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HEARING THROUGH WALLS

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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  
Masters of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by  
Bradley Marshall

May 2018

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Tema Stauffer, Committee Chair

Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay

Travis Graves

Keywords: photography, domesticity, lost youth, coming of age, masculinity

## ABSTRACT

### *Hearing Through Walls*

by

Bradley Marshall

The photographer discusses work in “Hearing Through Walls”, a Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibit held at downtown Tipton Gallery from February 19th through March 2nd, 2018. The exhibition consists of 15 archival inkjet prints and one two-channel video piece, representing the artist’s three-year exploration into narrative forms in image making. Using non-traditional approaches to photographic portraiture and experimental exhibition layout, the artist forms questions around themes of domesticity, lost youth, and American masculinity. Among these themes is an investigation into photographic issues, including the cultural role that photographs play in perpetuating, miming, and disrupting the facades of everyday life. Non-photographic influences are listed, including the paintings of Edward Hopper and the filmmaking of Paul Thomas Anderson. Historic and contemporary photographic influences included are Garry Winogrand, William Eggleston, Philip-Lorca Dicorcia, and Katy Grannan.

Installation photographs and a catalog of the exhibition are included at the end of the thesis.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“It is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there”-William*

*Carlos Williams (Williams)*

In the early nineteenth century, the English Romantic poet John Keats developed the idea of “negative capability,” which urged for a poet to describe the world around him or her with great reverie for the unknown. For Keats, the poet’s responsibility is not to distill the world into a series of ideals and truths, but to revel in its “uncertainties, Mysteries, [and] doubts [sic],” which can serve as a means of preserving and elevating an essential part of the human experience (Li 1). To Keats, the unknown is key to the poetic.

It has been said by more than one person that poetry and photography share similarities. Poet turned photographer Tod Papageorge writes, “A photographer must employ what Zen calls the ‘ten thousand facts’ ...just as a poet can only use the ten thousand words of her language” (Papageorge). Within these differing forms the artist and writer alike struggle to achieve a perfect combination of words and elements which efficiently ascribe meaning to the world around them. Both create meaning through the manipulation and transformation of language--one visual, while the other verbal. In this way, the two mediums find kinship not just in approach to form and content, but through contending with the shared language of symbolism.

I see the ideas of negative capability in an artist’s willingness to take risks. Surely all new and exciting art *works* because it is something new, and this confrontation with the unfamiliar forces us to reassess our relationship with the world as we know it. Obviously, this is an uncomfortable realm to exist in, yet to be open to this idea—let alone achieve it—takes artistic risk that can yield great reward.

My work comes about as a byproduct of open-ended searching. I often find that my best work is smarter than I am; I recognize when a picture works, but my words and thoughts have to catch up. The images that persist usually take longer to understand, making them more challenging and ultimately more rewarding. As Barthes writes in his seminal text, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, “The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (Barthes 51). It’s this process of creating, reviewing, and getting back to work that helps keep my process explorative, open-ended, and progressive. Preconceived ideas can’t always provide the results I want. I’m initially interested in how the camera sees something—as this is very different from human vision—and how this transformative process can warp my ideas into unforeseen realms. This approach often produces something far more interesting than what can actually be conceptualized, and affirms for me that my own ideas rarely can contend with the rich unpredictability of the world untethered. I can’t say that art gives answers to life’s great questions, but the process of making art through photography leaves me with brief moments of satisfaction and clarity.

In a world saturated with photographs, I ask certain questions to understand my medium better. Does a photograph hold any responsibility to the truth? Can a photograph be truthful, yet also staged? These questions hold contentious grounds within the documentary photography tradition. The literalness implied by “documentation” would seem to exist in opposition to narrative and fiction, and I have become increasingly skeptical of the medium to produce any factual evidence from the real world. As Susan Sontag writes, “the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth” (Sontag 49).

I personally believe in the power of fiction when looking at photographs to produce something far more telling than fact. Tod Papageorge has spoken out before against Sontag’s



apologist attitudes within photography, as he refutes that photographs are “indexical” to reality yet function primarily with the fragmented intentions of fiction (Papageorge). Of course, I understand that photographs are intrinsically interesting because they are *in fact* a direct reference to something in the real world; and I take this divisive issue as a challenge to subvert the viewer’s expectations and deny anything reducible as fact *or* fiction. This in-between space has become a discursive source of interest for my ideas and a liberating force from the exhaustion of such a tired debate.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has helped me to better contend with such conflicting ideas around imagery. He writes in his essay *Simulacra and Simulations*, “perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real...to this murderous capacity is opposed...[representation] as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real” (Baudrillard 3). For Baudrillard and many Postmodern thinkers, the world is a series of symbols far removed from their original signifiers, and any representation found in photography is only a simulation of a once-real thing. Baudrillard’s notions make believability in photography a dangerous assertion. The obvious solution to this problem would be to deny all truth in photographs; although this would prove to be a much too easy fix. Instead, photographers often find the perverse pleasure of indulging in both camps.

