, it is not necessarily about Buddhism. Similarly, Stephen Batchelor discusses how Buddhism affects his work without focusing on the heavy connotations that come with incorporating a religious influence. He states, “Buddhism is so interjected into my consciousness that inevitably it influences my work… Although Buddhism informs my view of the world, I do not consciously set out to take pictures to illustrate or confirm my beliefs in its doctrines… It is simply an extension of the insatiable curiosity I have to see the world more deeply and penetratingly” (144). This describes how a series like *Architectural Zen* could be influenced so deeply by the conscious ideas of Buddhism without the necessity of being about Buddhist doctrines. As the series’ relation to a Zen mindset and Eastern aesthetic ideals progressed, culturally different aesthetics became more significant to understanding the series and the importance of the process in the work.

**Aesthetic**

Aesthetics are very specific to a culture, pertaining to what those cultures consider important, how they distinguish fine art from craft and everyday life, influences, and many other aspects of life and culture. Consequently, an essay entitled “Philosophy and Aesthetic
Preferences: Symmetry versus asymmetry” written by Elizabeth Kazmierczak, discusses that the aesthetic differences between the West and Japan can be attributed to philosophical traditions. This explains the importance of Zen to Japanese and Chinese aesthetic (370). Kazmierczak supports this with specific comparative criteria: logic versus intuitionism, recognition of void, attitudes towards nature, and the definition of symmetry itself. The following paragraphs parallel these criteria to an Eastern aesthetic as seen in Architectural Zen through: an intuitive photographic approach, importance of emptiness and minimalism in the work, attempts at incorporating an appreciation of nature, and an Eastern oriented understanding of balance and symmetry.

Through a meditative approach to photography, the direct and intuitive, mindful experience encouraged an Eastern slant in Architectural Zen. Kazmierczak attributes the first element of differentiating Eastern and Western aesthetic to the differing origins of philosophy. Whereas Western rationalism stemmed from the Greek origins of logic (371), the teachings of Zen in the East “concentrated on an intuitive experience” according to DT Suzuki, a Zen expert (372).

The minimal forms and the lack of detail, simplified by the artificial light, are one key element to the final images’ mood and essence, as seen in Figure 22, where the expanses of the walls and columns and horizontal rows of space divide the areas of the composition. This is supported by Kazmierczak’s discussion of the concept of void. Westerners deny the existence of void, failing to recognize an empty space until something fills it. Easterners, on the other hand, require “the existence of empty space, for, without it, there would be no room for change or progression. Since space inherently has value, it does not have to be filled to be validated”
Space is also significant in the realm of minimalist art, “with its principle of simplicity that is ingrained in Eastern culture” (374).

Many images in this series use nature as a sarcastic commentary on Western culture’s attempt to show they are harmonious with and appreciative towards nature, despite their ideals stemming from the Greek “conquest of nature,” reflecting the importance of a culture’s attitudes toward nature in determining the order of artistic elements in compositions (375). The images are an attempt to combine the Western interpretation of an element of Eastern aesthetic. This is visually exaggerated, particularly when the grass has deep, unnatural shadows and neon hue, made possible by the artificial light. The photos emphasize grass and elements of nature, although mostly manmade, such as planted sod and landscaped plants and palm trees. These elements are still in balance and harmony with the structures, particularly in how the light hits them within the frame. Either way, it exists as an element of nature, but emphasizes and reflects the quality of some fake and tasteless architecture found in Orlando, Florida. Figures 22 and 23 depict how the architecture is greatly affected by the landscaping.

This series borders East and West in preferences of symmetry, as the images fall between asymmetry and slight asymmetry. While Westerners prefer perfect symmetry, the Eastern culture “ignores balance … and embodies beauty in a form of imperfection or even ugliness” according to Suzuki (378). An asymmetrical composition suddenly becomes more interesting and different by a single element of variety or imperfection. The central balance of the composition is offset by that simple principle. Figures 24 and 25 depict this central balance offset by elements of asymmetry on either side.
Figure 21: Zazen 10, Digital photograph, 2009

Figure 22: Zazen 16, Digital photograph, 2009
Because attitudes toward aesthetic are deeply rooted in philosophical beliefs, such as Zen Buddhism, by embracing meditation and mindfulness in the photographing process, hints of the Eastern aesthetic appear in the series.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The goal of *Architectural Zen* is to calm personal anxieties and to find beauty and solitude in a busy, urbanized city. Through photographic meditation and removing expectations about my environment, I am able to create compositions that encourage others to see the Buddha nature of otherwise mundane architecture. This series also enabled me to find an inner harmony and a direction for my art by highlighting the play of light on form in an effort to find a new way to transform a space.

Because this series is still in its early stages, there are many ideas yet to explore. I plan to expand *Architectural Zen* to include new locations and concepts, to include a deeper understanding of the true nature of other architectural forms. I would like to include more commercialized structures similar to *Gas Stations at Night*, as this seminal series has enlightened me to a new way of understanding and beautifying typically pragmatic structures.

Appreciating my efforts to enhance the appearance of structures that I believed to be banal, I am interested to see how this aesthetic translates to those that already have character. A recent walk through my neighborhood inspired a series of photographs featuring Winter Park homes at night. I believe this would be the perfect complement to *Architectural Zen*, as the intimate play of light I sought out in industrial structures is also present; but when juxtaposed with the cozier landscape of a residential neighborhood, rather than industrialized buildings, I experience a whole new form of serenity. Whatever photography comes of this series, I know that architecture in twilight is my Zen.
Figure 25: Installation View 1, Digital photograph, 2010

Figure 26: Installation View 2, Digital photograph, 2010
Figure 27: Installation View 3, Digital photograph, 2010

Figure 28: Installation View 4, Digital photograph, 2010
Figure 29: Installation View 5, Digital photograph, 2010
REFERENCES


