Exegesis.

Christopher Shawne Brown
East Tennessee State University

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EXEGESIS

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
Christopher Shawne Brown
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Mike Smith, Committee Chair
Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay
Catherine Murray
M. Wayne Dyer

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ABSTRACT

Exegesis

by

Christopher Shawne Brown

The photographer discusses the work in Exegesis, his Master of Fine Arts exhibition held at Slocumb Galleries, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee from October 29 through November 2, 2007. The exhibition consists of 19 large format color photographs representing and edited from a body of work that visually negotiates the photographer’s home in East Tennessee.

The formulation of a web of influence is explored with a focus on artists who continue to pertain to Brown’s work formally and conceptually. Included are photographers Eugene Atget, Walker Evans, William Eggleston, and Mike Smith as well as the artist Joseph Cornell, the painter Robert Motherwell, and the poet Charles Wright. Other topics include a discussion of place, particularly one’s home, as a resource and an envelope for a body of work.

Included are images of the photographer’s earlier work and a catalogue of the exhibition.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The author would like to thank his committee members: Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay, Catherine Murray, M. Wayne Dyer, and in particular Mike Smith, who has been a major influence on this work.
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1. INTRODUCTION

There is much to be learned from family photo albums. However naïve the photographer, the photograph itself contains lessons for the serious viewer. I am lucky enough to have a family that makes and values pictures of one another. I have repeatedly looked at these pictures, as if searching for clues, since I was a kid. What may have initially been a curiosity about my family members when they were younger quickly developed into a desire to see what things looked like before I was around to witness them. I was unaware of it at the time, but one of the things that kept me coming back to look at these various albums was the way the camera described and transformed the world. It was fascinating how those people staring back at me (some of them from the dead!) fit into the space of those tiny pictures. The strangeness of the expressions and body language before everyone learned how to smile and pose for the camera was foreign to me. More peculiar was the manner in which objects that were distant in reality could converge in the picture. This otherness of the photograph, its radical alteration of what occurs naturally, was a valuable lesson that I could not fully recognize at the time. One picture in particular piqued my interest. A man stands with a camera raised to his eye aimed back at whoever was photographing him. This funny reference of the machine that creates these images was the initial draw, but I always wondered what the other photograph, the one this man was making, must have looked like.

Unwittingly, with this picture and many others I was building a catalogue of images for myself. Eventually I would “appropriate” my favorite pictures from my family and make a little album of my own. Some of the pictures contained people I knew intimately, some were complete strangers. It did not matter. I thought about which pictures should go together and in what
order based on how they looked or how they complemented one another to produce new meaning. In many ways this is what I am still doing. It was these family pictures, more than anything else, that provoked me to return to East Tennessee three years ago to try and make my own photographs of the people and places that define my home.

The influence of home, with all of that word’s complex connotations, has affected artists from Joyce and Faulkner to the anonymous mountain ballad singer. Photographer Robert Adams quotes a line from a poem by Lorine Neidecker that attempts to address the issue. “Home” she wrote, “is where no fact is isolate.” (Adams 181) This simply stated mystery suggests the inherent difficulty for an artist dealing with his or her home in defining an easily identifiable subject within this broad spectrum.

I suspect many of the things influential to my own work are so insular and ingrained that I can barely separate one from another. I could sincerely cite my mother and grandmother’s cooking with as much enthusiasm as Leonardo’s notebooks. Certainly the many Sundays I spent riding through the hills with my grandfather on route to hear his sermons and hymns have deeply stained the way I understand this place. An honest and complete appraisal of one’s influences could be maddeningly complex and most likely impossible. However, the attempt in what follows is to piece together a sort of mythology of influence, placing myself within an historical context that has not progressed linearly like my left-to-right Western mind might expect,
but has emerged convoluted and interdependent like a nervous system. Similar to the way I linked and arranged my family photographs, this web is formed by a pick and choose strategy. It seems fitting to investigate these artists from a personal viewpoint as they pertain to my work. The artists focused on here have maintained a continual and evolving influence on the way I understand the world and my medium. Surprisingly, they seem to be the same artists who initially excited me as a student. I have chosen to stick with them rather than to bring in some obscure interest or fringe fancy. I lean toward an art that questions more than it defines, the frame containing a suggestion, clear but curious, and I align myself with those artists who craft from the moment, understood from an eternal pool of moments, having the audacity to believe they might transcend stories. The quiet singularity of a photograph naturally enhances this disposition. I accept and embrace the lesson that photography, “incapable of narrative, turned toward symbol.”(Szarkowski 42) Regardless of the medium, it is this attitude that connects my personal history of interests and influences.
2. COLLECTORS

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.

