

2014

## **Danger Shelter Opportunity: The Coastal Fortifications of Nineteenth Century Louisiana**

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DANGER SHELTER OPPORTUNITY:  
THE COASTAL FORTIFICATIONS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY LOUISIANA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by  
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August 2014

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To all of the friends who have graciously given their suggestions and support during the making of this work, I thank you deeply.

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## ABSTRACT

This document seeks to establish a contemporary record of the nineteenth-century masonry fortifications of the Third System whose continued existence in Southeastern Louisiana is in peril. Designed and implemented in the years following the invasion of Washington, D.C. during the War of 1812 by Napoleon Bonaparte's chief engineer, Louisiana's coastal forts represent the pinnacle of European, pre-modern-warfare military architecture. With their obsolescence secured by advances in technology in the mid to late nineteenth century, each was abandoned or decommissioned following the American Civil War. These historic constructed spaces that are each uniquely adapted to the land they occupy have never been formally or comprehensively photographed, though they have existed in varying states of ruin and decay for well over a century. Continued hurricane damage, neglect, lack of funding and public disinterest contribute to their impending non-existence. The series *Danger Shelter Opportunity* endeavors to preserve the physical appearance of these places and the nature of their entropy through photography.

## INTRODUCTION

Danger Shelter Opportunity began as an investigation of observed masonry fortifications within the rural landscape of coastal Louisiana. The unique nature of their existence, exacerbation of their degeneracy and lack of visual preservation combined to inspire a comprehensive body of work. The words danger, shelter and opportunity derive from a conversation with the artist Gregory Vershbow in which the concept that a human being instinctually attempts to identify these three elements upon encountering any new landscape or space was proposed. These words arguably embody every intended function of massive nineteenth century military constructions placed in the remote coastal marshes of a young country. It is their sheer impotence despite a duality of purpose, intended both to preserve the lives of those within while inflicting death upon those without, which intrigues me the most.

My approach has included both analog and digital technologies to accommodate the intrinsic challenges of exposure that vary greatly from space to space. I have at times employed a drone-mounted camera to make aerial photographs, as the overall shape of each fortification is integral to understand its history. This body of work also includes a video component consisting of single-perspective segments that immerse viewers in a contemporary experience of each space through subtle sounds and movement, in addition to drone-based segments that provide a thorough investigation of the forts' situation in the landscape.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The extant nineteenth century masonry fortifications found throughout the coastal landscape of Southeastern Louisiana belong to a larger network of American shoreline defenses named The Third System. The Third System of coastal defense was devised in the calm following the War of 1812. During this conflict, the majority of the United States' existing defenses performed poorly, resulting in the embarrassing occupation and burning of Washington by invading British troops. Thus made painfully aware of the vulnerability of its extensive shorelines, Congress commissioned the Fortifications Board in 1816 to engineer and implement a coastal defense system of unprecedented standardization.<sup>1</sup> Nearly two hundred fortifications were planned to line the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, as well as strategic waterways in the Gulf of Mexico. Between the years of 1816 and 1867 though, only thirty of those two hundred structures were completed or begun.<sup>2</sup>

President Madison and his advisors believed when forming this new Commission, that while American engineers were sufficiently skilled in their fields, what they lacked was the refinement of concept and knowledge from experience in designing sophisticated fortifications when compared to their European counterparts. Therefore, two chief engineers were officially charged with the design of the Third System, the American, Joseph G. Totten, and the Frenchman, Simon Bernard. The decision to

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<sup>1</sup> Price, Russell Reed. "American Coastal Defense: The Third System of Fortification on the Gulf Coast 1816-1867." MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1987. Print, 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> United States. National Park Service. *Fort Pulaski National Monument: The Third System*. Web. 16 March 2014. <<http://www.nps.gov/fopu/historyculture/the-third-system.htm>>.

appoint Bernard to a leadership position at the head of US Corps of Engineers was, at the time, a controversial one considered distasteful to many of the existing high-ranking officers of the Corps. Many felt that the installation of a foreign engineer over an American was a direct reflection on their own performance, resulting in six resignations of key personnel from the Corps of Engineers.<sup>3</sup>

