From here to there

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FROM HERE TO THERE

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
Dana Statton
B.A., Washington and Lee University, 2009
August 2012
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have met some wonderful, strange, and uncharacteristically good-natured people along the way to completing this body of work. I have had the good fortune to encounter old friends and the wonderful surprise of making new ones.

My biggest thanks goes to my parents, Alison and Larry Statton, for always believing in me and giving me the means to achieve my goals; my sister, Leah, for being my partner-in-crime; my brother, Jack, for always making me laugh; Grandma Mickey, for her unconditional love; and Grandma Barbara and Grandpa Jim, for always taking me along for the ride.

My sincerest and deepest regard goes out to Lauren Hegge, with whom, really, none of this would be possible. Thank you for always being there, and recognizing the ideas in my work when I could never quite form the words. I also owe a well of gratitude to my friends Mercedes Jelinek and Kelly Tate. Thank you for your constant friendship and even more constant affection.

I also want to thank Jeremiah Ariaz, for always pushing me with just the right amount of persistence; Tom Neff, for believing in me when it mattered the most; Mikey Walsh, Kelli S. Kelley, Ed Smith, and Paul Dean for your advice and even more for your confidence in my work; and Michael Book, for informing me that I was, indeed, a color photographer.

Last, but certainly not least, William, I appreciate you each and every day; thank you for always being there when I needed you, and even more, for when I thought I didn’t.
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ABSTRACT

The photographs in the series *From Here to There* are not a description of a place; instead, the images are about engaging in a particular type of looking. Elements of “here” and “time” are included in the work; by photographing a moment that will never exist again, transitory objects are imbued with importance. A tree branch drifts, a puddle evaporates, and light shifts, slowly, but immediately. In the midst of this change, my photographs represent specific moments. Integral to the work is the act of finding the photograph, as is the act of framing, taking, and making the photograph. Each decision informs an image, and each image in turn informs a group of images. Although the images appear simple at first, the longer the viewer spends with the images, the more complicated the imagery becomes. The more connections the viewer finds, the more rewarding the act of looking becomes.
INTRODUCTION

I am not a natural born storyteller; I have no knack for narrative. Rather, I prefer declarative sentences to descriptive ones. In this way, From Here to There is not necessarily a description of a particular place; instead, it is about engaging in a particular type of looking. As contemporary photographer Uta Barth said, “I am engaged in a different type of looking in this environment. It is truly detached from a focused interest in subject. Instead it provides a sort of ambient visual field.”¹ This body of work does not represent the city of Baton Rouge, nor does it comment on the Garden District precisely. It is not representative of the disruptive suburb, or the idyllic place of man in nature. It is a little of all of these things, and none of these things all at once. Subtle references are contained within this “ambient visual field” and allow viewers to draw their own conclusions about the spaces portrayed.

Elements of “here” and “time” are included in the work; by photographing a moment that will never exist again, transitory objects are imbued with importance. A tree branch drifts, a puddle evaporates, and light shifts, slowly, but immediately. In the midst of this change, my photographs represent specific moments. Integral to the work is the act of finding the photograph, as is the act of framing, taking, and making the photograph. Each decision informs an image, and each image in turn informs a group of images.

This work is not only about a particular way of looking, but also the experience of looking. It requires the viewer to examine the ways in which we look; both what we choose to overlook and, more importantly, what gives us pause.

¹ Uta Barth, Uta Barth (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2004), 21
FROM HERE TO THERE

Informed by color, space, and the relationship between objects, the photographs in this series are meant to give the viewer a glimpse into a place. The place is only important in that it is where the photographs were taken; beyond that, there is no intentional meaning. As previously stated, these photographs are not about the state of Louisiana, the city of Baton Rouge, or the neighborhood of the Garden District. Instead, these photographs show a place, but only briefly, and only hinted at. My photographs are grouped into three distinct parts, showing the act of looking down, looking up, and the in-between that occurs in the middle of the two. In this way, I hope to give the viewer a sense of a larger whole – albeit not a definitive one. It is not my intention to confuse the viewer; rather it is my hope that the viewer will make certain connections on their own, about both what they see, and how they see it.

Fig. 1 Dana Statton, Looking Down #2, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
12 x 18 in.
Fig. 2 Dana Statton, *Looking Up #1*, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
20 x 30 in.

Fig. 3 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #30*, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
10 x 15 in.
These photographs are not taken in a way that utilizes the camera’s ability to capture every minute detail of the scene. These are not photographs taken in the manner of Ansel Adams, or, in the contemporary photography world, Andreas Gursky. I am not using the camera in a way that shows every facet in the frame. Instead, I focused the image to reflect the way we, human beings, see – just as our eye lingers on certain elements, and glides over others. Only one point is in sharp focus; as the viewer’s eye reaches the edge, the rest of the image falls out of focus, but of course, not out of sight.