Walter Benjamin (60)

JOSEPH CORNELL

Joseph Cornell’s ability to mold a wealth of influences, interests, and stimuli into a coherent form of expression mystifies me. His numerous boxes and constructions represent an epic achievement in modern art. Cornell borrowed from everything: art history, cinema and its stars, astronomy, Christian science, architecture, automatism, mythology, opera, literature, newspaper articles, childhood games, various found junk, and his own dreams. This flood of stimulation is woven into an art form that is singularly private. Though informed and interested in the Surrealist movement as a young man (forming friendships with many of its refugee founders), Cornell matured quickly, surpassing any group or movement to become an artist of peculiar originality.

Cornell also interests me as a collector. He scavenged New York flea markets on a weekly basis in search of little objects that might be of use in his private language of symbols. He combined these found jewels with a vast cultural knowledge and a curious
inventiveness to build a body of work that reflects “his deeply reverential view of the universe as a mirror of mysterious truth.” (Waldman 29) This sense of wonder never stoops to sentimental mannerism in Cornell’s work. Instead, we are witness to a man who has not allowed knowledge to rob him of his capacity to experience awe or gratitude. His many boxes demand specific attention individually but complicate exponentially like building blocks. The bulk of his total creation should be understood as a whole, informing one another like a well-edited book of photographs.

**Walker Evans**

The impulse to snatch meaning from the detritus of life is not unlike the desire that drives some photographers. The distinguished photographer Walker Evans was a notorious packrat; stealing handmade or worn signs from their locations, saving bottle caps and various items of trash, collecting postcards wherever he went, and as an older man, making and filing Polaroids of anonymous faces and streets. All of this serves an innate need to somehow possess or at least investigate the hidden phenomena of daily experience (my work’s ultimate goal), and it informed Evans’ work dramatically. His impulse toward the vernacular apparently manifested early on. Like myself, Evans also rearranged family photos into his own albums. He sequenced albums from newspaper clippings and magazine illustrations as well. This incorporation of the mass produced and anonymous prefigured Pop art by thirty years. Evans’ sophisticated understanding of sequence is most evident in his book *American Photographs*, arguably the

![Fig. 4. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, c. 1948 (Waldman 71).](image)

![Fig. 5. Walker Evans, *Penny Picture Display Birmingham*, 1936 (Evans, Plate 2).](image)
most imitated book in photographic history. It became a bible for photographers, spawning many disciples and so thoroughly entrenching itself into the cultural consciousness that many viewers unknowingly assume Evans’ own vision is an exact replication of “how things were.” In the text accompanying the photographs Lincoln Kerstein emphasizes Evans’ literary references. Indeed, Evans learned from the transparent style of French writers such as Flaubert while living in Paris as a young man and translating his literary heroes. This in itself may be interpreted as a form of collecting. Evans is quite specific in his choices of what to translate. He was forming in his mind a collection of influences, similar to what I am doing. Walker Evans’ work is ground zero for many photographers, but it is his multifaceted collection of the vernacular, the mass produced, and the anonymous that formed the foundation of his intense vision and his massive output. “I go to the street for the education of my eye and for the sustenance that the eye needs – the hungry eye, and my eye is hungry.” (Evans 8, Hambourg 9-11)

My own tendency to collect things manifested itself at first in comic books, then in found objects on the street, and eventually evolved into making Polaroids. This got me out in the world wandering around looking for things of interest. Photography would provide the means to bring form to these findings.

1. I initially learned Evans backwards through followers such as Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander. His influence reaches contemporary color photographers as well. Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld are mentioned later in this paper, but I am focusing on the source for these artists.
3. EGGLESTON

William Eggleston’s work dominated my thinking when I discovered it. Unlike many I know who claim to have been bored by their initial experience with the work, I think I understood it instantly. It just seemed right to me. It expanded my notions about what the medium might be capable of i.e. that the camera could serve as an extension of one’s eye and, in fact, be the means by which one relates to the world. *William Eggleston’s Guide*, Eggleston’s first book, had not yet received a second printing when I first started photographing. However, I had regular access to *The Democratic Forest* and *Ancient and Modern*, and it was through these publications that I initially developed a fairly intense relationship with his work. The idea that one might travel the world and yet feed and maintain a private vision astonished me, appealing to my wanderlust and probably an innate tendency toward the romantic. More importantly, the inventive way Eggleston deals with whatever happens to be around him gave me confidence in my own mistrust of strictly defined “subject matter.” John Szarkowski’s comment in the *Guide* that “one might say that a photograph’s subject is not its starting point but its destination” continues to ring true for me.(Szarkowski 7) This lesson that anything could be raw material for a photograph was not an altogether healthy obsession in terms of my own work. Like many of Eggleston’s immature followers, I made plenty of boring pictures, but I was stretched in my understanding of what a photograph could accomplish. I could not imagine a better use for the medium. So I went about it myself, wandering around with my 35mm camera and learning the language of my chosen medium.