From my earliest encounter with art photography—which was in the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, I understood that a photograph could teach me something about a given culture. I quickly realized that Bresson was ordering the chaos of the world with sophistication; he was structuring these moveable parts into legible “picture-poems” (Papageorge). I began to understand that by moving an inch one direction or the other, an infinite combination of possibilities within the world could become apparent and contingent. This concept only excites

me further as I continue photographing ten years later. Although my research in photography takes up a different tactical approach from Bresson, I've never lost interest in the human element. This continually reaffirms my conviction that photographs contain a specific power in revealing things about the world that I cannot get from any other medium. As I see it, the camera is capable of giving a person agency to make observations about his or her culture in a very direct manner that few other mediums permit.

My research is indebted to many artists from a variety of mediums. I would hate to think that I have only found influence in photography—I've especially learned a great deal from working with professors within other mediums who have urged me to step out and attempt to express ideas within new materials. It pains me to leave out so many key figures when tracing my influences, yet I hope that what I have included will give proper evidence to the fact that my ideas about art and discussions around photography are constantly evolving and never produced in a vacuum. The history of photography itself is rife with masterful works that I have taken great influence from—if not simply in subject matter and stylistics, but in attitude and philosophy. This history is founded on common values such as tradition and influence—while also innovation, rebellion, and tenacity. During my time pursuing my master's degree I would like to think that I have aligned most with the latter.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONTEXT AND CONTENT

*“Creating is living doubly.” –Albert Camus (Camus 94)*

Before pursuing my MFA degree, I was working with inner-city youth in Nashville, Tennessee. What began for me as a means of simply making money, eventually led to an important connection with the people that I interacted with regularly. While working there I was forced to re-experience the coming-of-age narrative as it happened right in front of me. As the dynamics of male behavior are most pronounced at this age, I was reminded that I too acted out of aggression, competition, and isolation—seemingly as a form of confronting the discomfort of growth. I began photographing the people at this youth center by proximity, and I had no intentions of continuing this research beyond the job. However, in my first year of my Masters of Fine Art program I realized that some of the images made before school contained the complexity of compelling portraiture and narrative imagery, suggesting a more in-depth study. This realization paired with the social and political climate formed the basis of my exploration and research into the tumultuous state of young manhood. These ideas evolved into something more expansive, including conceptual issues regarding the medium of photography itself, yet these early ideas have helped ground the creation of a body of work that has helped to form my thesis exhibition.

*Hearing Through Walls* takes an interest in domesticity, lost youth, and American masculinity. Within this narrative is an exploration into the rituals of coming-of-age, made in response to the mounting tensions found within the current state of male youth culture. The images investigate claims of violence and isolation, as these issues represent a distinctly American male identity. My images don't intend to deal with violence head on; instead they

represent a kind of frustration that one feels when hearing about such issues that our culture fails to approach with any transparency. I'm most interested in how social issues assimilate into the canon of popular culture, ultimately becoming normalized, banal, and accepted.

As a method of resisting a traditional documentary approach, I have worked to explore different approaches to addressing the subject matter and iconography of masculinity. These concepts usually represent a strategy for re-approaching portraiture standards. I devised an early method for navigating *whom* to photograph and *how* using statistics and photographing male subjects between the ages of 20-24 (Shukla). The statistical information was cited as the average age-range and gender most commonly associated with violent crime, and served as a simple starting point for making portraits. Although statistics serve to provide broad information, I wanted to suggest that ultimately these figures reduced a complex issue into propaganda for rhetorical use. As I see it, the reductive nature of statistical analysis works in opposition to notions of identity, which can then be re-presented to someone through portraiture. The photographs show faces and identities concealed, for the actions and identities of these subjects should be called into question. I depicted activities such as smoking and hanging around (and onto) buildings, as these activities seemed capable of alluding to boredom and violence—yet the images themselves show little violence explicitly (Fig. 1). I wanted to lead the viewer into a narrative that contained elements of violent iconography yet gave little answers, reflecting my own frustrating feelings within the topic. Because these statistics suggested such a directed and pragmatic reading it was important that the images asked the viewer to ultimately make their own decisions.

The photographs in *Hearing Through Walls* not only explore social-political themes, but take a more direct interest in the making of photographs. In this way, the work explores the

cultural role photographs play in perpetuating, miming, and disrupting the facades that exist within everyday life. As I mentioned before in the work of Cartier-Bresson, I am compelled by the way photographs can show us something about human social interaction and culture. With



Figure 1. Bradley Marshall. *Lee Harvey Oswald T-shirt, Kingsport, TN, 2016*. Archival Inkjet Print.

my approach to photographing in a semi-staged manner, I am interested in how these contrived images can then warp our readings of an authentic social interaction and traditional documentary image. I find that these images can suggest a kind of artifice in our everyday cultural norms that mirrors the influences and falsehoods of a youthful social identity. This unique space asks the viewer to re-approach and question the nature of social interaction, the codified nature of gesture and language, and the construction of social identity. For example, in *Lauren and Jordan, 2016*, (Fig. 2), we see a visually dense, layered scene that from our initial readings is difficult to dissect.

