5-2019

The Boone Dam Project

Jordan Whitten
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THE BOONE DAM PROJECT

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 in Studio Art

by
Jordan Whitten
May 2019

Tema Stauffer, Chair
Mira Gerard
Andrew Ross

Keywords: photography, landscape, environment, class, systems, property
ABSTRACT

THE BOONE DAM PROJECT

by

Jordan Whitten

The photographer discusses his work in “The Boone Dam Project”, a Masters of Fine Art exhibit held at the Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee from March 18 through March 29, 2019. The exhibition consists of a collection of 14 large color archival inkjet prints from a large body of work that surveys a lakeside community’s landscape and residents affected by lowered lake levels during a dam repair. A catalog of the exhibit is included at the end of this thesis.

Whitten examines formal and conceptual influences through historical and contemporary photographers. Images included are works made by Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, Alec Soth, Susan Lipper. Influences outside of photography are discussed through literary works of Flannery O’Connor and Raymond Carver. Critical influence regarding landscape and human interactions is presented in regards to essays by J.B. Jackson.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the artists gracious enough to allow the use of their images in this thesis.

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Tema Stauffer, Mira Gerard, and Andrew Ross for their valued feedback in developing this work.

I'd like to thank Mike Smith, professor emeritus, for the encouragement in pushing the work and thoughts that go into the photographic process.

Lastly, I wholeheartedly would like to thank my family and friends who have supported me through my pursuit of my post graduate degree.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since adolescence, I have been curious about the architecture that surrounded me. Always curious about why things were made the way they are, what purpose they serve, and later when my mind was overrun with skateboarding, what unintended purposes can these structures foster. These curiosities have since remained prevalent in my mind. My connection with architecture became an obsession in my formative years when skateboarding became my primary creative outlet and means of forming a community. Living in the suburbs outside of Memphis led me, along with my peers, to scour neighborhoods for anything that would resemble the city obstacles such as fire hydrants, stairs, planters and plazas we saw in magazines and videos that fascinated us.

Fueled by this interest, I found myself wanting to emulate the photographs and videos that engulfed my world. This led to the purchase of a video camera when I was twelve-years-old to capture neighborhood kids and their attempts at living the lifestyle developed within cities and coastal towns that housed early skateboarding culture. Capturing the culture within skateboarding gave me a role with my peers and remained a quest for finding meaning in capturing, studying and questioning the world around me. At fifteen, my role in skateboarding shifted from filming videos to making still images when my images found value as a means of bartering with a local skateboard shop. I would provide pictures of local skateboarders they would sponsor and they would give me products, such as wheels, shoes, et certa in return.
While my initial adoption of the medium began as a means of capital gain, I began to find a deeper meaning in photography through the purchase of my first medium format camera. I read that the leaf shutters on such cameras could sync with flashes faster to better freeze motion without buying a digital camera that would have been far out of my price range as a fifteen-year-old dishwasher. I bought a square formatted Bronica SQ-AI piece by piece, week-by-week as I got paid. Upon obtaining this new camera, I began scouring my town to make pictures of anything that struck my attention. At times, I was paying attention to light and color in a similar fashion to William Eggleston or I would observe the industry and development reshaping the landscape like Robert Adams. I did not know the work of these artists yet, but I would later come to learn about how they shaped photography to influence the photos I made.

This practice to test and understand a new machine began a new means of looking at the world for me; one that followed strict traditions of photography long before knowing the histories, theories, and traditions that define the practice. Something about the impartial nature of the square format made me compose the images I’d make with more thought put into the placement of each element in the frame. Why would I, at fifteen, naively make images that arguably already followed traditions that I have gone on to study and practice for over a decade and will continue to study and practice for years to come?