The French nobleman Simon Bernard earned a distinguished reputation as an expert in fortifications in the Army of the Rhine as a young man, and was quickly promoted to the rank of *maréchal de camp* (equivalent to a brigadier general) under Napoléon Bonaparte. Bernard's loyalty to the Emperor following his abdication and exile resulted in Bernard's banishment to Dole in the year 1815. Finding himself without a job or commission, though recognized as one of Europe's foremost authorities on the design and construction of modern fortifications, Bernard became the ideal candidate in the United States' endeavor to secure a European architect for its proposed coastal defense system. General Simon Bernard was thusly appointed to the US Corps of Engineers with the rank of brigadier general.<sup>4</sup>

The American counterpart to Simon Bernard was Joseph Gilbert Totten, born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1788. He was educated at West Point and began his career as a military architect in the Corps of Engineers under Colonel Jonathan Williams in 1805. Promoted to Colonel for gallantry in the War of 1812, Totten became a permanent member of the Board of Engineers along with Bernard in 1819. Though a majority of the early Third System structures' designs are credited to Bernard, all works from the 1830s

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<sup>3</sup> Price, Russell Reed. "American Coastal Defense: The Third System of Fortification on the Gulf Coast 1816-1867." MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1987. Print, 12-14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

forward are accredited to Totten, as Bernard resigned his commission to return to France in 1831. Totten went on to distinguish himself as a noted innovator in the field of seacoast fortifications by designing casemate-embrasure iron shutters, as well as advanced masonry techniques rivaling any nineteenth-century European construction.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Price, Russell Reed. "American Coastal Defense: The Third System of Fortification on the Gulf Coast 1816-1867." MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1987. Print. 12-16.

## THE THIRD SYSTEM OF DEFENSE

Louisiana was to receive eight fortified works in total under the full term of the Third System between the years of 1819 and 1867 (Fig. 1). Each site was chosen for its strategic defense of critical waterways relevant to the city of New Orleans. The Fortifications Board ascertained that the South's largest city was also the most prone to attack. During the War of 1812, British forces advanced to within seven miles of the city by utilizing water approaches, despite the four Second System forts protecting it at that time. Though Second System works were insubstantial and inferior in design, Fort St. Phillip successfully defended New Orleans from invasion, and would be the only Second System fort to be retained and renovated in the Third System.<sup>6</sup>

The First System of seacoast defense, implemented by Secretary of War Henry Knox in 1794, consisted of roughly twenty works at strategic harbors and were largely based on the designs of French engineer Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban. Given an appropriation of only \$76,000 for construction, Knox directed these works to be inexpensively built of timber, earth and sod. Lacking funds for maintenance, these defenses quickly succumbed to the elements. Construction of the Second System began in 1808 in response to increasing British naval aggression. Engineered entirely by American officers, the Second System was more heavily influenced by the designs of French engineer Marquis René de Montalembert. While many fortifications remained masonry-faced earthen works, several completely masonry-based forts were built. These newer forts relied less on gun placement en barbette (on the top of the wall to fire over the parapet) while introducing casemated artillery. Though the Second System

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

works were of more advanced design than the First System, the defenses were hastily built of perishable materials, rendering them weak and ineffective under fire in the War of 1812.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the military history of southern Louisiana as well as topographical surveys, the Corps of Engineers under Bernard and Totten strategically selected seven sites on which to build new fortifications. These eight forts were positioned to defend all transportation routes leading to the city of New Orleans suitable for use by a foreign force, making it the most heavily protected coastal city in the southern United States<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 1).

