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Boundaries.

Elizabeth Trabue Gorham
East Tennessee State University

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Boundaries

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art & Design

East Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Elizabeth Trabue Gorham

December 2011

Mike Smith, Committee Chair

David Dixon

Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay

Keywords: photography, family, black and white, light, son, boundaries
ABSTRACT

Boundaries

by

Elizabeth Trabue Gorham

The photographer discusses the work in Boundaries, her Master of Fine Arts exhibition on display at Slocumb Galleries, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee from October 31 to November 4, 2011. The exhibition consists of 20 black and white photographs, the main subject of which is the photographer’s son. The photographs and supporting thesis explore the idea of boundaries real and implied, and how confinement can prompt a variety of behaviors. Topics include the process and evolution of the work and the artists who have influenced it, the importance of light and the challenge of photographing family. Included is a catalogue of the exhibition.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Most importantly, thank you to my family whose support helped me attain this goal: my two grandmothers, Mildred Bratton and Mary Trabue; my mother Anne Trabue; my father Charles Trabue. Special thanks to my husband Marty for always holding the fort down during my monthly trips to Johnson City, and for his patience, support, and belief in me as a photographer. And last but not least, to Martin for inspiring me and making this work possible.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1928 Renee Magritte created one of his most famous paintings, *The Treachery of Images*. The painting is of a pipe and below it are the words, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”, French for “this is not a pipe”. With the image, Magritte wryly illustrates the fact that the painting is just a painting; it is not the real thing. I have thought of this painting often over the last few years as I have been building up a body of photographs of my son. Repeatedly in critiques I was reminded that these pictures were not Martin. They were pictures of Martin, but not Martin. They were pictures of Martin about something else. What that “something else” was exactly eluded me as the pictures accumulated. As I approached the end of my MFA friends and colleagues began inquiring about the subject of my thesis. Fumbling the reply I would mutter something about “pictures of Martin”. Perhaps it is the personal nature of the work that inhibited my understanding it. The subject is after all my own flesh and blood, and despite the friendly reminders that the work had to be about something more, it was difficult for me to see anything other than Martin.

Periodic evaluations of the work happened in batches, one semester at a time. I could identify beautiful light and purposeful compositions, but these are elements that even my beginning photography students incorporate in their work. I understood (and have always felt) that the work was an extension of myself. The pictures on the whole are quiet and contemplative, but these, too are descriptive elements that did not equate meaning. Seeing the forest from the trees came only after experiencing some distance from the usual independent study coursework. Taking a year to work on other degree requirements, the pressure to produce more and to discover true meaning
was off. At my leisure I would pull out my box of prints and study them. I have never been one to wax on about my feelings, but as I looked at these pictures of my son resting, eating, playing, I became very aware of how I felt. I felt trapped and simultaneously I felt the exciting possibility of escape. The boundaries that confined Martin expanded as he grew. These pictures reference those boundaries, both real and implied, and highlight particular behaviors that grow out of confinement. In this body of work Martin is many things - complacent, frustrated, curious, empowered, captive. What I have come to understand is that the pictures are not just about Martin’s boundaries and behavior, but about those facets of life in a general sense and how one affects the other. This paper addresses those facets, the evolution of the work and the events and artists that have influenced me as I engaged in the creative process.
CHAPTER 2
WHERE HISTORY AND ART INTERSECT

Beersheba

I have already noted that my work is an extension of myself. That being said, every experience and every person that has helped shape who I am today has played some role in my artistic development. Separating the historical influences from the artistic ones seems a tricky task; they are for me innately intertwined. Nonetheless, for the sake of brevity I have distilled the most relevant influences in the history of me down to three experiences and two teachers. It comes as no surprise that each has something to do with art. Four of these influences stem from the academic arena, but the first predates high school and college. My interest in photography began as a child spending time at my family’s mountain summer home in Beersheba Springs, TN. My grandfather grew up spending his summers there as did my father and I after him. In pleasant weather there were hikes and swimming holes to occupy the day. On rainy days there were arts and crafts projects, and then there were books. My grandparent’s library in Beersheba was an eclectic mix of law reviews, SEC sports, Italian Renaissance, and mystery novels. Standing apart from this diverse collection were two photography books: Life and The Look Book. Both were oversized volumes of photographs taken roughly between the late 30s and the early 70s from their respective periodicals, Life, and Look. I spent hours with these books in my lap. Looking at one in its entirety was half a day’s activity in and of itself. I was fascinated by the images; the glamour, the innocence, the horror, and the beauty of them all made a tremendous impression on me. Looking back and tracing my path of the study of photography I see just how
powerful this impression was. Days every summer starting at about age 9 were spent studying these books. I looked at them until they disappeared, around the age of 15.