In the essay, Making Art New, Robert Adams states “All art comes from a background of convention established by one’s predecessors.” and goes on to quote painter Mark Tobey in saying, “No young artist can grow unless he emulates someone bigger than himself”. (81) In this, Adams is pointing out the influence necessary to push an artist to make what can be new in the broader scope of art. Following this bout of
photographing the world outside of my narrowed worldview focused on skateboarding, I began to find a new community through online photography websites. I would make work that mimicked pictures that fascinated me and used this practice as a way to broaden my own scope on exploring the world and fulfilling my need to understand it. This way of making pictures led me to the ideas and practices of so many photographers before me and their ways of understanding and documenting their worlds.

In 2016, I moved to Johnson City to pursue my Masters Degree at East Tennessee State University knowing I wanted to take an approach to a subject more serious than something practiced out of one’s own interest. No one I photographed was forced into skateboarding, racing, or wrestling. This was an act they chose to do for their own enjoyment. Shortly into my first semester, I drove over a bridge while on my way to meet with someone to photograph. I looked out to what appeared to be a desolate riverbend void of the water; just a series of homes with decks and docks that reached out to look over an overgrown field of dying foliage. Shortly into the conversation with the woman I met to photograph, I brought up the scene I had just passed. She went on to inform me of the issues around Boone Dam and the lake it formed, Boone Lake.

I began driving around Boone Lake with an outdated GPS system and following what should be a shoreline. In doing so, I found out just how much the environment could take back over so swiftly after the human factor no longer controlled it. I initially thought this could be the beginning of a long project based on environmental issues but as I returned more and more then began to talk to residents of the area, I began to recognize sociological, economic and environmental concerns. Finding such a large area with an abundance of issues, I knew I had found a project to focus on throughout
my three years of study. In this essay, I will address my influences and personal experiences that led me to my current body of work.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT

Prior to my graduate studies at East Tennessee State University, I often made work that could be classified as documentary. Early into picking up a camera and even well into studying at Memphis College of Art, I never felt comfortable calling myself an artist. I was and still am a photographer, I see something and I make a picture of it. I wasn’t creating anything that wasn’t already there, so why call myself an artist? I saw myself purely as a photographer and nothing more. It wasn’t until reading an essay by John Szarkowski on Eugene Atget that I came to a new understanding. Szarkowski explains Atget’s practice in preserving old Paris through photographs during Haussmann’s renovation, was an act of curated pointing. And the curatorial pointing is the art, to take note of what concerns the artist, expose a negative and make a print from that negative. Each step in itself is a conscious effort to bring something to the viewer’s attention. Since, I have gone on to document a multitude of things through my studies, the culture surrounding skateboarding, the participants at a recently reopened racetrack after years of closure, and a high school wrestling team. Each of these series taught me to immerse myself in the subject matter and brought a new factor into making pictures, the view from the subject. This thrilled me, to learn a new anecdote from each person as I photographed them or their space while practicing the habitual preparations of my camera.

The Boone Dam was built by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1950s to control flooding and provide hydroelectric power to the area surrounding the South Fork
Holston River, creating a lake aptly named Boone Lake. The dam was built using techniques that were state of the art at the time but sixty years of corrosion caused a sinkhole in the dam. During an inspection in October 2014, water and sediment were found seeping from a riverbank near the dam. This caused great concern for the Tennessee Valley Authority. To safely assess the situation the water levels of the lake were lowered drastically while repairs take place.

I find that photographs made based on this area and the instability of such a place can reflect a larger instability faced by many Americans. I found this work at a time when I, personally, was concerned with my own economic stability. Even now, in 2019, the effects of the 2008 recession are still evident in this country. The thought of needing a degree to find a sustainable career hinders most with student debt. The current housing costs are rising to a point that no one of my generation can afford. Health insurance is unaffordable so that a large percentage of people in their late twenties, such as myself, are living without it. Fueled by my own anxieties, I find comfort in the fact that making these photographs helps me identify with homeowners of a waterless waterfront vacation home.