Any discussion of the importance of Eggleston inevitably leads to color. Though it is currently considered naïve to refer to Eggleston as the “inventor” of modern color photography, he was the first color photographer to receive a solo exhibition by a major art museum - The Museum of Modern Art in 1976. At the time, the show was generally hated and misunderstood, receiving reviews citing banality and a lack of any formal qualities beyond the common snapshot. I believe it was Eggleston’s subtle color
use that was responsible for stumpng the critics, not to mention his deadpan incorporation of uncommon subjects. Eggleston’s color is so in key with the structure of his best pictures that they would fall apart in black and white. Color, more often than surprising composition, carries the weight of the image, yet it is generally quite naturalistic, even familiar. Eudora Welty would later warn that “familiarity will be what overwhelms” the viewer. (Welty 10) Familiarity in this case does not lead to comfort. Take the portrait at right for example (Fig. 7). The disinterested man holding the tiny teacup is seated under a salon style arrangement of frames. (Are those heads in the print above him?) At first it would seem that the photograph may as well be black and white; however, the childlike drawing of an orange tree against green grass and a blue sky reminds us of the necessity of color in this photograph. It is a clever lesson of how the specific use of color can alter the meaning and balance of a picture. In this case a small rectangle provides the only glowing relief from drab darkness. It is a sunny little joke at the expense of the man’s unshaven reticence. There is a strange intensity to these seemingly ordinary photographs. Robert Adams perceptively compares the problems of color photography with the difficulty of writing good free verse, both being close to what occur naturally. (Adams 8) For me it was one more thing to juggle, an additional challenge to the game I wanted to play with the world. Eggleston taught me as much about color use as any painter.

I put these lessons to use for a number of years deepening my pockets with my own pictures. Szarkowski’s description of an artist who is “uncertain as to what part of the content of his work answered to life and what part to art, and was perhaps even uncertain as to precisely where the
boundary between them lay” resonated with me during this period. (Szarkowski 5) One could either shut down as a result of this confusion, or choose to ignore the issue and get on with producing work. I chose the latter. Eventually I collected these photographs into an album as I had previously done with my family pictures. That little camera allowed me to make a sort of diary of my own; one of memory, criticism, and aggressive appreciation. The 35mm camera is a tool for quick response and instinct though, and I began to grow weary of its lack of finish. These early pictures seem to me now sketches or clues, and I have learned plenty from them.

Eggleston must enjoy a distinct position in mapping out the progression of my work due to his overwhelming early influence. However, it is the photographs made near his home in Memphis that inform my current thinking rather than the globetrotting bodies of work previously mentioned. Eggleston does not seem to court any special interest in his home. The purpose of the massive amount of pictures made from this region seems to be practical; this is where he happens to be most of the time. Indeed it is probably
Szarkowski’s initial curatorial ordering and definition of Eggleston’s early work that has molded my understanding as much as anything else. The possibility of building a private world of pictures around one’s personal experience of a place, even one’s home, produces an excitement that has not diminished in me. Discussing this ambition proves difficult since the subject of the pictures cannot be easily packaged around an idea. I agree again with Robert Adams, “useful pictures don’t start from ideas. They start from seeing.” (Adams 25) Eggleston’s work embodies this understanding. Fortunately for Eggleston, he could lean on the keen eye and perceptive intellect of Szarkowski to flesh out some of the underlying rhythms in his work and interpret them for the viewer through his edit and criticism. It helps to grasp some of the more elusive aspects of my own work by finding similar inclinations in the work of a photographer I greatly admire. “The ambitious photographer…seeks those pictures that have a visceral relation to his own self and his privileged knowledge, those that belong to him by genetic right, in which form matches not only content but intent.” (Szarkowski 13)

Fig. 11. William Eggleston, Tallahatchie Co. Mississippi, c. 1969 (Eggleston 29).

Fig. 12. Shawne Brown, Jonesborough, TN, 2000.
4. FORM AND CONTENT

*The arts aspire, if not to complement one another, at least to lend one another energies.*

*Charles Baudelaire (96)*

**Robert Motherwell**

My first experience in person with a Motherwell painting was in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. I was twenty-one. The painting was his mural *Reconciliation Elegy*, and it was a revelation. I had studied Motherwell’s work from the few books that I had access to, as well his own writing which I cherish. Although I was excited and anxious to finally stand before one of his paintings, I was not quite prepared for its emotional and intellectual onslaught. I was getting a glimpse of the fruits of Motherwell’s age and experience, his raw passion and awkward elegance – an accumulation of so much. The painting brought to the forefront something that I recognized instinctually as true. I can only presume that this was the experience with a piece of art that some academics claim only happens once; something that the viewer searches to experience again but cannot, something an artist continually tries to infuse his own work with. I doubt I would go that far, but it certainly was memorable.