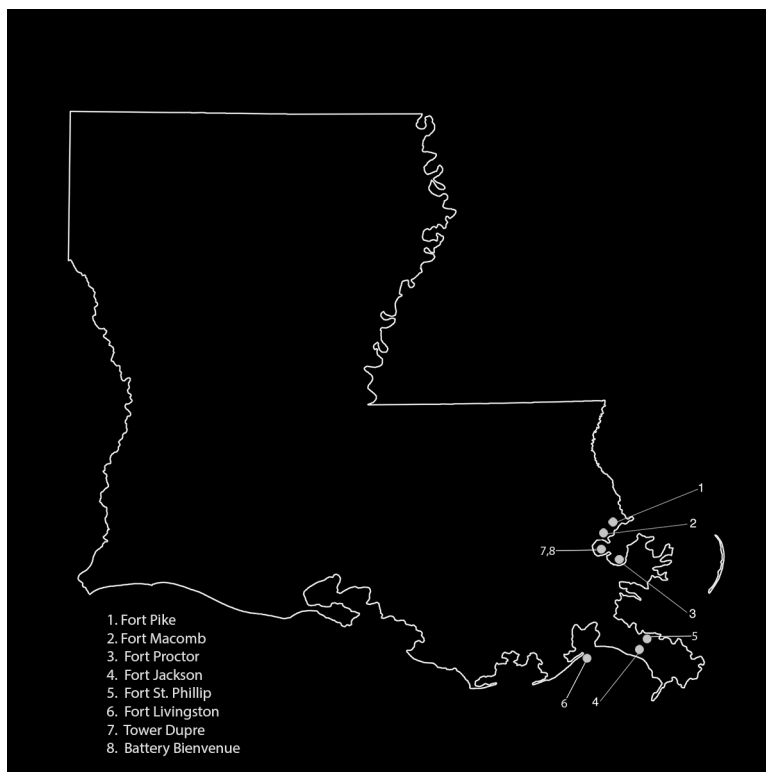


Figure 1: Third System Forts in Louisiana

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.



Guarding the approach from the southwest would be Fort Livingston on Grand Terre Island, and from the south along the Mississippi River would be the sister forts St. Phillip and Jackson, which are positioned nearly opposite one another at Plaquemines Bend. Though Fort St. Phillip was to be renovated in the image of the Third System, the people of New Orleans and Louisiana felt particularly vulnerable following their near fall to the British in 1815. Therefore, the Louisiana legislature petitioned Congress in 1820 to build an additional fort on the east bank of the Mississippi River opposite Fort St. Phillip. Construction on Fort Jackson was thus begun in 1822.<sup>9</sup>

The waterways to the northeast of the city, which provide direct access from the Gulf of Mexico to what is essentially the back door of New Orleans via Lakes Borgne and Pontchartrain were provided with Forts Pike and Macomb. Fort Pike on the Rigolets Pass and Fort Macomb (originally named Fort Wood) on the Chef Menteur Pass, were begun around the same time, are nearly identical in design, form and function, and are unique amongst all of the Third System Forts. Simon Bernard designed them “to be triangular in form with a curved sea front ending in two demi-bastions and a full bastion oriented toward the land (Fig. 2).”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Landry, Ernest Adam. “The History of Forts Jackson and St. Phillip with Special Emphasis on the Civil War Period.” MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1938. Print. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> Price, Russell Reed. “American Coastal Defense: The Third System of Fortification on the Gulf Coast 1816-1867.” MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1987. Print. 70.



Figure 2: James Osborne, *Fort Pike - Rigolets Pass*, 2014.

To protect the approach used by the British in the War of 1812 the simple Battery Bienvenue was constructed where Bayous Manzanant and Bienvenue meet, with the casemate curtain facing Lake Borgne. The seventh fortified position in Louisiana's coastal defense is to the south of Battery Bienvenue at Bayou Dupré, which connects Lake Borgne with the Mississippi River just southeast of New Orleans. At this position a Martello tower named Tower Dupré was constructed in 1829. This adaptation of the standard Martello tower design was to be the final construction in Louisiana under General Simon Bernard.

Fort Proctor, the eighth and final fort to be built in Louisiana, was placed and designed by Chief Engineer Totten in 1856 at Proctor's Landing. This site, which is south of Battery Bienvenue and Tower Dupre along the shore of Lake Borgne was chosen by Totten as it was perceived to be a weak point in New Orleans' defense, being the terminus of the Mexican Gulf Railroad which lead directly into the city. The three-tiered square design of Fort Proctor differs from the other Third System fortifications in Louisiana, though it resembles two towers built by Totten in Key West. One particularly unique feature of its construction is the use of wrought iron beams to support the second floor, which at the time was a significant and new advance in building technology (Fig. 3).