Photographing in my later adolescent years helped me to develop a system that has obviously altered over time but was arguably mostly realized at a young age. In my years solely focused on making skateboarding images, I focused on what location would best exemplify the talent of the subject in each image while also giving a feel of the city. If a friend told me they wanted to do a certain trick on or over a certain obstacle I made it my goal to search Memphis for the best location and time of day to make a photograph of them performing the trick.
Similar practices have been applied to *The Boone Dam Project*. With every bit of information I gathered while developing and researching this body of work I found myself in pursuit of how to convey a sense of the story, mood, and effects on the community surrounding Boone Lake. The image *Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2017* (Fig. 2) shows a neighborhood pool full of water in the foreground with what was once a lake cove in the back. The form of the pool and what should be the lake water enter from the right side of the frame and mimic each other in shape. The large homes on the far side of the dry lakebed have obviously lost value since repairs began. In my time photographing and speaking with the community I met a family in a gated community that signed the final papers on their “waterfront” vacation home just 48 hours before the announcement was made about the lowered water levels. The home has been up for sale for the past 2 years.
Figure 2. Jordan Whitten, Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2017. Archival Inkjet Print

Viewed as a bothersome counter-culture by many, I often had issues with property owners, police, and pedestrians while skateboarding. Once, as a minor, I was put in a choke hold that lifted me off of my feet by a police officer for misunderstanding a command shouted at me from afar. Following this incident, I found myself weary of all interactions with police and developed a manner of preemptively over explaining that I have no ill-intention when faced with authoritative figures while photographing. This is another practice learned through my formative years. The community surrounding Boone Lake consists of affluent families owning vacation homes, low-income families that inherited their land, and a multitude of demographics in between. But throughout those residents, a slew homes throughout the area are happy to display that they practice their right to bear arms in some fashion, whether as a bumper sticker or yard signage. This authoritative relationship between property owner and myself, as the
photographer wanting to photograph their property or from their property, led me to revert back to my practice of immediately justifying my purpose for knocking on their door. This method of talking to residents lead to images I often found hard to separate from the project.

With each trip to Boone Lake, I found myself meeting with people from a wide range of backgrounds and learning how their lives have been affected by the lowering of the lake and the issues that have arisen from the repairs. I’ve heard various anecdotes from residents while photographing, such as a woman on limited income who inherited the land that has been partially flooded for sixty years. The recently dried land is now loose clay which is dangerous for her cattle, so she had had to build fences to what used to be waterfront and also pay property taxes on what has recently become land. I made pictures depicting her, her cattle, and the loose clay but none of the images portrayed the loss and the headache caused in a way that worked in a single image. Each image felt forced and did not deliver the story to outside observers. Some photographers such as Garry Winogrand and Henry Wessel developed a practice to store away film for years before processing the images to best separate themselves from the memory that will make them subjective towards the image attached to a memory. I wish I had such a luxury within The Boone Dam Project to separate my memory from each image.
CHAPTER 3

LITERARY INFLUENCE

Prominent figures in photography and writing on photography often cite the influence of poetry on photography. Tod Papageorge, the former chair of photography at Yale University, was an aspiring poet turned photographer after discovering the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Papageorge argues that Cartier-Bresson was the “greatest photographer who’s ever lived” and that “Cartier-Bresson's sense of what an artist might be was Arthur Rimbaud, who’s work not only reveals a great poet, but one who most deliriously taps into the mania and exultation of being young, a genius and utterly free of what William Blake called the ‘mind-forged miracles’. “ This influence pushed a lyrical sense of photography for Cartier-Bresson with a strong influence from poetry.

In the essay, Beauty in Photography, Robert Adams states, “Art Simplifies. It is never exactly equal to life, In the visual arts, this is sorting out in favor of order is called composition, and most artists know its primacy.” Photography works as a form of visual storytelling that can mimic conceptual poems or, as I see in my work, a short story that can touch on a sense of place or state of being. While working on The Boone Dam Project I often read works by Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver imagining each composition as a scene from their writing. Their stories are concise by telling just what needs to be said to give a strong narrative without any unnecessary addendums. This is something I strived toward in photographing this series.
“She pointed out interesting details of the scenery Stone Mountain, the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway, the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple, and the various crops that made rows of green lacework on the ground. The trees were full of silver white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled” (O’Connor, 119)