Peter Goodwin and Henri Cartier-Bresson

This was the year, incidentally when I enrolled in my first photography class. It was a high school requirement - choose between art and photography (a funny distinction to me now since I believe wholeheartedly that photography is art). Early in my three years of high school photography classes was a visit to a Henri Cartier-Bresson exhibit. What I saw there reaffirmed what I had seen in those books: the fact that ordinary life provides for photographers a sustainable amount of raw material. Champion of the decisive moment, Cartier-Bresson was on the constant hunt for what André Pieyre refers to in his essay On Paris as “that miraculous beauty that can appear at any moment and must be seized or be forever lost” (159). This element is on display in Gardens of the Palais-Royal, 1959 (Fig. 1). Cartier-Bresson’s fascination with the world around him was apparent and while at 15 I believed his world was infinitely more interesting than mine, I think that I understood then what pictures could be: a truth and a half truth all at once, a synthesized reality that could stir you. It is important at this point to mention the teacher behind the memorable field trip, as I feel I would be remiss discussing my influences

---

1 Mike Smith, as quoted in class, March 1, 2005.
without tipping my hat to the person who was there in the beginning. Peter Goodwin was the first in a long line of teachers who were instrumental in my photographic development. With him came the introductions - to the love and struggles of the darkroom and to the art of looking and seeing things. Harpeth Hall was (is) an all-girls college prep school in a very conservative neighborhood. Goodwin, with his dry, sarcastic sense of humor, was a quirky artist who did not tolerate the usual attitudes one might associate with such a school. For Goodwin we photographed, but we also read poetry and listened to Peter and the Wolf in the dark. He began to broaden the horizons of my sheltered upbringing.

Mary Ruth Moore and Caravaggio

Intent on making a career with a camera, my study of photography led me to the University of Georgia and to Mary Ruth Moore. I fought to get out of taking her class - another introduction to photography that I was sure I did not need. I was denied a pass and reluctantly began building a pinhole camera out of balsa wood. Like her pinholes, which she used to create Study Parlor, Albergo Athens (Figure 2), she was a throwback to another time and place. Her languid southern drawl was deceptive; her expectations were challenging and she held tight to her convictions - chief among them an outright passion for light. Her camera of choice was a pinhole, so not only did she help me appreciate light, she taught me to

Fig. 2. Mary Ruth Moore, Parlor, Albergo Athens, Summer 2000 (www.art.uga.edu). Image courtesy of Mary Ruth Moore.
wait for it. The use of and attention to light is a critical part of my own photographs and this trait can be traced back to her influence. After a year under her guidance, I signed up for the UGA Studies Abroad program in Cortona, Italy. With that adventure came two more influential introductions: to Mark Steinmetz who would be my photography instructor (and whose influence will be discussed in Chapter 3) and to the paintings of Caravaggio.

My first experience with a Caravaggio painting was a spiritual one. After a long search through the streets of Rome a small group of students, like pilgrims found our way to the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. Inside were *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (Fig. 3), *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, and *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*. What struck me about these paintings was not just that Caravaggio had illustrated these monumental moments in a somehow very quiet manner, but also that the quality of the light that he used to illustrate these moments was almost paramount to their significance. The light, as H.W. Janson describes it, is “so natural yet so charged with symbolic meaning” (Janson 500); it was beautiful light that informed his subjects in

Fig. 3. Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* c. 1599-1602. Image courtesy of Scala / Art Resource, NY.
an illuminating way. Seeing this work was a profound experience and it furthered my interest in the conscientious use of light.