Figure 2: James Osborne, Rolled Iron Beams - Fort Proctor, 2014

In 1858 Fort Proctor was roughly two years into its construction and not nearing any state of completion when the Louisiana state militia seized the structure in the lead-up to the American Civil War. When Louisiana seceded in 1861 the state militia seized all Federal properties including the Third System Forts. Subsequently, Fort Proctor would never be completed. During the Civil War Confederate troops would garrison the Louisiana coastal forts until Federal forces captured New Orleans on April 26, 1862. When this news reached the lower Mississippi River forts, mutiny broke out and Forts Jackson and St. Phillip surrendered. Following this surrender, the Confederates proceeded to evacuate all of the remaining coastal fortifications. So it goes that despite great expense and decades of construction, only two of the eight masonry coastal defenses performed the function for which they were built.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-80.

## DECLINE OF THE THIRD SYSTEM

The engineers of the Third System designed its fortifications to stave off a naval invasion equipped with the technology of the antebellum period in which it originated. Two significant technologies emerged between the inception of Third System and the single test of its defensive effectiveness, the Civil War. These technologies not only contributed to rendering the masonry forts strategically ineffective, but effected a decline of public confidence in their ability to defend the people. First was the development of steam driven vessels which allowed an invading force to move quickly past a permanent fort that was designed to bombard a slow-moving ship. The second, more impactful invention, was the development of rifled artillery whose longer range, velocity and momentum resulted in each fired projectile inflicting significantly more damage to a masonry fort than the round, smooth-bore projectiles used in previous eras. Where a 10-inch smooth-bore round could penetrate a masonry wall to eight inches, its rifled counterpart could penetrate to twenty-four inches from the same range. Rifled artillery was adopted for use in the early 1860s, coinciding with the beginning of the Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

In the years following the Civil War, the Louisiana Third System forts were either abandoned entirely or experienced intermittent use before being decommissioned. Immediately following the surrender, Fort Jackson was used as a prison camp garrisoned largely by “colored people” who mutinied on December 9, 1863.<sup>13</sup> The fort continued to be used under federal ownership as a camp for Confederate political

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, Mark A. “The End of An Era? The Fall of Fort Pulaski and the End of Third System Defense Policy.” *Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians*. 26 (2005-06) : 98-122. Web. 98-103.

<sup>13</sup> Landry, Ernest Adam. “The History of Forts Jackson and St. Phillip with Special Emphasis on the Civil War Period.” MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1938. Print. 84.

prisoners, being manned by black troops until 1876. With the outbreak of the Spanish American War the United States War Department constructed two new batteries at Fort Jackson in 1896-97, one outside the fort along the river and one inside occupying the space of the original citadel. Both new batteries were armed with heavy artillery in the form of disappearing guns. Fort St. Phillip was given over forty-five new frame-buildings in 1900-1902 as well as additional structures during World War I when both Forts Jackson and St. Phillip were garrisoned to be used as training camps. In 1922, both forts were deemed surplus and summarily sold into private ownership. Fort St. Phillip sold in 1923 to Slavonian oyster fishermen, with Fort Jackson being sold in 1927 to the New Orleans photographer H. J. Harvey.<sup>14</sup>

The remaining Louisiana forts were disarmed, decommissioned and permitted to fall into ruin during the 1890s. Fort Pike was purchased by Louisiana in 1928 as the first project of the Louisiana State Parks Commission, with Fort Macomb being similarly acquired in 1939. While Fort Pike has enjoyed generally good upkeep and regular tourism despite continued coastal erosion, Fort Macomb was severely damaged in the 1960s by the Fort Macomb Development Company to whom the site was leased for maintenance and development as a tourist attraction, leading to the fort's disuse since that time. Fort Livingston was heavily damaged by hurricanes in 1893 and 1915, was purchased by the Office of State Parks in 1923, and continues to erode without improvement due to a lack of state funds. The main structure of Fort Proctor has survived in its incomplete state fairly well, though the shoreline of Lake Borgne has

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

eroded enough that the fort is now an island in the lake, accessible only by boat.<sup>15</sup> The Martello Tower Dupre, located north of Fort Proctor on Lake Borgne, was reduced to its foundation by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

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<sup>15</sup> Price, Russell Reed. "American Coastal Defense: The Third System of Fortification on the Gulf Coast 1816-1867." MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1987. Print. 84-87.