There are certainly levels of artifice at play in this image, not only in the artificiality of the background, but also within the interactions between the two truncated characters. The odd cropping of human limbs reminds us that the camera can withhold information from the viewer. The woman's hand is uninspired and limp; the man's hand is in a fist. Are these gestures convincing? What do they mean? After looking at this image, we wonder why these people are even here—there seems to be an outside influence that we cannot see. The deliberate



Figure 2. *Lauren and Jordan*, 2016. 25"x30". Archival Inkjet Print.

construction of this image serves to force the viewer into questioning the visual appearance of this scene and the motives and gestures of the people. Barthes' ideas of "Flat Death" within the photograph come to mind here. The juxtaposition of natural and artificial flora here attests to Barthes concerns that, "...by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of 'what has been,' modern society has renounced the Monument [sic] (Barthes 93). From a viewer's perspective, the camera is merely the witness of a seemingly banal scene. Upon further reading, this scene offers us a fragmented glimpse into everyday interactions excerpted and reconstructed into a kind of cryptic tableaux.

The narrative form in photography allows for a shifting of perspectives, and embraces the idiosyncrasies and discontinuities that wouldn't necessarily exist in a documentary context. By this I mean that the people and places in my photographs exist as solely fictional, and whatever meaning is derived from the work takes shape through the metaphorical or symbolic readings of the images. I enjoy the fragmented nature of photography as it contains a certain lack of explanation and an inherent muteness.

The narrative that I'm working to construct is set in a domestic, suburban locale, which serves as a kind of stage for tensions to build. The appearance-driven facades of domesticity inform the work both physically and metaphorically, and I'm interested in the architecture of interior spaces to imply some psychological reading within the human element. In *Untitled, Nashville, TN, 2017* (Fig. 3), we see a large "X" formed on the outer facade of a suburban American home. This image can be seen as an establishing shot. This house is marked both literally and symbolically, the crossing of power lines—a banal and typical punctuation within the domestic landscape—becomes a source of allusion. Because the image is at night and in

black and white, an aesthetic decision worth noting, the reading takes on a dramatic shift, becoming suffused with pathos and a feeling that some sort of ominous event is at work here.



Fig. 3. Bradley Marshall, *Untitled*, Nashville, TN, 2017, 25"x30" Archival Inkjet Print.

Dramatic events are seemingly happening off-frame either before or after the picture is made in many of the images in *Hearing Through Walls*, and I take great care to achieve a kind of balance in a picture that doesn't reveal too much or too little. To me, the suburban landscape is perfect for building psychological tension because pop-culture has long perpetuated this reading.

Coming from a suburban background myself, I believe in the banal mythologies built within this landscape from both good and bad perspectives. As this exhibition is focused on rituals of American masculinity, lost youth, and notions of artifice, I find that the suburban



context offers a perfect vessel for all of these themes to coalesce. The suburban lifestyle is one based on appearances and on artifice, which includes the construction of a social identity and the pressures of American masculinity.

Alongside the visual explorations within the exhibition, I continue to be interested in how photographs can shift meaning through editing and sequence. This process takes lots of time and understanding of the images at hand and the intentions and concepts that are to be conveyed. Photographs are often experienced and displayed in book form, which rewards the reader with a more intimate and prolonged viewing experience. While the monograph is more intimate and accessible, the exhibition space offers the viewer a more immersive and confrontational interaction with the work. Both presentation methods require acute attention to detail and structure in efforts to best convey narrative and visual cues for the viewer. The linear structure of a book doesn't always translate into the physicality of an exhibition, which is a caveat that I take into consideration when selecting works and preparing for a show.

## CHAPTER 3

### CINEMA AND PAINTING AS INFLUENCE

*“My only master has been life, since I believe that cinema must derive from life, and not vice versa.” – Federico Fellini (Peri 3)*

If poetry is akin to photography in spirit, then cinema is linked by blood. Yet unlike photography, cinema is time-based and experiential; the moving image harbors the capability of transporting the viewer into a narrative that reveals itself over time, which offers itself a variety of advantages. Cinema, like photography, has a seemingly opaque relationship to mass and popular culture. Movies are accessible to all people and are surely the most widely used form of art. However, it's important to note the distinction between movies and art-house cinema; while I admit to liking films from all genres, it's the art-filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and Jean-Luc Godard that have produced films of lasting impact and challenged the ways in which I watch and think about movies and visual art. These classic directors knew from the outset that watching movies could be more than a simple form of entertainment or escapism. They used realism, suspense, and played into our fears, psychologies, and expectations to shake the audience out of a casual viewing experience. To me, this is where the art in cinema lies. Great filmmakers experiment with story and narrative, and push the formal limitations of the cinematic medium in efforts to provoke something in the viewer.