When considering the subject of these photographs, this particular and fixed way of photographing is emphasized. Individually, these are not monumental images, nor are the subjects monumental in and of themselves. In a simple manner, I photographed my neighborhood as I came to know it. Leaving my house when the light started to fade, I became aware of my environment. I have always noticed the mundane, and appreciated the quality of light that the late afternoon holds. In his short story, *Cloud, Castle, Sky*, Vladimir Nabokov once wrote that:

> Vasili Ivanovitch would look at the configuration of some entirely insignificant objects – a smear on the platform, a cherry store, a cigarette butt – and would say to himself that never, never would he remember these three little things in that particular interrelation, this pattern, which he could now see with deathless precision.²

In this way, walking along the sidewalks, gravel throughways, and uneven concrete roads of familiar, and often unfamiliar, streets becomes an exercise in seeing in itself. As I walked, I photographed moments of shadow, line, reflection, and light.

² Vladimir Nabokov, June 1941, The Atlantic Magazine
Presentation of these precise moments becomes of the utmost importance. Each image plays a role in realizing the whole. The three looking up photographs are placed together in a way that leads the eye to visualize the spaces left blank, the eleven looking down photographs are lined up next to each other in three series, and the in-between photographs are in a four by five grid, with a few inches between them. Each of these aspects plays off the other and are meant to be seen together; each photograph is in view of the other, nothing obstructs the viewer’s eye in the gallery.

Fig. 4 Installation View of the Gallery

The images in the grids play off each other in an exact way. Arranged in a very controlled and intended manner, the images connect, contradict, and inform the ones surrounding it. Tree lines continue and disappear, sidewalks run askew, and turn back, and reflections turn our world upside down and right side up. By placing the images in this way, I am relying on the viewer to make connections themselves; there is a specific way to see these images, and evident connections to be made. Although the images appear straightforward at first, the longer the viewer spends with the images, the more connections they will find and the more rewarding the act of looking becomes.
Likewise, the *looking down* images are lined up next to each other in a very precise order. Although these images do not necessarily play off each other as the images in the grid do, by being placed in the same space, they images automatically play off the others in the same room. The viewer is confronted with this direct view of *down* and the idea is reinforced through the repetition of images, eleven in all. Each is its own take on the sidewalk, the road, or the pathway. Each has its own idiosyncrasies and nuances, underpinning the idea of control imposed on the environment, and the subsequent flagrant disregard of that imposition.
The three *looking up* images are separate, individually emphasizing the largess of the sky. They are also connected by the organization of the space; the corners of the photographs are almost touching. In this way, the photographs encourage the viewer to continue to imagine the space outside of the frame. Again, the photographs are independently portraying part of my environment. The branches act as tendrils, connections, and breaks, just as the cracks in the sidewalks do. These photographs also serve to literally open up the scene and the space.

Fig. 8 Installation View
INFLUENCES

This work, although my own, owes much from concepts and ideas from other artists, writers, and filmmakers. While I have attempted to make work that expresses my ideas truly, nothing is ever completely independent of others. Filmmaker Jim Jarmusch once said that:

Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light, and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is nonexistent. And don’t bother concealing your thievery—celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: ‘It’s not where you take things from—it’s where you take them to.’

This being said, the most auspicious form of my thievery comes from artists such as Uta Barth, William Eggleston, and Edward Hopper.

Uta Barth was born in 1958 in Berlin, Germany and moved to the United States when she was twelve years old. Today, she lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Her photographs allude to the concept of place, rather than provide an explicit window into a world as we normally anticipate photographs do. In an interview, Barth said that, “I am interested in the margins, in everything that is peripheral rather than central.” Her photographs reflect this idea, and the focus is on ambiguity rather than the expected explanatory characteristics of the camera. In this way, certain series that she has done, such as Grounds and Fields, move away from definite subject matter; the photographs are not what they purport to be (Fig. 9 and Fig 10).


4 Uta Barth, Uta Barth (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2004), 10
Fig. 9 Uta Barth, *Ground # 38*, 1994
Ektacolor print on panel, Edition of 8
20 x 20 in.

Fig. 10 Uta Barth, *Field # 8*, 1995
Color photograph on panel, Edition of 8
23 x 28 3/4 in.
These photographs become more about the act of looking than looking at any subject in precise detail. Part of this aspect of looking can be seen in my photographs *The In-Between #23* (Fig. 11) and *The In-Between #1* (Fig. 12).

Fig. 11 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #23*, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
10 x 15 in.

Fig. 12 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #1*, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
10 x 15 in.
The focus of the images is not on the entire scene, if it can be called a scene. The emphasis, instead, is on the outline of the leaves, the line of the water, leaving the foreground and the background to fall out of focus. The viewer’s eye has to concentrate on the leaves, the water’s edge; there is no other place for the eye to rest. The act of seeing in this way reinforces the overall idea of looking in the first place, confronting questions about what we chose to look at, how we look, and how we choose to look.