## IMPETUS & PERIL

In the nineteen eighties and nineties my father often brought me fishing for flounder, trout and redfish near the remains of Fort Pike on the Rigolets Pass and Fort Proctor in Lake Borgne. They existed for me, as they do for so many people in Louisiana, as landmarks in the coastal landscape by which one navigates a vessel and nothing more. I never once questioned their presence or disuse, nor did I seek to visit them if they were made accessible for the purpose of my perusal. They remained though in my mind as a thing of fascination — physical objects which feel in equal measure a part of their unique environments while being at odds with it. Though a fair amount has been written about the political atmosphere as well as the engineers that wrought the Third System forts near New Orleans, only intermittent, amateur snapshots and the occasional dispassionate government-commissioned photographs exist as visual evidence of their unique ubiquity. No comprehensive effort has been previously undertaken to photographically document the appearance of these massive, European-designed nineteenth century structures existing within the contemporary American landscape. I believe this to be a function of each fort's remoteness, seemingly exiled as relics of the "Old South" to run out their days assured of the meaninglessness of their future existence. Compounding the rural nature of their locations, which were quite far removed even during their occupation, is the fact of their abandonment or decommissioning within as few as ten years of the widespread application of photography.

The consequence of neglecting to apply the intrinsic capabilities of photography to transient constructed spaces is of course the loss of the opportunity to preserve the



experience of an element or incarnation of a collective history. “A photograph was and sometimes still is our first and only experience of a building and its surroundings. The eye behind the camera becomes ours, gazing on places and structures.”<sup>16</sup> In essence, it is this threat, this potential of losing the knowledge gained through the experience of a place in peril which motivated me to create this body of work. If we allow that the photograph has the potential to convey an evidentiary truth of an object or place, then creating such visual evidence of these constructions, adapted uniquely to the very places in which they exist prior to their non-existence, seems imperative to preserve history and knowledge. I contend that historians can never fully explore the meaning or nuanced subtleties of any constructed space or environment simply by reading an account of it. The photograph then carries the latency of direct vicarious experience, as it “typically bestow(s) what historian Peter Hales called the imprimatur of the medium’s supposed realism upon a space or building.”<sup>17</sup>

The imperative need to create these preservative photographs derives from a number of factors, many of which relate to elements of the specific geographies in which the fortified works exist. Recognizing the unstable nature of the Louisiana coastal marsh, Third System engineers built sub-foundations for the forts to be “supported entirely on grillages of logs and planks” made of cypress wood.<sup>18</sup> Continued coastal erosion along with a steady barrage of hurricane surge waters has, over the years, caused these wooden support foundations to deteriorate. Their immense weight being

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<sup>16</sup> Woods, Mary N. *Beyond the Architect’s Eye*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. Print. XX.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII.

<sup>18</sup> Price, Russell Reed. “American Coastal Defense: The Third System of Fortification on the Gulf Coast 1816-1867.” MA thesis. Louisiana State University, 1987. Print. 71.

unevenly supported in soft marsh mud has affected irregular settling which can be observed in the form of massive structural cracks running throughout the buildings (Fig. 4). The exterior casemate curtain walls in some places at Forts Pike and Macomb are beginning to lean towards the water, pulling slowly away from the interior casemates themselves. Other visually observable evidence of the forts' slow decline in structural integrity are the multitude of calcareous stalactites that have formed in the barrel vaults of several interior passageways. The permanently damp and humid conditions compounded by the drainage of the terreplein tier and the interaction of caustic salt water react with the masonry causing it to "bleed" limestone from the mortar (Fig. 5). As it seems unlikely that this interaction of elements will ever come to an end, the forts will inevitably be unable to sustain their own weight.



Figure 3: James Osborne, Northern Demi-bastion, Salient Angle-Fort Pike, 2014



Figure 5: James Osborne, *Masonry Deterioration*, 2014.