Fig. 13. Robert Motherwell, *Reconciliation Elegy*, 1978 (Motherwell 62–63).
In discussing Motherwell’s vast series of *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (of which *Reconciliation Elegy* may be understood as a sort of conclusion), Frank O’Hara points out that “the possibility of the schema’s arousing such a broad range of associations, depending on the emotional vocabulary of the viewer, is a sign of its power to communicate human passion in a truly abstract way, while never losing its specific identity as a pictorial statement.”(O’Hara 19) In other words, Motherwell’s painting “engages the viewer in its meaning rather than declaring it.”(O’Hara 19)

Motherwell seems to me a peculiar and distinguished voice lumped conveniently within the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. Though he became their brightest apologist, his work stands beside (and above) that over-romanced period. His working lifespan might seem to be the practical reason for his longevity. True, he survived most of his peers, but the quality of his life’s oeuvre has more to do with his taste and tenacity than the luck of his health. Motherwell’s work is at once refined and brutal. His intellect and conscious humanity temper an intrinsic need to make marks without smothering it. Surely a man of Motherwell’s sophistication had many interests, but none of his preoccupations overtly disrupt the paintings. Instead, all of his work is infused with the most personal elements of the interior man. His ethical consciousness, love of materials, knowledge of literature, music, and philosophy all filter into his work organically. Motherwell is an example of bravery within a steady work ethic that promotes the evolution of themes not in rapid succession but slowly and methodically over a lifetime. Also, Motherwell’s work is an argument against the weak and unnecessary easiness of irony in art.
“The problem is to seize the glimpse. The ethic lies in not making the glimpse presentable.” (Motherwell 59) The subject of his paintings is nothing less than the sum of every mark, line, and brushstroke. The content cannot be explained or fully understood apart from actually looking at the individual paintings. In fact, the content does not exist without the form. Motherwell’s sense of balance on the canvas and his specific (and often spare) use of color are vehicles to suggest meaning. These are his modes of intent. A visual language is being spoken here. Form and content are inseparable in Motherwell’s work.

Charles Wright

This object and that object
Never contained the landscape

nor all of its implications,

This tree and that shrub
Never completely satisfied the sum or quotient
I took from or carried to,

nor do they do so now,

Though I’m back here again, looking to calculate,

Looking to see what adds up. (3)

This is how the poet Charles Wright opens up Chickamauga, the first book in a trilogy accumulatively known as his “Appalachian Book of the Dead.” This trilogy (Chickamauga, the Pulitzer Prize winning Black Zodiac, and Appalachia
respectively) has been a profound resource for me while photographing in East Tennessee. Looking is a central preoccupation in this epic. Wright admits his poems usually spring from “what I see rather than an idea I had in mind: idea follows seeing rather than the other way around.” (Wright) What he sees is then molded into his chosen form of expression. Similar to what Motherwell manages in paint, Wright accomplishes with words. Language is his medium. What is being said and how it is being said cannot be separated. To change one alters the other.

Wright first caught my attention with the title of the final book of the trilogy, *Appalachia*. I discovered that Wright lived as a child in Kingsport, TN, my hometown. His poems are littered with references to places that I know.

*The South Fork of the Holston River*

*slick as a nickel before its confluence behind our backs*

*at Rotherwood with the North Fork’s distant, blurred thunder (8)*

It is particularly poignant to me when Wright comments that “All forms of landscape are autobiographical,” since the setting for these discoveries is my home. More importantly, the structure of the language is married to the structure of the landscape. But Wright does not stop there. He hints at another landscape:

*We live in two landscapes, as Augustine might have said,*

*One that’s eternal and divine,*

*and one that’s just the backyard (27)*

Fig. 15. Shawne Brown, *Forks of the Holston River*, 2006.
Discovering a poet of Wright’s caliber expressing similar inclinations as those I inherited from my grandfather delighted me, particularly when focused on the same region. His questioning of what we think we know reveals courage and a searching honesty shared between some poets and preachers. Perhaps Wright himself acknowledges this with his comparative poems, *Lives of the Saints* and *Lives of the Artists* (a clever nod to his Italian literary roots).

*The world is a language we never quite understand,*

*But think we catch the drift of.*

*Speaking in ignorance*

*And joy, we answer*

*What wasn’t asked, by someone we don’t know, in strange tongues* (29)

Photography may seem ill suited to deal with these ephemeral issues, but I agree with Wright that they can be linked with the bones of what we do see. “I’m always looking at and thinking about how the exterior landscape reflects the interior and vice versa.” (Wright) This echoes photographer Robert Frank’s reply when asked about his motives. He shrugged, “I’m looking outside, trying to look inside.” (Frank 20) This may be uncomfortable to contemporary ears, but I am encouraged by this sincerity and still hope for its possibility. However, like Frank, Wright is no sloppy sentimentalist. The form of his poems conveys the meaning in ways that challenge and surprise rather than reaffirm nostalgic clichés. The work itself provides the best defense. Robert Frost’s response to a request to explain one of his poems must please Wright. He replied, “You want me to say it worse!?!”
Nothing’s more abstract, more unreal,

than what we actually see[…] (5)