*Paul Thomas Anderson*

Paul Thomas Anderson is a Los Angeles-based, contemporary filmmaker who has written and directed films such as *Boogie Nights*, *There Will Be Blood*, and *The Master*. Anderson is surely one of the great filmmakers of this generation, and his work is known for continually pushing the boundaries of the cinematic art form. Thematically, his films move between contemporary melodrama and period piece. Anderson depicts struggling characters (often male)

who seem to be at odds with society and themselves. The failure of these male characters represents a uniquely American pathology that I attempt to better understand in my work. Anderson approaches classic themes of loss, alienation, and love, with an experimental edge that serves to an unsettling portrayal of alienation and failure within the American landscape. George Toles describes these feelings of disillusionment as, “the specter of damaged male souls in arrested development,” where they are performing a repeated quest for atonement as a kind of seeking of pleasure and satisfaction through greed, lust, violence, and wanderlust (Toles 4).

Anderson’s films experiment with formal limitations as well as narrative direction. As Toles writes, “The departure from traditional, readable narrative structure seems to be a necessary corollary for Anderson’s deepening fascination with human unknowability” (Toles 4). The protagonist of *Punch Drunk Love*, Barry Egan, is a man who lives in fear of the world around him while hopelessly searching for love and acceptance in the wrong places. His attempts to find these things can be found in hare-brained schemes, including collecting frequent-flyer miles through pudding box tops, and awkward late-night conversations with sex hotlines. These comedic activities are punctuated by underlying outbreaks of intense violence whenever his plans fail or he is somehow wronged: “his rage has the capacity to do serious damage...to Barry and whomever seeks to draw near him emotionally” (Toles 30).

In *The Master*, Freddie Quell has newly returned from World War II and struggles with alcoholism and mental-illness. He rambles about the country until he is taken in by “The Cause,” a cult group that offers him the seductive notion of direction and responsibility. The cult leader, Lancaster Dodd (who is an allusion toward founding Scientologist L. Ron Hubbard), offers Freddie acceptance and adoration, although the structures and illusions of his ideology cause tension within Freddie.

I find that photographs can only suggest stories, not tell them. Therefore, I attempt to learn from Anderson's accounts of human life and use them to enrich my own silent character studies. The recurrent themes of alienation and ritual serve as a realistic reminder of the American condition. His experimentation with narrative and formal beauty set a precedence for the evocative and challenging potential of filmmaking. Cinema has clearly influenced my photography on an aesthetic level, at least in the ways that I stage and light elements of my pictures. In a similar way to how photographs educate me about the world in a specific way, cinema has visual and cultural power, and I entertain the idea of borrowing elements from each.

*Edward Hopper*

*"Photography has one leg in painting and one leg in life but the two things must be combined." – Brassai*

*(Brassai)*

Although I have never painted, I feel deeply indebted to the nineteenth and twentieth-century painters that ushered in the Modernist era. Edouard Manet's subversive depictions of French social life, and Henri Matisse's flattened-out, color-centric interiors have influenced me a great deal from an early point. Pierre Bonnard's psychological depictions of odd and sexually tense domestic scenes also greatly affect me. For a photographer who is interested in light and color, studying painting is the logical first step for learning what has already been done. I see learning from painting as a way of breaking the habits and redundancy that sometimes accompanies photographic seeing alone.

Edward Hopper is of great importance to me, specifically in how he is able to find beauty in a banal and vernacular America. His work is suffused with a longing and alienation representative of a uniquely American landscape. Hopper's 1963 painting, *Sun in an Empty Room*, is a painting that struck me early on, and forced me to reconsider what I knew about light,

and how this informed subject matter. Such a bold statement is made through a muted gesture and I find it as an iconoclastic statement in the contexts of his era. After all, it's just light in a room. Still, Hopper's pathos persists even in such minimal circumstances. The open space and lack of narrative in the painting allows the viewer to construct and project their own direction. As Hopper was famously laconic, he however explains, "any psychological idea will have to be supplied by the viewer..." (Levin 64). As this was one of Hopper's last paintings, I see its emptiness as imbued with a heightened sense of uncertainty, melancholy, and finality.

As the photographer Gregory Crewdson remarked, "[Hopper's] still vignettes seem eternally suspended in an instant between 'before' and 'after,'" which I see as a very photographic way of seeing. The fluidity of Hopper's scenes rejects any forthright readings of his work and forces us into a greater fictional headspace when searching for narrative. I consider Hopper exemplary when it comes to exercising a kind of visual restraint in my work. I find that if a photograph tells too much of the story, then it becomes easy or heavy-handed. The fragmented and unguarded content that I look for suggests the symbolic, instead of giving into the literal or purely representational. To me this liberates the photograph from preoccupations with truth and allows for a richer and more subjective experience to take place.

## CHAPTER 4

### PHOTOGRAPHY AS INFLUENCE

“...can an artist visually describe another person with some degree of ‘truth’? One might begin by accepting that it is impossible...” -Gregory Halpern (Halpern)

*Garry Winogrand*

Winogrand is seen as a key figure in freeing photography from its modernist ties within the first half of the 20th century. The *New Documents* exhibition of 1967 featured work by Winogrand and ushered in a radical new approach to viewing and photographing the world. Winogrand’s images are complex observations that arrange the chaos of metropolitan streets into a sophisticated commentary on the oddities found within the dynamics of everyday life.