The satirical writing of Flannery O’Connor on the South scribes a worldview shared by most photographers and artists whose work I admire. “O’Connor’s own love for irony reflects a more universal truth that America, and in turn American popular-culture, loves satirizations of itself. Following the old adage that any attention is good attention” (Cofer). In O’Connor’s short story, A Good Man is Hard to Find, she tells a story of a family going on a vacation with a grandmother that sees herself as a Godly woman of high morals and needs to be seen as a lady. Throughout the story, you are assured that every character holds their own selfish desires, especially the grandmother. But once faced with the threat of losing her life, the grandmother finds herself experiencing a moment of compassion for an outlaw she had so blatantly disregarded earlier in the story. Jim McDermott writes, “It is only through an experience of radical interruption—when the floor drops out on us and the rules by which we believe the world works are revealed to be convenient fictions—that conversion to a life of discipleship, the path of goodness, is even remotely possible” (McDermott, 48).

I am not looking at a devastating loss for a community in a way as sardonic or harsh as O’Connor can often depict the South. Yet, there are times in which I find myself capturing a moment I find ironic and find it necessary to point out such a scene. Figure 2 depicts a quite scene of a middle-class home on a hill. The house seems like
an ordinary middle-class home on a bleak winter day. But a closer look reveals two tall windows oddly placed on the right side of the home to hint at what must be a large home with many stories belonging to an upper-class resident. Below that, two docks form to create a triangle below the home. This trifecta conveys an ironic Southern gothic tone that O'Connor's writing often depicts.

Figure 3. Jordan Whitten, Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
Raymond Carver

I often hear that the way I discuss my work is very matter-of-fact or terse. While that can be problematic for some, I feel it keeps me from forcing the viewer or audience to see something I don’t deliver with each image while also allowing a broader scope for the work to be seen. While I can not begin to compare the way I discuss my work to the precise and descriptive narratives of Raymond Carver’s work, I do find influence from the spectacle he can make of such an act of mundanity in such a quick and descriptive short story. Described as an American Literary Minimalist, although he denounced the claim, Robert Clark writes, “He was by many accounts inclined to cut words rather than add and to imply significant information rather than write expository passages” (ch.2, par.3). I frequently find when making a picture I have many ideas, themes, or narratives I want to add to a body of work. But at times the images that hold too much in the composition fail due to the busy nature when instead I could make a calm, quiet image that reflects that of Carver’s writing.
Recent publications of Carver’s short story collections have used images from Todd Hido’s *Homes at Night*, a series consisting of soft, quiet photographs void of human presence made at night in an often suburban setting with few light sources providing an ambiguous scene to be left open ended. Hido describes the void of human forms in that work with “if it is an empty shell, the viewer can place their own memories within it or create a narrative that would otherwise be blocked by the reality of what is actually inside.” (Hido) much like the undetermined endings in many of Carver’s short stories.
Figure 5. Todd Hido. #7373. 2009. Chromogenic Print
CHAPTER 4

CRITICAL INFLUENCE

J.B. Jackson

“Recreation is indeed the right word: recreation as pleasure and relaxation, but also as a recharging of exhausted bodies and minds: recreation by means of temporary contact with nature.” - J.B. Jackson (88)

John Brinckerhoff Jackson pioneered landscape studies and argues that we are constantly evolving due to our lives in the urban and industrial landscape. Jackson wrote a multitude of essays revolved around the vernacular landscape and what shaped our understanding of it, many of which can be applied to that practice of nearly every photographer no matter how much they divert from traditional landscape photography. In correlation to my photographs and research based around the human made Boone Lake, there are multitudes of revelations to be made when relating the environment to Jackson's writings. While much of the homes and land surrounding Boone Lake are farmland used for some’s livelihood or out of necessity, with an artificial lake comes artificial recreation.
With the jobs surrounding Boone Lake predominantly consisting of large industrial plants and coal mines, the need for a break from hard work comes to many in the form of enjoyment of the lake. But with that need for recreation in nature comes the falsehood of a natural environment. Jackson states, “Their attractions are so man-made: an agreeable and flexible composition of parking lots, playgrounds, trailer park, golf course, beach, and a sizeable area of natural forest and even renewed wilderness” (88). This newly formed idea of nature is now a source of energy for the modern American and something that Jackson goes on to state is a “demythologized definition which automatically includes human participation” (89), as if to say that we have ruined what our experience with nature should be and that each experience we share with it is a diluted sense of place.

*Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2018.* (Fig.6) depicts an alternative form of recreation in the area. Multiple trash slicks on Boone Lake accumulate what has been littered into
the lake. These slicks acquire an abundance of syringes that float through the water until ending up caught in a slick. The Tennessee Valley Authority funds a crew of three people that fill boats with the trash to clean the slicks. Each needle encountered is cautiously placed in a Gatorade bottle so the crew does not get stuck by the needles. This irresponsible act during the current opioid epidemic not only threatens users but also those swimming in the lake. The crew member holding the bottle depicted tries to lighten the severity of the issue by suggesting that “maybe this is due to a lot of careless diabetics.”

Figure 7. Jordan Whitten, Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
CHAPTER 5

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES

The New Topographics Exhibition

While photographing the vernacular landscape, in recent years, I have found a keen interest in the way nature finds a way to reclaim the structures that humans constructed. All of the architecture, tract homes, and suburbs that remained from the fifties through the seventies created a banal, stagnant sense of place. The modular buildings and architecture have either become struggling businesses or abandoned spaces slowly redeemed by trees, vines, and flowers. While in modern photography there is something to be said of this, I was not concerned the land taking back over the architecture. I was always more interested in the interruption of the structure in the land. It was for this reason I was fond of the Robert Adams and Stephen Shore’s photographs of the post-industrial American landscape. Adams and Shore were prominent artists included along with eight others in a 1975 exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape. The International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House hosted the exhibition curated by William Jenkins.

During my first photography class, early into attempting to gain an understanding of photography as art, I was introduced to Robert Adams. My class was given assignments to read from Adams’ collection of essays made into his book titled Why People Photograph. Adams, from my naive understanding, was more known as a writer and reviewer than a photographer, and looking at his pictures I was sure of it; Adams had failed as a photographer and made up for it with his writing. Skip forward to the end of that semester and every bit of text I highlighted was a pessimistic response towards
the practice of photography or society and the way making pictures could portray that. The fact that Adams could refer to such prominent and influential photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston to say “almost nothing they said about specific pictures enriched my experience of those pictures” (44). Adams goes on to declare that explaining something that was so carefully made or took so many failures can then add a fault to the final image itself. My gained understanding of Adams’ criticisms altered my views to have increased respect of Adams’ photographs. I could look at his pictures deeper and think more in-depth to understand what he was saying without relying so hard on his word, just the work. This idea holds true for every artist featured in New Topographics.

Topography is defined as “a detailed description or representation on a map of the natural and artificial features of an area.” William Jenkins’ title for this show gestures toward the early landscape pictures made by early twentieth century photographers such as Timothy O’Sullivan, Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams. These early topographical photographers worked to glorify the landscape of western America and often promote tourism. This realm of early landscape photography found itself fitting realm of documentary photography. The pictures prompted ideas that encouraged state parks as well as western expansion. Other forms of early twentieth century documentary photography yielded work from social documentary photographers such as Lewis Hine, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. This group of photographers was concerned with promoting humanitarian ideas that were strongly pushed in their work.

New Topographics photographers took influence from New Documents, an exhibition John Szarkowski curated at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967. Szarkowski put together the work of three seemingly unknown photographers at the time who were
photographing American life without a direct problem needing some resolve, like that of the social documentarians. Szarkowski found that Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand were pushing contemporary photography in an evolutionary manner; he explains “Their aim is not to reform life, but to know it”. This take on the idea of documentary photography broke new ground in what work could be accepted into museums and institutions. Although influential, New Documents work featured a human figure in nearly every photograph included. New Topographic photographers exclude the presence of man and only focuses on the effects made by man in relation to the land.