Collectively these events and people began to shape how I would process images from the world around me. Paying attention to the everyday, paying attention to light was to become an inherent part of my photographs.
CHAPTER 3

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Mark Steinmetz

Mark Steinmetz was there in Italy and studying under him that spring has had a lasting effect on me. He has influenced my personal and professional development and continues to influence the pictures that I make. The latter will be discussed shortly. The former is a myriad of things ranging from his method of shooting to his presence as an instructor. With his quiet personality and intuitive knowledge of the medium of photography he brought to the classroom a mixture of wit, sarcasm, and matter of fact honesty. I have been teaching for 11 years now and try to engage my students with these same qualities. His quiet manner is reflected in his work and I think this is something that we share. Surface similarities exist - medium sized black and white prints and rectangular format, but it is the other less concrete characteristics of his work that draw me in. His recently published trilogy of books *South Central, South East, and Greater Atlanta* presents work that spans seventeen years of photographing the territory from northeast Tennessee to Atlanta. The subjects of his photographs range from landscapes to portraits of people, animals, and insects even. They fluctuate from hopeful to full of despair, caught in the doldrums of everyday life. An air of

![Image](www.marksteinmetz.net) Image courtesy of Mark Steinmetz.
melancholy hovers around even those who seem to have been having a good day. But they all seem very real and the moments never appear manufactured. His prints are stunning, and as seen in “Athens, GA 1996” (Fig. 4) there is something about his use of light and the tones he can pull out of the print that combine with his connection to the subject, gracefully delivering the image’s occasionally droll message of isolation, boredom, or resignation. Like Cartier-Bresson before him, you sense in every picture Steinmetz’s fascination with the everyday world.

In an interview for Ahorn Magazine with Daniel Augschoell and Anya Jasbar, Steinmetz voices his opinion on more choreographed photography:

But I have to say that photography that tends to be called “cinematic” doesn’t appeal to me so much. Staged work often seems fairly lifeless. There’s little surprise to it - it lacks that freshness, that rawness that comes from discovering something that’s out there in life. (Garry) Winogrand advised photographers “to make pictures that are smarter than you are.” He’s saying that the world is more interesting than our ideas about it, and that if you have faith in the richness of the everyday world and the willingness to collaborate with chance happenings, you can make a picture that exceeds anything your mind could come up with (par 3).

In his most recent project and subsequent book, Philip & Micheline, the work becomes a bit more personal as he turns his camera toward his aging parents. Up until this publication, we have been exposed to Steinmetz’s ability to confront and photograph strangers. He proves equally adept at photographing family and gives us heart achingly beautiful images of his mother and father as they become increasingly dependent. This work like the previous is peppered with
discoveries. It is these observations that deliver poignancy and keep the work from becoming overtly bleak. Halos made out of clouds and a parking lot light compliment angelic orbs and the beautiful light falling on his bedridden mother’s face as she watches the birds outside her window. Traits found in these quiet, uncontrived pictures made with conscientious use of light have kept me returning to his work and inspiring similar qualities in my own.

Sally Mann

Photographing family can be a tricky endeavor requiring just the right amount of detachment for objectivity. No one knows that more than Sally Mann. I first became aware of Mann in the early nineties when her book *Immediate Family* stirred controversy with her unflinching look at the sometimes playful, sometimes peculiar activities of her sometimes naked children. I was still in college and the pictures stirred me. They ranged from haunting to joyful and they were rich and beautiful and honest. In the introduction to the book Mann describes the images, “Many of these pictures are intimate, some are fictions and some are fantastic, but most are of ordinary things every mother has seen - a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes. They dress up, they pout and posture, they paint their bodies, they dive like otters in the dark river” (*Immediate Family*). The controversy centered around the undercurrents of adulthood that the pictures and the children possessed. Any parent (or anyone who has ever paid attention to children playing) understood this to be an inherent part of being a child. Again Mann on her work, “We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up” (*Immediate Family*). Many misunderstood, and as Malcolm Jones relates in his article *Love, Death, Light* for Newsweek, “Overnight Mann was tossed into the strange ranks of photographers...whose work leaves you squirming even as it
holds you spellbound” (Jones 54). Her strength as a photographer (and as a mother, no doubt) allowed her to commemorate what many mothers would just assume forget: fresh stitches over a bloody cut, teethmarks on arms, and moments where her children appear half if not already lifeless. That she is able to make pictures in moments like these speaks of her steady resolve and her commitment to her project. I have thought of her during the two trips to the emergency room with my son, unwilling or unable to take my camera with me. But even the haunting pictures are beautiful and the beautiful, more innocent ones of everyday stuff like *Hangnail* (Fig. 5), transcendent. The careful arrangement (and enhancement) of light and dark coupled with placement of subject and unexpected elements combine to transform this simple moment into a rich study of childhood curiosity.