Winogrand is next in line after Cartier-Bresson as a formative influence in my understanding of photography. After first seeing the image *Hollywood and Vine, Los Angeles, 1969* (Fig. 4), I realized there was a tremendous ability in the candid street-photograph. In the middle of the frame we see a slender group of women strolling idly out from within intense, angular rays of late afternoon sunlight. To the left of them and in the shadows, is a handicapped homeless man who goes completely unnoticed by the women. To the right sits a family on a bus bench, where a young boy takes notice of the man and perhaps offers the only form of empathy that he will ever receive. The narrative contained in this image is a fabrication, and yet a more haunting reality than any photojournalistic endeavor could attest to. This image illustrates Winogrand’s incisive understanding in the nuances of archetypes, class structures, and social dynamics inherent and observable within the real world. The narrative draws us in, yet offers no solution, “It is on this edge of comprehension, subtle and uncomfortable, that Winogrand’s most important photography creates its meaning” (Nilsen).



Fig. 4. Garry Winogrand, *Hollywood and Vine, Los Angeles, 1969*, Silver Gelatin Print, 18 15/16”x13 3/8” © The Estate of Garry Winogrand, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

These elements of the real world are contained— “pressed” into Winogrand’s frame, and, in his best images, carry the raw and fragmented energy of a heightened moment (Papageorge 91). It’s important to add that these instances become interesting because of how they are photographed, and not vice-versa. John Szarkowski explains, “central to the work [is]...the difference between photographs and the world they describe, and in the possibility that the former may...tell us something important about the latter” (Winogrand, Szarkowski 25). Winogrand himself often stated, “I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs”, suggesting that the formal and conceptual events that happen within a frame are far more compelling than the world itself, and for Winogrand, allowed him to better learn how the world behaved once distilled into pictures (Winogrand, Szarkowski 26). Papageorge attests to this detached position, “Winogrand understood that the ‘practical’ meanings of things are in fact

transformed when photographs are made of those things, and that by describing new, discursive forms he would, with them, claim new meanings” (Papageorge 84).

My work aligns with the tenets of Winogrand’s work in a number of important ways. I find meaning in the gestures and glances of everyday interactions, and I often find that my best photographs are more interesting than the thing being photographed. I find meaning in the fragmented, candid moments in photographing people, and I utilize these suspended moments to create tension and suggest narrative within the larger contexts of my work.

While Winogrand’s images are predominantly candid I find that my hybridized technique adds an exciting update on his aesthetics and tactics. My earlier photographs are highly indebted to Winogrand in style and approach, yet I have moved into a newer mode of exploration where a simulated or provoked moment within the portrait-style setting becomes performative and sculptural, mixing in the raw moments of Winogrand’s world with a structured and more controlled narrative.

### *William Eggleston*

As I was learning the difficulty in making an intelligent, coherent color picture, I was perplexed and seduced by how natural William Eggleston made it look. Upon first viewing Eggleston’s work, I thought I knew what to expect: a complexity in form and light, and a technical mastery of materials, yet what I didn’t expect nor know was possible was a surprising depth and haunting mystery found within the work.

One of Eggleston’s most notable pictures, and to me one that is most profound, is *Greenwood, Mississippi, 1971*, (Fig. 5) colloquially titled *The Red Ceiling*. This image engages with a viewer’s ability to create psychological associations through certain colors, and does so to an overwhelming capacity. The treatment of this intensely colored space, with its bare-bulb



wiring and its clipped framing, portrays a truly sordid scene. When looking at this image one can't help but search for a more sinister explanation for how this picture came to be, and yet there is nothing explicitly disturbing about this image aside from the color red. John Szarkowski aptly explains the physical and psychological nature of these images, "restrained, austere, and



Figure 5. William Eggleston, *Greenwood, MS, 1973*. 13 7/8 × 21 11/16 in. Dye Transfer Print.  
Courtesy of the artist and the Eggleston Trust.

public... [these photographs] might be introduced as evidence in court" (Eggleston, Szarkowski 11). It's this element of mood, and perhaps psychological resonance, that Eggleston achieves so masterfully. I have found that color photographs, for me, elevate these feelings of mood and mystery in a uniquely affecting way.

While Eggleston's pictures were initially described as "perfectly boring"<sup>1</sup> by critic Hilton Kramer upon his first solo show opening at the Museum of Modern Art, anyone keen on Eggleston's photographs would find this as a largely dismissive comment (Glover). As Eudora Welty writes in her introduction to *The Democratic Forest*, "[these images] focus on the mundane world. But *no* subject is fuller of implications than the mundane world!" (Eggleston, Welty 13).

The artist's first monograph, *William Eggleston's Guide*, is, to me, the ultimate book of photographs—and a tour-de-force for anyone interested in exploring the subtle mysteries within Eggleston's world. The book is open-ended and banal, yet marks a confidence and restraint in a masterful sequence of images and a locality of subject matter.