## APPROACH AND INFLUENCE

At the outset of this endeavor I felt a certain self-imposed responsibility to step behind the camera, allowing it to faithfully render the details of each construction devoid of my influence to the purpose of historical documentation, as if purely objective photography is possible. Quickly recognizing this to be an implausible and ineffective method of approach, I adopted a mode of working that is at times in line with the motivations of the mid-nineteenth century Mission Héliographique in France. The Mission was a photographic undertaking of the Société Héliographique that formed in early 1851. Its founding members were charged by the Commission des Monuments Historiques, founded in 1837 by the ministère de l'Interieur, with the task of applying the fledgling art and science of photography to “the discovery and preservation of ancient and, particularly, medieval monuments.”<sup>19</sup> Each of the photographers thusly commissioned would be assigned roughly one fourth of the country in addition to a carefully composed list of edifices “whose historical importance or urgent need of restoration had been particularly remarked by the commission...”<sup>20</sup>

While the proclaimed purpose of the Mission aligns with my own objectives in photographing the Louisiana Third System forts, it is with its contributing photographer Gustave Le Gray whom I feel most aesthetically drawn to in philosophy and approach. Certain similarities of sentiment are shared between my work and that of Le Gray (Fig. 6-9). During a period in the 1850s when many landscape photographers made images

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<sup>19</sup> Aubenas, Sylvie, et al. *Gustave Le Gray 1820-1884*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002. Print. 59-61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

of the Fontainebleau forest, they selected picturesque scenes including strolling figures to the purpose of mass appeal. Conversely, Le Gray made photographs in the same forest which are studies based on his own curiosities, knowledge and personal perceptions, all adapted to his own understanding of the photograph's unique rendering of nature.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 4: Gustave le Gray, *The Dolmen Known as "La Grande Allee Couverte," Bagneux, 1851.*



Figure 5: James Osborne, *Eastern Bastion of Fort Jackson, 2014.*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-48.



Figure 6: Gustave Le Gray, *The Great Wave, Sete*, 1857.



Figure 7: James Osborne, *Seaward Casemate, Fort Pike*, 2014.

This shift in perspective allowed me to adopt a sense of purposeful curatorship in which I could explore architectural elements and their provocative interaction with the

land, trusting the photograph to convey requisite details. To communicate the individuality of their features, I chose not to select compositions based on the confines of a systematic approach typical of and necessitated by working typologically. Repetitive depiction of the elements of sameness universal to the works serves only to relegate the function of the collected images to analytical documentation. In spending long periods of time through multiple visits to each place, it is the differences in their design, situation in the land and unique degeneracy which became the focus of my attention. If my objective is to convey particular evidence of existence and decay, I do not feel compelled to repeat a same composition for each place, intending each photograph to contribute a crucial piece of a larger narrative

The images I have made in this series seek to be in the moment rather than control it. Though I draw inspiration from past ideas and the work of photographers such as Gustave le Gray, I do not seek to repeat it — rather to build upon it. As I progress in my understanding of the world through the continued photographing of it, I endeavor to create increasingly refined images in which the architecture of composition and the interplay of light become my most significant subjects.

As similar as the Third System forts in Louisiana are to one another, their architectural adaptations and highly varied individual geographies have contributed to each expressing a unique identity. After visiting only one space I did not have this impression. After visiting two spaces, it became quite clear that the experience of each construction itself, as if it were a living thing, deserved an equal measure of attention in their documentation. The buildings seem to resist preservative adaptation, conveying a sense of persistence despite the works of man or nature. Though the absorbing of their

histories into nature seems less a romantic desire to escape modernity as it is an indicator of the American culture's nature of ever-rapid advancement, eschewing any element not aligned with that purpose.

The function of this body of work then evolved with the intention to not only create a visual record, but to do so in such a way as to effect awareness. What began as documentation of history and architecture became an investigative representation of existence facing the implication of nonexistence, loneliness, and the idea of purpose and the loss thereof. I became particularly interested in the forts' presence in time, focusing on the idea of these fortifications existing as a single iteration of the repeated usage of the land upon which they stand. The 1978 archaeological investigation and excavation of Fort Pike revealed evidence of both prehistoric and historic usage of that land. In fact, the Rangia shells used in the construction of Fort Pike are attributed to the remains of the so-called Garcia site from the Tchula period occupation between 500 and 300 B.C.<sup>22</sup> These structures wrought in and from the landscape exist in precisely the same fashion as the land itself—the land is created and eroded, it is built and consumed by the action of water. In the final analysis, the land and that which is built upon it share a common fate. When Martin Heidegger writes of repetition as a primordial mode of fate, he contends that “history has its essential importance neither in what is past nor in the ‘today’ and its ‘connection’ with what is past, but in that authentic historizing of existence...”.<sup>23</sup> Heidegger claims that history has its roots in the future, and in his discourse concerning the death of existence (Dasein) he asserts:

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<sup>22</sup> Castille, George J. Coastal Environments, Inc. *Archaeological Investigations at Fort Pike (16 or 57): The 1978 Excavation*. Baton Rouge, 1982. Print. 5-1.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Print. 438.