Since *Immediate Family*, Mann has worked on oversized Southern landscapes (some collodion, some film), Civil War battlefields, decaying bodies from the Body Farm and bones from a beloved pet dog, and back full circle to pictures of family, most recently collodions of her husband Larry. While the landscapes hold a special place for me (more on that later), it is the earlier family work that is most relevant to the discussion here. Our equipment is very different (digital as compared to large format film), but it is family, it is our children we are
photographing. I mentioned earlier the idea of photography presenting a synthesized reality. It can be something that really happened but might appear to be something slightly or at times entirely different. In her introduction Mann talks about the “Angel of Chance” visiting them while the camera is at ready. “when the good pictures come,” she adds, “we hope they tell truths, but truths ‘told slant’ just as Emily Dickinson commanded” (Immediate Family). To be certain there was direction involved on Mann’s part. The 8x10 view camera requires time for set up and demands patience of the subject, but despite those demands the images depict real time activity and on the whole still are very free representations of what it is to be a child. She, like I, made pictures of her children resting and playing and the results are often ambiguous variations of unfolding drama. They ask questions instead of giving answers. Steinmetz expresses his appreciation of this type of photography noting that his interests lie in “photography that is open-ended, work that poses questions and doesn’t rush into solutions” (Augschoell, par 2). Both Steinmetz and Mann photograph in this manner, and it is this quality that makes their work the enduring sort.

Like Steinmetz, Mann’s influence on me has been far reaching. I was fortunate enough to work for her in 1998-1999 as her assistant. Her methodical and meticulous manner of printing and editing her photographs was something to behold. We spent a year preparing for one show. I watched with reverence as she spent one week solving the problem of how one negative or glass plate should be printed, and then another week, sometimes longer printing nothing but that image. These were 40”x50” photographs, so their size accounted for a great deal of the time it took to finish one print. Even so, her exhaustive efforts in the darkroom were impressive to say
the least. After a week or so of printing came the editing process. We would fill her studio with
prints of the same image and attempt to edit with the goal of completing an edition of 10
photographs that most closely resembled the artist’s proof. After an edition, or most of an edition
was printed out, they were carefully flattened, dry mounted, spotted, and ultimately shipped to
the gallery. The latter work fell on my shoulders and I quickly adopted her meticulous manners
and critical eye for detail. This work, every day for a year, has had a tremendous impact on the
way in which I handle my own photographs. I am not making traditional or oversized silver
prints, nor am I printing out editions of my photographs, but the careful treatment of the work
and the professional quality of the prints is something I try to incorporate in my own work habits.

The otherworldly collodion landscapes from Deep South are very different from my current
body of work but present in those Southern sweeps as well as the family work that came before
them is an ever present attention to light. With the family work, it is the deliberate contrast of
light and dark with occasional images being the palest of pale or the darkest of dark to set tone.
With the landscapes, it is what Mann describes in her essay that introduces Motherland, the first
section of Deep South, as “thick, vespertine gloaming” light (Deep South 7). Mann’s use of light
in her landscapes brings to them a sense of mystery and intrigue, as found in the hauntingly
beautiful Georgian hollow, Untitled 1996 (Fig. 6). Prior to moving to Virginia to assist Mann I
had been working on a series of portraits of my friends. All of a sudden there I was in a small
town, and not knowing anyone (and not keen as Steinmetz is on photographing strangers) I found
myself shooting landscapes. The land itself was not so exotic to me - it was still the south and not
too different from Middle Tennessee, but it was new territory and I loved to explore. Her work
(and the prints I was helping with) influenced me heavily during this period and then again with the landscapes that began my graduate work, work which preceded my pictures of Martin. I was aided while under Mann’s wing by her well stocked library of photography books. It was there that I rediscovered the last of my artistic influences noted in this paper - the work of Eugene Atget.