Desire discriminates and language discriminates[…] (7)

All speech pulls toward privacy[…] (41)

Form and content are linked inseparably in these two artists’ work. Painting and poetry inform my photographs, and my approach to subject matter draws from their lessons. “Let us say that the true subject of the photograph is the same as - identical with - its total content. Then the photographer’s problem will be seen to be not the revision of a received model, but the discovery and precise definition of a new subject - a coherent idea, plucked from an inchoate sea of subject matter.” (Szarkowski 16) Otherwise it is just illustration. The presumption that a photograph should or even could accurately “document” anything without prejudice is a naïve understanding of its purpose and capabilities. Photography is as plastic as other art forms; however, due to its precise descriptive abilities (particularly in color) it is often mistaken as a kind of record. It is simply a more convincing liar. Although it may be true that photography, by its very nature is tied to its subject, it is no less capable of transforming or redefining that subject.

Equipped with this understanding and disposition, forming a coherent body of work now becomes the overriding problem. What should one look at? Or where?
5. ONE’S PLACE

Eugene Atget

Revisitation is a practical advantage of choosing a subject that is familiar and readily available. Eugene Atget’s subject was Paris. Within this grand framework Atget aspired to photograph everything – meaning everything that was historically, privately culturally, and aesthetically rich according to his own tastes. This expressed desire to possess everything within his geographic and philosophical territory freed Atget from the exhausting self-consciousness of art, allowing him to get to work building a pictorial catalogue devoted to his chosen place. “His problem was not the acquisition of a style, but the ability to make intuitive perceptual acts that subsumed everything – personal experience, the specificity of the moment, and deep cultural knowledge – into pictures.” (Hambourg 27, Vol.III)
Atget’s lifelong cataloguing of Paris now stands as an enigmatic beacon to photographic modernity, but there is something peculiarly fresh about his pictures of this city that continues to resonate with the viewer beyond the description of a subject. Walker Evans recognized it as “the projection of Atget’s person.” (17, Vol.IV) This shadow of self cast upon his work imbues these public spaces with a unique, private poetry. The picture of the stairway above (Fig. 16) hints at the existential flavor that would preoccupy the following generation, but Atget manages it with more restraint than most. Atget’s experience with and passion for theatre filtered into his life as a photographer. This picture, like many of Atget’s storefronts, entryways, and window displays, mimics a stage set frozen for the viewer to explore. “There are of course aspects of an artist’s subject matter that are so thoroughly in solution that they will not be filtered out by the finest screen, aspects that will be invisible to the artist himself, since they reflect knowledge and predilections as unconscious as his gestures and accent.”(Szarkowski 15, Vol.I) This quality I am attempting to define resembles the activity of water in a faucet much like the one at the bottom of Fig. 16, dripping slowly but ultimately filling the bucket.

Atget is of particular importance to me for his visual austerity, his complex homogenization of interests, and the daunting scope of his task. This was formed from personal desire and applied practically. There is certainly no shortage of pictures of Paris in the world, yet none have bettered Atget. It is not the uniqueness of the subject that makes his pictures interesting, it is the quality of the vision. This allows the stuff of daily life to serve an art that is plucked and molded from reality. Here a common thing becomes a symbol, raised by definition and description from what is known to what is discovered. His temperament, methodology, and serious work ethic allowed him to meet this ambitious endeavor with certain rigor and a peculiar grace.
I leaned on Atget heavily during my first project using the view camera. I moved to Nashville to photograph an abandoned slaughterhouse and quickly realized my 35mm would not fit the job of describing this beautiful space. So I began to use a 4x5 view camera. It was my first attempt to focus on a specific subject, and I spent a year at it. The logistics of handling the large camera forces one to slow down and be more specific about what is included in the frame; it is no longer a whim. Not distracted by travel and criticism, having that enormous place to myself, and being alone with a subject taught me a lot about how I see. I also spent hours studying Atget’s work closer than ever. His visual economy and specific attention to how light transforms space at different times of day informed that project a great deal. Yet somehow, even in these specific parameters, I chafed within the confines of a subject, refusing to obviously subscribe to a preconceived notion of what these pictures were “about.” I was discovering my form, but had yet to find its appropriate content.
Discussing the work of one’s teacher can be tricky because personal and artistic influences are often difficult to separate neatly. However, I find it necessary to confront Mike Smith’s work here considering the physical similarities of our materials - large, unmanipulated (or “straight”) color photographs, as well as the fact that he has been photographing in the region I am working in for over twenty-five years. His work, like that of those mentioned previously, has been earned by consistency, intimate knowledge of a tradition, and hands on exploration. Smith works with a solid understanding of photographic history and aesthetics under his belt, and he knows who he is as an artist. Loosely, his subject is this place, East Tennessee – something he wants to learn about. Under that umbrella his pictures vary widely with a pulse that is his own. Humor, empathy, and precision inform pictures filled with mud, atmosphere, decay, doll heads, coon paws, crosses, and recently, the encroachment of mass culture into the landscape. Though the land seems to be the overall envelope in which these theatrics are delivered, Smith’s work is ultimately about people. What people do and make, how they live, interests him a great deal. A search for interesting raw material is only the surface impulse for making photographs. It is an ongoing investigation of how the camera can render light, color, and space, transforming the world in a picture, that continues to peak Smith’s curiosity. Through hard work his own perception has matured and defined itself within this visual language. “To render the relationships between and among things, to find the orderly within the disorderly, and to wrest meaning from the inchoate are the tests of good photography. According to the philosopher William Gass, the photographic act is that of a “finder”; it ‘turns accidents into ends; it pulls orderly groups out of disorderly heaps; it rerelates things in picture space’…”(Sobieszek 15)