Another crucial lesson to be learned from Eggleston is this: one does not have to travel far to make interesting pictures. In fact, it could be argued that a person will photograph the places and people they know well, best. And most importantly is that one can photograph the most familiar subject matter with a radically experimental approach. As Szarkowski writes:

Pictures of aunts and cousins and friends, of houses in the neighborhood and in neighboring neighborhoods, of local streets and side roads...preoccupation with private experience...whose view is characteristically self-centered, asocial, and, at least in posture, antitraditional. (Eggleston, Szarkowski 10)

The photographs in Eggleston's "guide" are compelling to me because they don't rely on exotic or spectacular subject matter. Szarkowski helps us understand, "these materials, even if slight in terms of their intrinsic...importance, are nevertheless...available as the carrier of

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<sup>1</sup> Kramer is quoted by Michael Glover in *Why William Eggleston is the World's Greatest Photographer*, a 2013 article written for *The Independent*.

symbolic freight” (Eggleston, Szarkowski 10). I believe that our encounters with the everyday are marked with symbolic meaning, and these often-unnoticed relationships require the intervention of a medium (and a person) to access them. Eggleston uses this trope and blends it with an innovative sense of light, form, and color. He understands the transformative capabilities of photography, and lets a simple gesture—the act of describing the world around him with subjective acuity—yield less literal fact than a tremendous realization of the potency and profundity in the everyday. Szarkowski closes out Eggleston for us best, “a paradigm of a private view, a view one would have thought ineffable, described here with clarity, fullness, and elegance” (Eggleston, Szarkowski 14).

*Katy Grannan*

I first saw an exhibition of Katy Grannan’s images at a now-defunct gallery in Nashville, Tennessee. The images were from a more recent body of work made in the American West, and what I saw intrigued me enough to research and seek out her earlier work. The photographs that constitute this early work and her first monograph, *Model American* (2005), develop a radically innovative approach to portraiture. Grannan published newspaper ads within small towns, calling for willing models to be photographed in their own home. I admire Grannan’s work for a number of reasons, and the risk that this method employs is surely noteworthy.

Her work explores themes of identity and domesticity, while also challenging preconceived notions of photographic portraiture. Her work places the controlled and contrived nature of studio photography into the contexts of a real-world space—blending staged with candid, fictional with documentary. It seems that the artificial lighting of her studio-strobes serves two purposes here: it dramatizes and heightens the mundanity of the space and it helps to fictionalize and remove them from reality. The observable discomfort and awkwardness of the

people in her images works in opposition to the stylized techniques that she applies to her locations. I see this as Grannan drawing emphasis to the inherent, or perhaps instilled desire within American youth to assume the role of the desirable.

As we see in *Wolf, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2000*, (Fig. 6), most elements within Grannan's images are innocuous, but combined to influence an eccentric and uncanny reading. In this image, we see a young man knelt uncomfortably on a rug in a domestic interior space.



Figure 6. Katy Grannan. *Wolf, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2000*. 48-1/4 x 38-3/4 inches. Chromogenic Print. Courtesy of the artist.

The house is adorned with decades-old furniture and decorations, making the young man something of an anachronism within the frame. The lighting of this scene is clear and direct, and calls attention to the man's feet, which are caked in some sort of white powder. While banality is pervasive in this image, this small detail sends the viewer into very strange visual and narrative territory. The way Grannan sneaks in this small detail suggests that perhaps we aren't fully supposed to see it, and perhaps this young man doesn't want to show the camera. The exchange between Grannan and her models remains one of the greatest mysteries about her work, and complicates any traditional dynamics between photographer and sitter.

Grannan's work blurs the lines between staged portrait and candid image. By doing this, we lose bearing on reality and are forced into a more fictional mode of looking. It helps to remind ourselves of the postmodern predicament that photographs merely present us with a facade of reality—a series of simulations of the real. In an ever-progressing society of imagery, reality becomes increasingly difficult to find, and some would even argue that this task has become impossible.

*Philip-Lorca Dicorcia*

Perhaps the first photographer to open my eyes to the fictional possibility of photographs is Philip-Lorca Dicorcia. The staged work that Dicorcia is best known for carefully blurs the lines of fact and fiction. The degree to which Dicorcia constructs his imagery is seemingly elaborate, yet believable by photographic standards; his work resists the overly polished look of a Gregory Crewdson image, or the painterly influences of a Jeff Wall, which isn't to say that I haven't admired and learned from both of these artists. To me, Dicorcia's work finds its proper lineage in coming after Winogrand and Eggleston, yet brings a radical new approach to pushing the photograph into uncharted territory. Dicorcia's work falls into the conceptual camp; he works

in discrete, often complexly layered projects that often makes reference to topical media influences and specifically photography's relationship to that system.