Robert Adams

Robert Adams’ early practice in photography was very much an attempt to recreate pictures much like Ansel Adams and the original topographic photographers who found themselves out in nature far from pavement or any polluted air. Robert Adams lived in Colorado as a teenager and gained a fondness for the landscape that surrounded him. During his studies in California, Adams quickly noticed the land was “coming apart, not respected and damaged” (Adams). Over the years during his travels back home to Colorado those issues began to rise further and further east to do just the same to the landscape he appreciated at home.

In his essay, Two Landscapes, Adams discusses a plateau he and his father would explore in his teens. “The view was like nothing we had known-windswept, sun-bleached, vast”. However, after his years studying in California he returned to the plateau with a camera. He states, “it is now often under smog, the foothills next to it have been built with houses, the hogback with the Indian overlook has been mined for clay and is being partially recontoured as a landfill, and an expressway is scheduled to
cross part of the area” (Adams). Further alterations in the area included The Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant that has brought a whole new set of issues to the area on top of just being an eyesore or causing slight environmental issues. Adams’ work derives from a concern for the natural world and the way we have attempted to reshape it, something I constantly considered while making The Boone Dam Project.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 8. Robert Adams, Northglenn, Colorado. 1979. Gelatin Silver Print

Adams photographed throughout Colorado continuously for over twenty years. Early topographers would wake up before sunrise to photograph in the morning light or wait until dusk to get the soft glow of twilight. Adams, however, and many other New Topographers, worked in sharp contradiction to that practice, would make pictures in the harsh midday sun. This gave a high contrast in each image and thoroughly washed
the whites in the tract homes that transforms them in their mystery and damage they bring to the landscape.

Stephen Shore

Greg Foster-Rice explains all of the systems that factor into New Topographics. In his argument, he cites Mel Bochner’s statement on the ideas behind serial art. “This is not a stylistic phenomenon. Variousness of the above kind is sufficient grounds for suggesting that rather than a style we are dealing with an attitude. The serial attitude is a concern with how the order of a specific type is manifest” (Coplans). Using multiple styles, grounds and techniques are a sufficient practice in encouraging the thoughts behind artworks. That said, Stephen Shore’s color photographs make a bold stylistic alteration from the otherwise all black and white pictures featured. Color pictures were still considered a use for novice and commercial photographers at this time. It would still be another year before MOMA’s curator; John Szarkowski would exhibit William Eggleston’s groundbreaking color photography exhibition which encouraged the acceptance of color in the realm of art photography.

Stephen Shore’s photographs gained notoriety at a young age. This allowed Shore to work almost fearlessly when creating new bodies of work. His series, American Surfaces, was made with a cheap Rollei 35 toy camera and color film which were both thoughts of as no means of making art. Using such a simple camera gave Shore a new engagement with the vernacular photographs made at the time. Shore’s act of photographing with a toy camera was vital in pushing the snapshot aesthetic that his work is strongly noted for having. His work featured in New Topographics came from his
series *Uncommon Places*, which proved to be a pivotal book in contemporary photography.

![Figure 9. Stephen Shore, Fifth Street and Broadway, Eureka, California, September 2, 1974. Chromogenic Print](image)

Shore’s interest is American culture, and he studies it well. With *Uncommon Places*, Shore began working with a large format camera which takes a long time to set up and limits any spontaneity for the user. Shortly after he had started working with this camera, Shore noticed his pictures were densely composed and served more purpose than before. Shore’s dense compositions strongly influenced the way I would load compositions with information while photographing the Boone Lake area. While he benefited from such pictures, Shore wanted to study what the practice of seeing looked
like. He wanted to photograph in a sense that was much like a quick glance while taking a stroll. He calls this a “less mediated looking experience” (Shore). By working in this realm, one doesn’t get such a critical sense from Shore’s photographs. Shore’s work has an acceptance of change rather than a judgemental concern associated with the change in the post-industrial era.