Although Smith has lived in East Tennessee for twenty-six years, his subject is still exotic to him. The distance of an outsider is a necessary disposition to create this kind of work. Smith can objectively investigate the contemporary mountain culture without
many of the presumptions and preoccupations of a native. This is not to suggest that he has not managed to integrate on some
levels. He is able to get into places that many locals would not even attempt. Smith’s voracious eye has not become bored by
intimacy but has continued to search for new elements to add to a body of work that will and should, like it’s predecessors here, be
understood as a single evolving relationship to a medium and a subject. My work owes much to his influence.

The quick summary is that I am in this for the long haul. These artists have spent their lives exploring something personally relevant, something they believed in. Their work often stands apart from the dominating trends of their day, though some of them may have been loosely associated. In each of these men’s work the viewer is confronted with a private vision. This alone is what I expect of myself. I want to mix the freedom and visual exploration of my 35mm work with the sturdy resolve and personal clarity of the view camera and aim it at something I am emotionally and intellectually invested in – the private experience of a place; this place being my home as I understand it. I see my work in terms of its historical context as being similar to an additive ingredient rather than a plot on a timeline. These influences should be wholly digested, layered with restraint, and spread democratically throughout my work.

Fig. 20. Mike Smith, Cash Hollow, TN, 1999 (Smith 73).

Fig. 21. Shawne Brown, Jessica, Johnson City, TN, 2005.
6. EXEGESIS

I once said that I quit painting because I was more interested in the world than in myself. I now recognize that the two are coextensive, not contradictory; one is informed by the other. I have come to accept that my shadow rests over my photographs no matter how hard I try to step out of the way. Hopefully this is not overtly apparent. I returned to school in East Tennessee to create a body of work that openly attempts to investigate how photographs might merge the two (self and world) in an instant without seeming too vague, trivial, or abstract. Focusing on my home seems to practically fit this task. Whatever else a photograph may be about, it is inherently about the the present, even an eternal present, codified in the moment. However, I have tried to look at this place in a way that is less definite, suggesting “the past, present, and future at once,” as Robert Adams says. “You want ghosts, and the daily news, and prophecy.” (Adams 44) Such attempts can be difficult to pinpoint early on. When an artist (particularly a photographer, whose work is often understood sequentially) does not obviously focus on a specific tangible subject, discussing their own work can feel impossibly vague. I have always held to an evasively hard headed position toward explanation agreeing with Charles Wright again, “too many things are not left unsaid.” (Wright 8). It is convenient and often misleading. What follows is a description of certain attributes in three photographs that might serve as representations of the whole group to form “collectively a paradigm of a private view.” (Szarkowski 14)

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2. John Szarkowski’s influence runs through this paper like a river. He is, along with Robert Adams, one of the most articulate interpreters of photographs. Both men are quoted heavily in this paper. Adams for his unacademic candor in writing plainly and intimately about pictures. Szarkowski for his keen understanding of the nature of the medium. I lean heavily on his reading of Atget and Eggleston in particular. It would merit an entire paper to discuss his enormous influence. Though his dominance is being questioned in my generation (which is healthy), I am reminded of Howard Bloom’s reply to the question “Why Shakespeare?” He answered glibly, “Who else is there?” (Bloom 1) This applies to Szarkowski. His recent death is in my mind while writing.
This photograph (Fig. 22) eludes specific temporal and geographic identification. This could be Anywhere, USA within the past few decades. The picture is rich with descriptive detail, but what else is it about besides the surface of things? A photographer wants to see what is behind facades. This may partially explain the many photographs of alleyways that exist. Photographers have been snooping around off the main streets at least since Atget. His photograph was a surprising recent rediscovery for me in terms of its similarities with mine. The placement of the lamp echoes the streetlight in the later picture. Even the tire track at the bottom of the frame is mirrored by the cart rivets worn into the cobblestone street a century earlier. Both of these pictures are precise definitions of space. Photographer Stephen Shore explains that a photographer’s starting place for building a picture cannot be the same as a painter’s, who will often begin in the middle of his picture, possibly with his subject’s face or some other point of interest. A photographer,
however, begins with a picture’s edges and builds inward since the frame is how he defines his image from the rest of the world. This is an important understanding of the structure of photographic space. Photography is not an additive process like painting. It is an analytical process; the camera being essentially a problem solving device. This is apparent in Shore’s picture. His space is specifically defined by the edges before receding back on the railroad tracks of the shadows toward the distant mountains. This may be closer to sculpture in that the raw material must be subtracted from to realize the finished form. The edges cannot be handled casually in a photograph. A photographer is responsible for every choice he makes. (Shore 173-183)