**Eugene Atget**

Atget photographed in and around Paris during the early part of the 20th century. His contemporaries were leaving the clumsier view camera behind for smaller, lighter, faster cameras, but Atget remained devoted to his large format and covered Paris with it, voraciously cataloging everything he could of the city and its outlying areas: the tradesmen and street vendors, the buildings and their architectural details and interiors, and the parks. His photographs of the gardens in and around Paris, from Versailles to St. Cloud to lonely, rundown Sceaux possess characteristics that I strove to include in my earlier landscapes. To borrow some of Maria Morris Hambourg’s descriptions from her essay *The Structure of the Work*, his landscapes are “elegant”, “transcendent”, “ephemeral”, “intimate”, and “veiled but distinctly personal” (Hambourg 9, Vol III). These qualities can be found in the space and light of *Statue of*
I was (and still am) captivated by the magic and the mystery that is found in his forgotten, brambling gardens. Hambourg confronts Atget’s work again in *The Waking Dream* saying that in photographing these gardens (chief among them Versailles), Atget “learned that the photographer’s main problem, like that of a landscape architect, is to establish a point of view that directs the movement of the imagination” (Hambourg 347). I love this description. It speaks of Atget’s chief dilemma but also what could have happened in these places and what could still happen. My pictures of Martin hint at this notion as he began to explore the out of doors. While not landscapes in the traditional sense, there are some, like *Easter Hunt 2010*, and *Escape* where the land acts as a stage and dramatic backdrop whose importance is equal to the children roaming it. I have tried to be conscious of the light and lay of the land when photographing Martin outside, and my backyard, bearing a closer resemblance to the unkempt Sceaux than to manicured Versailles, keeps Atget in the forefront of my mind while undertaking this endeavor.

John Szarkowski notes in *The Work of Atget, Vol I* that “In his lifetime, Atget made perhaps ten thousand photographs; almost all of these describe the historic character of French life, as
indicated by its architecture, its landscape, its work, and its unconsidered vernacular
gestures” (12, Vol I). He follows this statement observing that it “is interesting that Atget did
not, during more than thirty years of work in Paris, photograph the Eiffel Tower” (13, Vol I). This
indicates that the immense project of cataloging his French culture was to include places and
things that he deemed vital to the project, not necessarily those that were important or of interest
to the general public or even to his potential clients. As a photographer, I make pictures of things
that interest me. This seems like an obvious statement. Even more obvious is this one: I
photograph my son Martin because he interests me. Many people make comments to me that go
something like this, “Oh, I bet you have so many pictures of Martin (and now Charlie, too)!”. “Yes!” I reply out loud, and then to myself I say, “but they are not the pictures you are thinking
of”. They are the pictures that to me are important in describing him. Like Atget returning to the
same tree over and over again, I will continue to photograph Martin, just as Atget “repeatedly
(returned) at twilight to the pools of Saint-Cloud, confident that he would not exhaust their
potential meaning” (Szarkowski, 19, Vol I).
My pursuit of this degree has been a non-traditional one. Aside from my year in residency in Johnson City, I have chipped away at my MFA requirements one class a semester as I live and work full time in Nashville. This has made the journey an exceptionally long one - approaching seven years, which in turn has had an effect on the work that has been produced. When I started working on my graduate degree life was very different; there was no Martin. I understood, as did my professors that the work in the beginning might be very different from the work in the end. For the first four years of my graduate pursuit I photographed color landscapes in and around my neighborhood as demonstrated in *Hawthorne Gate* (Fig. 8). While the subject matter took a dramatic turn after Martin was born in 2008, similar threads join my earlier yard work to that of the work being evaluated here. The yards were quiet studies of personal spaces that I was not totally privy to;
there was always some degree of separation, a boundary between my subject and me. In the present work, the boundaries have changed. No longer on the outside looking in, I’m inside trying to gage where and how secure that boundary is, as in *Escape* (Fig. 9). Some tools have remained - I try in both bodies to make an effective use of the light; and some tools have changed - after the yards I made the switch from color film to black and white digital. While the camera and color changed, the way I hunt and gather images has not. In a his interview for American Suburb X, Mark Steinmetz was asked how he works through a project and his answer was this:

I don’t begin a project with an agenda that is going to over-determine the outcome. I think it begins with a faint vision - one of those whispers on a breeze - that somehow gets a grip on me. I try to fan that flame and see what comes of it, but photography of the sort I do depends on what the world out there wants to cough up, so in some ways I am powerless and just hope the universe is on my side. A project is over when the energy that once propelled it has subsided...and then with time and further effort to edit an print, I begin to see the larger patterns and come to understand a bit more what I did. While you’re in the midst of it, you’re excited and you know you’re onto something but exactly what you’re onto remains a bit out of reach (Schiek, par 6).