Authentic Being-towards-death—that is to say, the finitude of temporality—is the hidden basis of Dasein’s historicity. Dasein does not first become historical in repetition; but because it is historical as temporal, it can take itself over in its history by repeating. For this, no historiography is as yet needed.<sup>24</sup>

This rhythm of being and being-towards death must be acknowledged as an absolute. The unique nature of the photograph in its relationship to time and the temporal then becomes our only existing method of interfering with the death of existence.

Having worked for many years as a photojournalist myself, I am often influenced by photographers working in a similar way. Though our subjects vastly differ, I greatly admire the unfaltering technique and comprehensive dedication to purpose of Sebastião Salgado. His treatment of natural space as well as peoples and cultures in peril around the world have at times impacted the decisions I have made in producing this body of work. Alan Riding writes in the introduction to Salgado’s first book titled *Other Americas*, “In black and white, Salgado’s photographs capture the alternating light and darkness of skies and lives, the harshness and cruelty that coexist with tenderness and sentimentality.”<sup>25</sup> When Salgado photographed people whose way of life is coming to an end and I photograph constructed spaces that will no longer exist, we both chose to make monochromatic images which may romanticize our intents, though potentially allow a more simultaneous experience of both form and content, free of the distraction of judging the reality of color.

In a brief read, the images in (Fig. 10) and (Fig. 11) figures may initially appear to be quite different, though upon closer inspection you discover a level of similarity in their formal construction. This similarity of treatment not in literal terms of subject, but in the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Salgado, Sebastião. *Other Americas*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. Print. 9.

technical crafting of, and sentiment of purpose occur over and again when comparing this body of work to that of Salgado's (Fig. 12-13). All of Salgado's works function to me as environmental portraits in their dual purpose of conveying a depth of contextual information while expressing the experience of a person or place. That duality of purpose which relies on the photograph to depict "reality" resonates with the intended purpose of my images to be historically preservative while grasping at the intangibility of experience through light and form. These photographs of seacoast fortifications, in much the same way as Salgado's photographs of people whose ways of life are coming to an end, strive for meaning past their usefulness as descriptive documents.



Figure 8: Sebastião Salgado, *Brasil*, 1983.



Figure 9: James Osborne, *Western Landward Casemate Floor*, 2014.



Figure10: Sebastiao Salgado, *Ceara*, 1982.



Figure 10: James Osborne, *Wet Ditch, Fort Pike*, 2014.

## CONCLUSION

This body of work reveals the dual nature of my experience and interest in making photographs. My work continues to straddle the division between the highly technical and the expressive. The photographs in this series are influenced by and crafted using techniques and technologies spanning more than a century of photography's history. Simultaneously, they seek to be expressive images capable of social commentary.

Installation of this work for the MFA thesis exhibition will be organized into four distinct groupings based on geographic location and fortification. The thirty-one exhibited photographs were selected from a significantly larger collection of work. The images chosen represent significant architectural features as well as distinct features of each landscape, sequenced in the order one would encounter the forts traveling from north to south on the waterways upon which they are built. The video component of the work will be projected at roughly eight by five feet in an alcove separated from the photographic works. Though the exhibited work represents three years of continued exploration of this subject, it encompasses only four of the six extant fortifications. This project will continue until all of the sites are represented. With the passing of time these constructed places will transition into nonexistence. I do not seek to influence their physical preservation, only to make the viewer aware of the values which lead to the loss of elements of our history.

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## **VITA**

James Osborne was born in 1982 as a fully-grown man of fifty-seven years. He emerged wearing a finely tailored suit, having above his lip an impeccably shaped handlebar moustache. To his knowledge, he was never a child, and his interest in photography is simply a matter of course. He was raised near New Orleans, earned his B.F.A. in photography from Louisiana Tech University in 2004, and is currently an M.F.A. candidate at Louisiana State University in studio art.