These tools brought coherence and purpose to an initial notion to walk around and look at my grandmother’s hometown. Maybe it was the local muralist’s quaint reference to art history that made me stop and begin to build a picture, or the tire tracks, or simply the light on the buildings. The completed photograph suggests a pause. A silent moment between passing traffic and cultural change. Photographs can be similar to poems in this fashion. They can pretend to live in between the action, like a breath, but somehow still remain relevant to the larger progression. In this way, a picture can maintain presence individually, but strengthen in sequence like links on a chain.

Photographing people is difficult. Many pictures fall into a vague or staged sentimentality when human beings are the focus; something easy and jaded or too devoted to cultural context. The contemporary response to this problem is often boring or cold, pretentiously presuming that by stripping away emotion and environment something closer to the truth can be isolated. Truth exists outside of our interpretation. How to allude to it in a picture is the more interesting question.

Fig. 25. Walker Evans, Fulton St. NYC, 1929 (Evans, Plate 17).
The picture of my grandmother in her doorway is one of the more direct and structurally simple photographs in the exhibition. The quality of the light, her beautiful skin and hair, what she is wearing, and the moment that she leans out of the darkness against the doorframe all coalesce to form an intimate photograph. It is late and the light is still on, unlike the lamp in the Eggleston picture. The woman in his photograph is receding in space, dominated by the interior with no natural light. Ruby is leaning forward into the late light. The simplicity allows the viewer to meditate on the subject’s situation. She is alone. The woman in Evans’ photograph (Fig. 25.) is alone as well, though she is on a busy New York street and also anchored in the frame by a vertical structure. It is the gaze of these three women that unites them more than anything. The direction of their focus is “out there” beyond the frame suggesting another level of importance outside of the literal description of the photograph. Finding a halcyon existence between these two worlds of fact and suggestion is the business of the quiet photograph.

Ideally, my picture would imply a specific, private experience without hiding behind academic qualification. “The fight against the rhetorical insistence on what we ought to say, rather than what we really feel, is...important.” (Gopnik 34) I want to look at this woman I know so well with an informed silence bending away from dogma. The presentation of hope without sentiment is sometimes necessary for survival.
Photographs, which incline toward the local and specific, can also be vehicles for metaphor. This picture of my friend by the river (Fig. 28) is one of the first photographs I made upon returning to East Tennessee in 2004, and it hinted at the direction I wanted this work to go. It is balanced, both structurally and in terms of its ability to live in the two worlds mentioned earlier. It also manages to use the overwhelming greens of an Appalachian summer. Motherwell’s painting below is a lesson in subtle variations of green, and it is obviously marked by the strange script of a human being. In the photograph, the figure is similarly marked, as is the tree (with a binary code?). Motherwell borrows as his title the first word of James Joyce’s novel *Finnegan's Wake*, “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s...” (Joyce 3) This Eden is scarred, complete with a plastic trash bag containing a McDonald’s cup. Even the serpent is present at the bottom right corner. But the light is perfect. It is the defining element in the photograph.

Fig. 28. Shawne Brown, *Melissa by the South Holston River*, 2004.

Fig. 29. Robert Motherwell, *Riverrun*, 1972 (Ashton 97).
Rivers are used expressively in all of the arts. Joyce uses his opening line to imply the flow of words that will define his novel. Leonardo thought of rivers as the veins of the world, in line with his desire to define nature and anatomy as mirrors of one another. (Kemp 133) Andy Goldsworthy leans heavily on the change and flux that the river represents. In Joel Sternfeld’s photograph, at right, the man by the Mississippi River is “caught between the edge of the landscape and the absolute.” (Wright 92) The picture of Melissa draws from and comments on these artistic precursors, but there is another reference closer to home.