Figure 10. Jordan Whitten, Untitled, Kingsport, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
Alec Soth

Alec Soth’s emergence as a leading artist began after his series, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, gained him notoriety in 2004 after showing as a part of the Whitney Biennial. Since then Soth has gone on to publish over 25 books, whether published by acclaimed printers such as Steidl or publishing them himself. He has helped forge a path of what is considered documentary photography with his work and his efforts to explore the photographic medium in a new lyrical approach to the documentary practice.

Alec Soth’s first book, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, was heavily influenced by the traditional style of the American large format photographers such as Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld. Soth’s approach and visual elements in *Sleeping by the Mississippi* are similar to the aforementioned artists; photographing in color on a large format camera and searching for a serendipitous moment in the American landscape. Soth’s work has a more sympathetic sensibility to his subject matter, getting to know who he photographs and making pictures that don’t exploit the subject.
Soth’s work finds itself in a realm of documentary photography touching back on the *New Documents*, one could argue in Soth’s photographs that he is getting to “know” life. While *The Boone Dam Project* documents an issue that can set itself into a traditional documentary realm, I also find myself getting to “know” life and place myself within the concerns imparted in the imagery. The fine line Soth walks with his subject matter between lyrical documentary and, at times, pseudo-photojournalism made some question the decision when he was chosen to be added to the prestigious photojournalist cooperative, Magnum in 2008. Soth states in regards to his joining Magnum “What connects Magnum photographers for the most part is that they’re not making digital collage, but they’re out engaging with the world.” This being said of his work opens up a whole new possibility of success to be gained by young photographers. With smartphones that allow the world to have a camera in their pockets
at all times that have been deemed suitable for newsprint and so many news outlets laying off their photojournalist staff, what hope does that leave for a young photographer to want to tell a story with their pictures? Soth’s introduction to Magnum gave prominence to stories of vague places and romanticised landscapes that study life on a more personal level.

Susan Lipper

“I think that the only thing a photographer -a good photographer should do is feel that they’ve gotten it down, that it’s complete; That it’s complete as they can make it. That what they have to say is actually in the photograph” Susan Lipper states in a recent interview. Lipper’s comment is a telling and harsh reality on how hard I have worked to feel finished with the Boone Lake project. Lipper has published three books of complete series she has finished. Lipper works in a means of delving into the culture she is photographing and developing such a close relationship with her subjects that she claims much the work of Grapevine like a journal.

At first glance, Susan Lipper’s work appears to be in the tradition of an objective social documentary photographer. When first hearing of her New York upbringing and seeing her work made in the South, one could assume that she has taken the role of a modern Walker Evans. However, Lipper lets us know in the introduction to her first book, Grapevine, that the photographs “are not an effort to document, in any real sense.” In a review of the series, Rachel Churner states, “The images dare us to take them at face value, confirming both our fears of and feelings of superiority toward white, job-starved, rural communities. But they are not documentary, and Lipper explicitly
acknowledged a "contract" between her camera and the men before it, giving her
subjects license to actively and self-consciously shape their own representations" (219).

![Figure 12. Susan Lipper, Untitled (Grapevine), 1991. Gelatin Silver Print](image)

After meeting the residents of Grapevine Hollow, Lipper says she was quickly
adopted into the family and returned for months at a time to stay with them for a course
of five years. While making the work, Lipper often worked with the subjects from the
Appalachian region to depict such an overtly stereotypical depiction of them as a means
to subvert the judgment they often received. In *Untitled (Grapevine)*, 1991, (Fig.6), you
see a female deer hanging by a basketball goal. While it may seem out of context, it
reflects the theme of the area that you find so many homes using what they have as a
means to make things work. This seems a bit desperate while also coming off as
lawless due to the time of year and kind of deer that has been gutted if one were to know the laws and guidelines that follow game hunting. While the image carries a lawless tone, she has revealed in interviews that this was hanging outside the home of a local pastor who is regarded in the area as an authoritative figure himself. Lipper’s collaborations with her subjects is something I have strived to achieve in my own work. Working with the community surrounding Boone Lake and representatives from the TVA, I am making a conscious effort to not place blame on or have a critical opinion towards my subjects that are working towards a common goal.
CHAPTER 7