Dicorcia's project *Hustlers*, created during 1989-1991, uses a National Endowment of the Arts grant to pay male-prostitutes in Hollywood, California for their participation as stand-ins in Dicorcia's tableaux. Dicorcia would pay these models for their services—equal to their street price—and furnished the price paid alongside the exhibited works. The images are strange depictions of fringe characters in banal locations such as hotel rooms and street corners, where melodramatic scenes portray figments of lost dreams and social disenfranchisement. Peter Galassi writes, “the elaborate artifice of Dicorcia's photographs keeps us from reading the series as an earnest document of a Hollywood street culture...perhaps, the poetry of his Hollywood pictures derives from their theatricality...as an invitation to imagine ourselves into the lives of others” (Dicorcia 13). Dicorcia's images do something that I find quite challenging: they ask the viewer to dismiss reality when viewing the images, yet ask that we reconcile with the harsh and unsettling truths embedded in the work through conceptual underpinnings.

*A Storybook Life* (2003), is a body of photographs that exists predominantly in monograph form. The book takes disparate images from over the course of twenty years and arranges them into a coherent and circular narrative that explores themes of family and domesticity, as well as the fictional and theatrical possibilities within the photographic medium. The work is an early example of a much more expressive version of book making which mimics the enigmatic quality of fiction or poetry over the “greatest hits” mentality of assembling one's best pictures into a book format. In book form, certain images gain importance and acquire new context when placed in sequence with other images. The book underlines the photograph as a fluid form, capable of changing its reading within editing and sequence. I've found inspiration in

this book and its enigmatic yet affective approach to narrative while sequencing the work in my thesis.

## CHAPTER 5

### HEARING THROUGH WALLS

*“I want very, very much to...give the sensation [of narrative] without the boredom of its conveyance.”*

*– Francis Bacon (Alphen 28)*

The work in *Hearing Through Walls* represents a three-year exploration into domesticity, lost youth, and American masculinity. For this exhibition, my aim was to construct a narrative that explores the artifice of human social interaction, mirrored in the construction and staging of my images. The goal was to examine the ways in which a fabricated image could describe, or possibly parallel ideas around the construction of a social identity. Again, my practice is initially born out of questions and experiments, and I was curious as to how these two concepts could be held together through photographs and a video installation in the exhibition space. I wanted to find the intersection of these pre-existing forms of artifice—one found in the ways in which we think about photography, and the other in the learned mannerisms, gestures, and languages found within any culture.

I’ve found that artifice manifests itself in various ways throughout the exhibition, which in return aids my initial study on themes of domesticity and masculinity, and begins to form a larger study on American culture. I’m interested in how these more traditional, documentary-based social themes—domesticity, lost youth, and masculinity—are all influenced and shaped by aspects of a culture that is rooted in appearances, superficialities, and performance. I’m also fascinated by the ways in which photographs can help reveal layers of truth while simultaneously aiding in and concealing a mysterious narrative.

Resisting stereotypes or conclusive answers, I ultimately ask the viewer to take part in the perplexity and awkwardness of social interactions. As I mentioned before with Keats’ idea of



negative capability, I believe that the strength in this work is not in illustrating or answering these questions, but preserving the tumult and apprehension of a youthful state.

I can't say that my work aims to contend with any social or anthropological studies. I use specific tactics to produce a narrative that centralizes on the male character, yet the meaning within each picture is capable of shifting interpretation throughout viewing or through change in sequencing and arrangement. The best photography to me is able to conceive for itself a theme, and then work to expand the viewer's definition or preconceived ideas on that theme. In this way, I feel that the images elude and resist any simple illustration or exposition of a topic or issue.

I'm most interested in the fictional reading that can be placed on images, which allows for a more open-ended and challenging viewing experience. I find that these fictional spaces still carry an important connection to reality, and I believe this can be important, relevant, and educational to how we understand and perceive real-world subjects.

*Lauren with Map, 2016*, (Fig. 7) works in this fictional way, where it depicts a young woman nude in bed, with a map seemingly hovering over her head. The anchored map floats in a way that mirrors the uncomfortable arching of her back; the camera has caught her candid and unaware of the camera and its intrusive flash. Her pose feels unguarded. The floating map wouldn't be possible without some preemptive planning, yet it still reads as a candid moment. The combination of these two kinetic parts, the figure and the thing, creates something slightly elevated and odd. The image is an absurd assemblage of pieces that plays perfectly into a discordant, male-driven narrative and offers an expanded viewpoint from simply photographing men. We assume that we're witnessing a post-coital scene and the window is open, allowing for a breeze to lift the map off the wall, but how did these pieces fall together?



Fig. 7. Bradley Marshall, *Lauren with Map*, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 20x24”

The image works to confuse and compare gendered iconography—the map on the wall suggests the curiosities of male adolescence, while simultaneously the image offers the obvious interests of manhood—sex. The formal aspects of the image align gender dynamics as well; as the predominant colors, blue and pink, are ordered into separate halves of the frame. The figure is truncated at waist and neck, creating a disorienting and surreal visual discovery of the body that references the street photographs of Garry Winogrand or perhaps some of the more

figurative images from my former professor, Mike Smith (Fig. 8). Smith has long dominated the East Tennessee area with his color landscape studies, although his unflinching approach to portraiture has resonated with me as an equally compelling exploration into place, identity, and the human condition.



Figure 8. Mike Smith, *Johnson City*, 2005. *Chromogenic Print*. Courtesy Lee Marks Fine Art.