The picture below is one of the family photographs from my collection. The boy second to last in line to be baptized is my grandfather. The action of light through a lens onto film is again providing us with more than we bargained for; in this case, a hint of the Spirit. I remember years later hearing him preach on the River of God, which flows throughout time bringing new life to those who would be swept up and submerged in its current. This is the same place I was baptized as a boy decades later, and it is the same river flowing south to where Melissa is pictured dipping her hand in the water. These complex associations color my relationship to photography, linking my photographs to personal and historical influences that are difficult to sift out. The photograph should work on its own, without these explanations, but I am becoming more comfortable with searching for their source. Perhaps my picture can be seen as a contemporary translation of the old spiritual quoted by Charles Wright, “Let’s all go down to the river.” (Wright 47)
7. CONCLUSION

To me it seems that the pictures here are about the photographer’s home, about his place, in both important meanings of that word. One might say about his identity...[I]t does not mean that the pictures are not also simultaneously about photography, for the two issues are not supplementary but coextensive...Thus if we see the pictures clearly as photographs, we will perhaps also see, or sense, something of their other, more private, willful, and anarchic meanings.

John Szarkowski (6)

I quote Szarkowski a final time as a means to measure this work. These possibilities of the medium have been a guide while piecing together this private album. The photographs are meant to stand on their own yet work in tandem. The sequence leads the viewer on a symbolic visual tour of this place as I know it. However, I have come to accept that these pictures do not conveniently form an idealized, completed project, but will most likely continue as a lifelong endeavor. Nevertheless, I am no longer wondering about the unknown picture made by the man in the first family photograph. I am defining that for myself.

The word exegesis implies one’s critical interpretation, generally of a text, and is commonly applied to Scripture. This seems an odd title to attach to a group of photographs, but it serves as an umbrella, allowing room for the pictures to define their subjects individually, rather than rigidly declaring an idea for the photographs to illustrate. It must be understood that these pictures are the result of an interpretive investigation of my home, defined by my choice of medium and approach, as well as interior inclinations that are more elusive to discussion. I want to look hard at where I am from, but this is not a record. It is an attempt to really see my own
landscape. Annie Dillard gives the best definition of this complex word, “Landscape consists in the multiple, overlapping intricacies and forms that exist in a given space at a moment in time. Landscape is the texture of intricacy...” (Dillard 139)

The hills still echo for me with my grandfather’s (and now my father’s) sermons. Looking at the landscape from the backseat of the car with those powerful words and songs fresh in my mind as a kid was probably the seed that led to the production of this work. Like an itch that I could not quite scratch while travelling and photographing, I have known for some time that I wanted to seriously explore my home in pictures without sentimentality or easy judgement. This is the reason I returned to East Tennessee to pursue an MFA. Unlike Joyce, I have created this work not through liberation from my home but through engagement with it, yet I have discovered that it is the camera that defines the subject for me, not any particular place. I realize that the possibility of suggesting more than what we presently see is vital to the way I want to use the medium. The impetus behind this work is not all that different from what drove my grandfather, and surprisingly I find myself agreeing with him and the old hymn that this, in fact, is not my home.
CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

[Images of art gallery with framed photographs on walls and a bench in the center]

35
Gate City, VA, 2005
Breaking Beans, Kingsport, TN, 2004
Monument, Kingsport, TN, 2006
The Appalachian Fair, Gray, TN, 2004
Melissa by the South Holston River, 2004
Spring Snow, East TN, 2007
Ruby, 2007
Forks of the Holston River, 2006
WORKS CITED


<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/041698wright-poetry>

<http://pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june98/wright_4-15>
EDUCATION

2008  MFA, Photography, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

2005  BFA, Photography, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2007  Adjunct Instructor, East Tennessee State University
       Graduate Teaching Assistant, East Tennessee State University

2000-  Assistant to Mike Smith on multiple assignments for The New York Times Magazine,
       Harper’s, Newsweek, and The Washington Post

EXHIBITIONS / PUBLICATIONS

2007  Out of the South, Atlanta Photography Group, Atlanta, GA
       Exegesis, Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, TN
       The Artist’s Book, Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, TN
       New Work, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN
       S.P.A. Exhibition, Tipton St. Gallery, Johnson City, TN
       VISION Magazine (Interview), Issue 3

2006  New Work, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN
       S.P.A. Exhibition, Nelson Fine Arts, Johnson City, TN
2005  *First Tennessee Bank Show*, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN  
*Photographs*, Main Arts Center, Kingsport, TN

2003  *The Neuhoff Project*, Nashville International Airport, Nashville, TN  
*Neuhoff at Neuhoff*, Nashville Cultural Arts Project, Nashville, TN  
*A Front*, Spot Gallery, Nashville, TN  
*The Tennessean* (Interview)  
NPR Interview

2002  *Photographs*, Nashville Jazz Workshop, Nashville, TN  
*Nashville City Paper* (Interview)

2001  *Subjective Matter*, Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, TN

2000  *First Tennessee Bank Show*, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN

1999  *S.P.A. Exhibition*, Milligan College, Johnson City, TN

1998  *First Tennessee Bank Show*, William Christenberry (Juror), Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN  
*Photo Review*, Larry Fink (Juror)