THE BOONE DAM PROJECT

Over 60 years ago, the construction of Boone Dam created an artificial lake, Boone Lake, that permanently altered the landscape of Sullivan and Washington County in Tennessee. A recently discovered sinkhole in the dam has caused further transformation. The sinkhole has forced the Tennessee Valley Authority to lower the water levels of the lake while they work to fix the hole without damaging the structure or the homes that are at risk if the dam were to fail. In this body of work, I examine the immediate or residual impacts made on the environment and economy in the area affected by such a large scale, man made structure.

The group of images displayed in the exhibition *The Boone Dam Project* studies an array of tenuous relationships; Americans and the American dream, citizens and federal corporation, humankind controlling nature, and nature prevailing over humankind.

In the essay “Systems Everywhere” *New Topographics and the Art of the 1970s*, Greg Foster-Rice describes systems theory in saying “complex phenomena cannot be reduced to the discrete properties of their various parts, but must be understood according to the arrangement of and relations between the parts that create a whole. It is this particular organization that determines the system, rather than its discrete parts.” (46) The same theory is applied to therapy practices that bring a holistic view into one’s understanding of a problem. I find that making photographs eases a deep-rooted anxiety within myself that questions these systems and the relationships that impact one another. *The Boone Dam Project* explores these systems as a reflection of concerns.
rooted in the human condition. We are all affected by these systems and can’t blame one more than another. In reflecting on the delicate relationships touched on in this work, I have found myself reaching back further and further into prior systems that current systems are just trying to fix. One can’t directly blame the current representatives of the Tennessee Valley Authority for fixing what was constructed generations before they came into their positions.

(Fig.12) depicts a barren landscape that was once a lake cove. The former docks now appear as stitches across a palette of red clay previously covered by water. While the elevated dock on the right may no longer serve a purpose for the residence of the area to look over the water, the far left shows a small garden plot taking advantage of the new system in place at the bed of the former lake cove. The rendering of detail from a large format camera helps find these small delights.
in the landscape otherwise overwhelmingly tormented by occurrences out of its own control.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The images made and presented in *The Boone Dam Project* prove to be my most heavily examined work to date. The research and practice over the past three years at East Tennessee State University has refined my approach to the photographic medium. The struggle in finding my voice within a long-term project has proven to be a development of a body of work that I can find prosperity in the end result.

My exploration into human correspondence and control over nature and its dubious relation takes on a new and richer meaning in the work. My gained understanding of artists in my time pursuing my MFA has helped me to approach this work in a way I previously could not have imagined.
While *The Boone Dam Project* comes to a close, I will use the practices learned in my studies to inform future projects that I am elated to pursue. My aim in this work studies systems that relate to a comprehensive theme I hope to continue in understanding our relationship with our own natures and what drives us.
Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2017. Archival Inkjet Print
Untitled, Kingsport, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
Untitled, Kingsport, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2017. Archival Inkjet Print
Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2017. Archival Inkjet Print
Untitled, Piney Flats, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
Untitled, Johnson City, TN. 2018. Archival Inkjet Print
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    Chromogenic Print.


VITA

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Professional Experience:  
Studio Photographer, Shelby Images, 2010-2011
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Publications:  

Exhibitions:  
Spring BFA Exhibition, Memphis College of Art, Memphis, TN, 2016.
Framed: Landscape and Architecture, Black Box Gallery, Portland, OR, 2016.
10x10x10Tieton, Mighty Tieton, Tieton, WA, 2016.
High Sign, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, TN, 2017.
The Map is not the Territory, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN, 2017.
Year in Reverse, Humble Arts Foundation, Online, 2017.
Memphis is the New South, Grit Gallery, Memphis, TN, 2017.


Find the Pattern and Break it, Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN, 2018.

At Night, F Stop Magazine, Online, 2018.

Kill Your Darlings, Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, TN, 2019.

The Boone Dam Project, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, TN, 2019.

Forms of Violence, Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, TN, 2019.