My experience photographing Martin was similar. As I began focusing my lens more intently on him, I was casting a big net. The goal in the beginning was simply to prove to myself that I could, as a mother with a full time job, still make some good photographs. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, but I was looking.
CHAPTER 5
BOUNDARIES

Family as Subject

I am not the first person to fix my lens on family. This has been done since the invention of photography. There are any number of ways that I could have approached the subject with an equal number of ancient and modern photographers to use as reference. During the early stages of my project I considered a variety of photographers. I was attracted to the dramatic subtexts of Larry Sultan’s photographs of his parents and Tina Barney’s of her family and friends. I thought of Sally Mann’s work, which like Barney’s was made with a large format camera. While I liked the detail and exacting control that format offered, I knew that if Martin was to be my subject, I was going to need to move faster. He was unpredictable to say the least and even as a crawler was extremely fast. The two photographers that stuck in my mind in the beginning were Abelardo Morell and Nicholas Nixon, both of whom had made photographs of their children at home. Morell’s Julian, 1989 (Fig. 10), conveys for me the rewarding element of surprise and discovery that can be found by both the subject and the photographer. It also represents a looser approach (despite the large format) than the photographers mentioned previously; the moment here seem fleeting. The pictures of Martin may have been influenced by all of these are photographers, but in the end they are expressly

Fig. 10. Abelardo Morell, Julian, 1989 (www.abelardomorell.net). Image courtesy of Abelardo Morell.
At one point I was asked why I made the type of pictures that I do. I wasn’t sure how to answer the question and it was suggested that I make an attempt to photograph in an entirely different manner to find the answer. I could make pictures of Martin that were brash with bad color and unflattering light, or to go the opposite direction and make sappy pictures dripping with sentimentality. In his interview with Ahorn Magazine Mark Steinmetz was asked if something in particular had inspired him to make photographs with such an emotive quality and he replied, “...I think my psyche is just wired a certain way and that I’m pretty much helpless to photograph things the way I do. It’s my nature” (Schiek, par 3). I did not take the challenge to make pictures that went against my natural inclinations. It became clear to me why my pictures were what they were. They were, as I have said before, an extension of myself. I am a quiet observer. I pay attention to details. I am attracted to light and am fascinated by its ability to transform the objects in front of my lens.

My process - the how and when I made these pictures - centered around my time with Martin. Some were made at meal time, some during periods of rest, but most were at play. The detachment that was necessary for Mann and Steinmetz was also important for me. Too much of it and the work becomes clinical. Too little and it becomes overly sentimental. My first pictures of Martin for this project were taken when he was 5 months old, so there was a balance between being caregiver and photographer. Steinmetz notes that during the time spent with his parents he was “helping them out and managing their situation so (his) photographing them was a fairly small part of the overall experience. Sometimes something would happen or the light would suddenly announce itself and the photographer in me would awaken” (Schiek, par 8). This mode
of operation - the duality of responsibility is something I have become accustomed to with
Martin. As a new mother I was warned from every source imaginable not to leave my baby
unattended on a changing table. I remember wondering as I set up the tripod in the middle of the
night if my priorities were in check. Danger looms around every corner for infants and toddlers
and there were many times that a good picture was abandoned to prevent uncertain calamity.
Even so, amidst the pictures that are light and optimistic in nature are others infused with a sense
of uneasiness that speaks of something more than child’s play.

**Boundaries Implied and Real**

In 1991 Peter Galassi, who was then the chief curator of Photography Department at the
Museum of Modern Art, organized a show (and accompanying book) *The Pleasures and Terrors
of Domestic Comfort*. It was in response to what he saw as an increasing number of
contemporary photographers making art on the domestic front. In his introductory text, he
comments on the attention of the photographers to the children, saying “they have recognized in
childhood the drama and complexity of adult life, without transforming it into a version of adult
life” (19). This goes along nicely with my work here. The situations that Martin finds himself in
and the subsequent behaviors they provoke can be likened to any number of adult scenarios. A
person feeling trapped in a job / relationship / role in life might react any number of ways
depending on the circumstances. The boundaries that surround Martin in these images vary from
real - a crib, a highchair, a fence - to symbolic - darkness. There are times when his confinement
elicits frustration and other times a combined resignation and yearning. He studies his
surroundings and exercises his powers within these borders, and stands on the verge of
discovery, the very edge of escape. I find the latter particularly exciting because they pique my imagination as to what will happen next after he reaches the other side of the bushes, descends from the light on the hill, breaks free of the grappling relatives’ hands. Martin it seems is not just Martin in these pictures but everyman struggling to to explore his place, understand his role, and perhaps to discover if the grass is greener on the other side.