This body of work is also influenced by William Eggleston. He was born in 1938, in Memphis, Tennessee, and lives there still today. He is often cited as the photographer who brought credibility to the medium of color photography. My interest in Eggleston’s work stems from his inherent attention to the relationship of colors to one another as much as he is concerned with the relationship of objects within the frame to one another. Both aspects play off each other and inform the work, arguably more than the subject matter itself. In an interview with Kristine McKenna in 1994, Eggleston said:

I’d intentionally constructed the pictures to make them look like ordinary snapshot anyone could’ve taken, and a lot of that had to do with the subject matter – a picture of a shopping center parking lot, for instance. Because the pictures looked so simple a lot of people didn’t notice that the color and form were worked out, that the content came and went where it ought to – that they were more than casual pictures.\(^5\)

This statement encapsulates much of what can be said about Eggleston’s work. It is evident in almost all of his photographs, and specifically photographs such as *Saint Simon’s Island, Georgia* and *Louisiana* (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14, respectively).

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Fig. 13 William Eggleston, *Saint Simon’s Island, Georgia*
Negative, 1978; Print, 1980
Dye transfer print
10 1/8 x 15 3/16 in.

Fig. 14 William Eggleston, *Louisiana*
1978
Chromogenic print
8 x 12 in.
Eggleston depends heavily on elements of structure to order his composition. He also uses light to inform the photograph, frequently relying on natural light and its effects. Both my photographs *In-Between #21* and *In-Between #3* show some of these similar characteristics (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16, respectively).

Fig. 15 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #21*, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
10 x 15 in.

Fig. 16 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #3*, 2012
Digital Inkjet Print
10 x 15 in.
Although these images initially appear to be very different, a closer look reveals that they are very similar in the way that they are constructed. Both photographs embrace shape and light in such a way as to inform the photograph as a whole. The photograph itself is about realizing the relationship between that space and the lighting; both complement the other. There is, as Michael Almereyda describes Eggleston’s photographs, “a sense of heightened attention – alertness, anticipation, awe – from fragments of ordinary, unmanipulated reality.”

In many ways, Edward Hopper is the least and most visible influence on my work. It shows in the balance I have tried to create in the images, and in the effect of light and shadow that I use to insinuate mood. It seems contradictory since I never show people in my photographs or use them in an exalted manner. However, I hope that the quiet moments that I capture show elements that he includes in his paintings, such as the inherent interest in the introspective response to wandering. I am interested in the world as I find it, never staging a photograph, never moving elements to fit better within the frame. Hopper, too, was interested in the un-staged, the unobtrusive moments, and appreciated them for what they were. Jeffrey Fraenkel writes that:

Edward Hopper’s relevance to American photography becomes clearer with each passing decade. His respect for humble subjects, his interest in the psychological, his depth as a landscape artist, and his astonishing sensitivity to color as a means of communicating feeling, are only some of the elements that may have led the writer Geoff Dyer to theorize that Hopper ‘could claim to be the most influential American photographer of the twentieth-century – even though he didn’t take any photographs.’

His paintings *Folly Beach, Charleston, South Carolina* and *Seven A.M.* , completed twenty years apart, show his interest in spaces absent of human interaction (Fig 17. and Fig. 18, respectively).

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6 William Eggleston et al., *William Eggleston, for now* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2010) no page number

Fig. 17 Edward Hopper, *Folly Beach, Charleston, South Carolina*, 1929
Watercolor, gouache and charcoal on paper
13 7/8 x 19 3/4 in.
The Lesley and Emma Sheafer Collection, Bequest of Emma A. Sheafer, 1973
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 18 Edward Hopper, *Seven A.M.*, 1948
Oil on canvas
30 3/16 × 40 1/8 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art
The paintings are empty and full at the same time. Narratives are hinted at; something is lurking on the other side of the frame. This element is absorbing in and of itself, even without acknowledging the pure sensory pleasure that exists in these paintings. In my photographs *The In-Between #28* and *The In-Between #40*, some of these same elements are apparent (Fig. 19 and Fig. 20 respectively).

Fig. 19 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #28*, 2012 Digital Inkjet Print 10 x 15 in.

Fig. 20 Dana Statton, *The In-Between #40*, 2012 Digital Inkjet Print 10 x 15 in.
CONCLUSION

These photographs are about seeing, looking, and looking with intention. I want to show the viewer not only what I am interested in, but also what is overlooked too often – moments objects, light, and the curve of a line. By photographing these objects and instances, importance is automatically attached to these things. The democratic eye of the camera is not regulated to images we typically think of as being worthy of the title “art.” By placing these images in a gallery setting, the importance of these small instances and arrangements grows and expands; in this way, the viewer becomes a part of an experience that perhaps is not a typical one.
REFERENCES


VITA

At varying points in her life, Dana Statton was raised in Texas, Long Island, and Louisiana. She received her B.A. with a double major in Journalism and Studio Art from Washington and Lee University in 2009 and is currently seeking her degree at Louisiana State University for both an M.F.A. in Studio Art and an M.A. in Art History. The thing she loves most of all in this world is books.