At first viewing of my image, the nominal subject is a woman, yet the image aids in the construction of a subjective masculine viewpoint—where the flaws of this viewpoint are being included and utilized to subvert the problematic ways of objectification and fetishization of the

female form. In this way, the image works to comment on the history of portraiture and the photographic medium as well.

Symbol, form, and mood work in various combinations toward describing or transforming the content of my photographs. In *John, Kingsport, TN, 2017* (Fig. 9), we see symbols in two states—the literal markings of a tattoo on the man’s back, and the metaphor implied through use of light and shadow. The man is shirtless, which could be taken as a



Fig. 9. Bradley Marshall. *John, Kingsport, TN, 2017*. Archival Inkjet Print. 25x36”

confident assertion of one's manliness or maybe a violent warning sign. The large tattoo on his back immediately draws our attention.

To him, there is a personal significance to this symbol, and there is personal value and ritual in it, yet we have no access to its meaning or power through this photograph.

I take special interest in this disconnection between the photograph and the personality of the subject photographed. Gregory Halpern talks about this disconnect, "one person can never fully understand another, and because visual translation of another person is entirely subjective...[this] inevitable subjectivity will make the work flawed, conceptually and ethically, but also has the potential to make the work successful" (Halpern). There is something perverse about this process as Halpern suggests, yet it becomes a crucial part of creating greater meaning from the disparate and idiosyncratic aspects of the world.

The light helps to form an important second level of symbolic meaning in this picture. The shadow of the man's hand (produced by electronic flash) somehow comes in from the left of frame, and forms a beckoning gesture that oddly resembles Leonardo DaVinci's, *The Creation of Adam*, (1508-1512). The scar on the man's torso oddly resembles the shape of lips (or arrow wounds?) and is perfectly framed in the light and shadow formations. This pastiche of quasi-religious references pushes the meaning of the image into mythological territories. The symbolic reading helps form a more complex depiction and re-approach to the conditions and narratives of the American male. The biblical references suggest heroic aspirations in the story of this character, yet pathos and banality pervades. The contemporary appearance of this character grounds the viewer and fails the grandiosity offered by the mythic and symbolic. What is to become of this modern-day Saint Sebastian?

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

*"I think that it's certain that one doesn't only photograph with the eyes but with all one's intelligence."-Brassai*

*(Brassai)*

I find that my influences are constantly evolving and shifting. Not only have I come to reject certain artists or works that don't stand up to the test of time, but I've found myself learning to appreciate works that lacked interest for me in the past. The time spent pursuing my MFA has been a challenge first and foremost, but I've used this time to discover many new



Fig. 10. Bradley Marshall. *Adam, Nashville, TN, 2016*. Archival Inkjet Print.  
29x36"

artists and to develop radically new directions and ideas within my work. The influences that I have covered here are simply a starting point for understanding the dedication that I have put into researching and understanding new work. My research has been influenced by poetry, fiction, cinema, painting, and sculpture, among others. Even when I continue to believe in the singular, unmanipulated photograph and its potential to change the way I see and understand the world, I've surely learned a great deal from just about every other discipline.

I continue to question my medium and its relationship to truth and authenticity, as these questions are inherent to photography and the documentary tradition, and complicate things in the most exciting way. As my work has become more about issues within photography itself, I continue to find inspiration in trying to wrap my head around the cultural importance photography has in our image-saturated culture. While these notions daunt some, I find that it raises the stakes and forces me to seriously evaluate the artworks that I choose to put into the world.

*Hearing Through Walls* explores facets of domesticity, lost youth, and American masculinity. The exhibition was conceived to yield a narrative that depicts these themes, as well as notions of artifice within the construction of a social identity. Throughout my studies I have become increasingly interested by the ways in which photographs help us to better understand the world while simultaneously concealing and complicating things. As I have mentioned with Keats' negative capability, I don't take up the role of elucidating these complex themes within my work. Instead I choose to revel in them, pulling elements out from the flux, turning them over in my hand and offering them back for re-examination and possibly newfound appreciation.



*Catalog of the Exhibition*



*Untitled, Nashville, TN, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print.*





*Franklin, TN, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 16x20"*



*Untitled, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 29x36"*



*Misha, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 29x36"*



*David, Johnson City, TN, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 29x42"*



*Ethan, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 25x30"*





*Nashville, TN, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 29x36"*



*Summer, Nashville, TN, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 20x24"*



*John, Kingsport, TN, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 25x36"*





*Lauren and Jordan, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 25x30"*



*Nashville, TN, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 25x30"*



*Lauren with Map, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 20x24"*



*Adam, Nashville, TN, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 29x36"*





*Untitled, 2016. Archival Inkjet Print. 29x42"*



*Untitled, 2017. Archival Inkjet Print. 25x30"*



Still from *Observing a Spear*, 2017. 02:16" loop. Two-channel video projection, audio, speakers with subwoofer



Installation view of *Hearing Through Walls*





Installation view of *Hearing Through Walls*



Installation view of *Hearing Through Walls*

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