Writing with Light

Robert Hirsch begins the Preface to his book Seizing the Light with a quote from Daguerre: “I have found a way of fixing the images of the camera! I have seized the fleeting light and imprisoned it! I have forced the sun to paint pictures for me!” (qtd in Hirsch vii). The excitement of his discovery underlines the elemental design of photography: using an instrument to write with light. It is what excites me and reminds me to make pictures. In his essay Atget and the Art of Photography, Szarkowski plays with the premise that photographers (the good ones) have all been good pointers (Szarkowski, Vol I, 11). In these pictures I use the light as my pointer and it can carry with it a sense of excitement or of melancholy. What follows is a discussion of a handful of the images from the exhibition using light as a categorical tool to group certain images together.
In the first two images the light conveys an optimistic, uplifting feeling, the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. While this may be a slightly expected way to use light to inform a subject, it does not undermine its impact here. In both pictures light does what it does best - it illuminates. In both the boy seems to be in pre-flight, with the promise of new land waiting just beyond the frame. Even as the light makes these promises an uneasy undercurrent persists. He is contained for the moment, literally in the swing and loosely in the yard. In Swing (Fig. 11), the sunlight on the boy’s face and the pearly catch light in his eyes seems to be lifting him magically through space. But the boy seems at a vulnerable place with the parent in the background unaware. In Side Light (Fig. 12), the sun delicately defines the boy’s hair then falls to the ground gracefully laying a path before his feet. With the point of view there is a hint of voyeurism and he is unaware that he is being watched. There is a predatory feel to the picture, as if he will be caught the moment he steps down the hill. Which force, the positive or the negative, will prevail is left up to the imagination of the viewer. Regardless, the pictures are about discovery, enlightenment.
In the next two images the light acts as a spotlight pointing to a captive child. Here the shadows are as important as the sunlight, helping to define that which holds him. In *Mealtime*, (Fig. 13), darkness acts as the container, enveloping the child like a cloak. The dramatic light hitting his face calls to mind movie images of prisoners in solitary confinement. There is an anxious look on his face, wary of the confrontation. In *Blinded*, (Fig. 14) the boy is arrested in sunlight and plants his hands over his eyes in an attempt to shield himself. The elongated dark shadow that lords over him stands by watching, not offering a helpful hand. In both of these photographs light, usually a positive force, becomes the aggressor.
In the next four images, diffused light creates a softer feeling in the tone of the print and the emotion that it suggests. In the first two, *Winter Window* (Fig. 15) and *Little Car* (Fig. 16), there is an overwhelming sense of melancholy, painting a picture of a boy who dreams of getting out. The soft light is quieting, calming and almost makes up for the yearning that we know is there.

Above we find a different boy, one who is gathering strength and gathering tools. Here just as above the light falls softly allowing the viewer to enjoy in *Blueberry* (Fig. 17) the intensity of the toes and the pressure of the pointer finger as well as the soft baby hair on his arm and tiny pools of milk. In *Hammock* (Fig. 18) the soft charcoal grays of the landscape invite a study of the
textures found there as well as a glimpse of the soft shadows on the contrasting bright white house in the background.

When looking at this body of work, it is important to acknowledge not just the transformative power of light, but of the medium of photography as well. Martin is not an oppressed child. He is not trapped inside or fed in the dark or harassed (not yet anyway) by his relatives. Photography takes a three dimensional world and in an instant flattens it, creating an altered reality, an altered version of the truth. It is also important to note that with the number of images I have of Martin, any number of different shows could have emerged from them, each carrying different tone. And yet they are all still pictures of Martin. In the end I chose to focus my edit for the show on the idea of boundaries, first and foremost because it was this grouping of photographs I thought was the strongest, but also because it was fitting to him. Since before he was born he has been trying to get out. He was a breech baby and for the last month of my pregnancy he relentlessly jammed his head into my ribcage as if he knew he wasn’t coming out feet first and was desperately seeking another exit. I have mentioned that he is fast, and I mean the sort of fast that everyone, including strangers comments on. Aided by his speed he has always been heading for the door, the gate, the fence - whatever it is that is keeping him in. He has an unusual affinity for bushes and when most children are happy to play in the middle of the yard (where most jungle gyms are), he typically heads for the periphery, stepping into the bushes or tree line, whichever one defines the edge of the yard. This is all personal information that no one would know by looking at these pictures. No matter. These pictures are not about Martin. They are about the boundaries that hold us and the behaviors that we exhibit as a result of their presence.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The end of this show signifies the end of a long quest, but it does not signify the end of my project photographing my son. Like most mothers of children I will continue to photograph Martin and now his brother Charlie. It remains to be seen what show if any will be erected with the latter as my subject. Regardless, I will continue to photograph because it is what I do; it is in the words of John Szarkowski, my “way of meeting and understanding the world” (Atget, 107). Many pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree for the purpose of teaching. As a tenured professor, this could hardly be my motive for engaging in such a prolonged venture. For me, this endeavor is about personal growth and to prove to myself more than anyone else that I could accomplish such a goal. When I look at the body of work that comprises this thesis show I am reminded of the importance of the creative process, its demands and rewards. Atget photographed the same gardens until his death. To quote Szarkowski one last time, he did it “not because it might bring him wealth, fame, power, esteem (then or later), or a higher station here or in heaven, but because it was what he did best...” (Atget, 220). I don’t presume to be in the same league as Atget, but photography has been a part of my way of life for 25 years, and with a little luck it will be that way for the next 25 or more. In closing I’d like to offer the words of Harry Callahan, another accomplished photographer who put it nicely in his 1946 application for a fellowship at the Museum of Modern Art:

My project could only be to photograph as I felt and desired, to regulate a pleasant form of living, to get up in the morning - free to feel the trees, the grass, the water, sky or buildings or people - everything that affects us; and to photograph that which I saw and
have always felt. This I know, is not a definite project because life itself is not definite, but it could be a part of a lifetime project to help keep photography alive at least for me and with the hope that it would be alive for someone else (qtd in Greenough 181).
CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

BOUNDARIES
Beth Gorham
baby Go, 2008
Changing Table, 2008
Inside Crawler, 2009
Highchair Angst, 2009
Outside Crawler, 2009
Easter Hunt, 2009
Easter Annie, 2009
Swing, 2009
Bird Watching, 2009
Struggle, 2009
Winter Window, 2010
Little Car, 2010
Easter Hunt, 2010
WORKS CITED


VITA

BETH GORHAM

EDUCATION

2011    MFA, Photography, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN
1994    BFA, Photography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2000-present    Assistant Professor & Coordinator, Visual Communications Program, Nashville State Community College, Nashville, TN
1999-2000    Assistant to Jack Spencer, Photographer, Nashville, TN
1998-1999    Assistant to Sally Mann, Photographer, Lexington, VA
1997-1998    Curatorial Intern, Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville, TN
1997-1998    Photographer, Nashville Life, Nashville, TN
1996    Teaching Assistant, UGA Studies Abroad Program, Cortona, Italy
1995    Print Technician, Chromatics, Nashville, TN

EXHIBITIONS

2011    Boundaries, Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, TN
2006    New Work, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN
2003    Orphans, Kaiser Trabue Landscape Architecture, Nashville, TN
B-sides, Rumours Gallery, Nashville, TN
Art in Open Spaces, Nashville, TN
2002    Group Show, Zeitgeist Gallery, Nashville, TN
Nashville Reflections workshop with The Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN
Switchyard, Zeitgeist Gallery, Nashville, TN

2001  *The Alchemy of Light*, Group Photography Exhibit, Cumberland Gallery, Nashville, TN

2000  *Recent Photographs*, Kaiser Trabue Landscape Architecture, Nashville, TN

1997  *UGA Studies Abroad Exhibition*, Lamar Dodd School of Art, Athens, GA

1996  *Cortona Mostra*, UGA 25th Anniversary Studies Abroad Exhibition, Cortona, Italy

1994  *Images from the Cumberland Plateau*, Lamar Dodd School of Art, Athens, GA

1993  *Cortona Mostra*, UGA Studies Abroad Exhibition, Cortona, Italy