The quiet

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THE QUIET

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By
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ABSTRACT

*The Quiet* is a series of photographs that focuses on nightly travels in South Louisiana and Oklahoma. The images recall my time growing up in Southwest Oklahoma through the depiction of dismal yet riveting structures. The images are based on the idea of architectural ecology— that is, the relationship of architectural structures to one another and to their surroundings.

I photograph isolated vernacular structures and pair them with other photographs to create a single panoramic image. By digitally merging complementary scenes, I create an illusion that derelict structures can exist as “neighbors.” The final results are seamless panoramic representations of scenes reminiscent of the neighboring towns and lonely streets I explored as a youth.
Along with my soon-to-be wife, I moved to Baton Rouge in the summer of 2008. Soon after, we discovered that she was pregnant. With two life-changing events unfolding simultaneously, I understood that my photographic practice would be transformed as well. What I did not understand at first was the degree of change that would take place. After our daughter was born, necessity made me the primary caretaker, while my wife became the primary breadwinner; this led me to photograph at night, when I could be alone with my thoughts.

When I was younger, my friends and I would take our skateboards and wander throughout our town exploring new places. The work I have been producing for the past couple of years is reflective of how I saw my surroundings as a child and into my teens. Small-town life felt desolate and run-down.

“There is always a subjective aspect in landscape art, something in the picture that tells us as much about who is behind the camera as about what’s in front of it”

Even as a kid I found the night to be a very fascinating time. As most of us were, I was afraid of the dark, but later came to find a profound appreciation for it. Everything is transformed into the unfamiliar, and the resulting experience spoke to me of mystery and isolation with potentially unique visual properties. Objects that were in full view during the day become all but hidden when seen by the dim light from scant-colored light sources. These objects are permeated

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with evocative connotations where everything appears to be altered into something else. With few people around, the nighttime offers a greater sense of freedom, allowing me to photograph whatever I please.

When I was younger, my father would take me to the south side of my hometown, past an old run-down porn shop, to play baseball at Missile Park, so named for a 110-foot tall Atlas missile that was erected in the center. This became a weekly experience for several summers. Each time we passed the shop, I wondered why the building seemed so unusual— not because I was prepubescent and charmed by the idea of a porn shop, but because the architecture was so beautiful. No other building in town was like this one. It was a long rectangular building that had wood siding with a corner cut off for the entrance. The side facing the road had a large row of paned glass similar to the windows one would see on an old factory building. This seemed odd for a business building within the town. The structure had been there for as long as I could remember, until the city tore it down sometime in the late 1990s. Whenever I recall the porn shop, I remain curious as to how a young boy found beauty in that particular structure without being predisposed to an appreciation for architecture. I believe my fascination with the domestic and functional buildings, also referred to as vernacular architecture, resulted from my attraction for that run-down shop and subsequently inspired the creation of works such as Used Tires.

My interest in photographing at night derives from a fascination with deep negative spaces and the presence of isolated objects outlined and highlighted by colored light. After working for several months, the idea came to mind that photographs could become emotionally darker and more complex if I combined subject matter representing an imaginative rather than a literal interpretation. By adding or subtracting objects in a scene, I try to bring forward questions
of a photograph’s authenticity. Moreover, each experience of fabricating scenes brought to mind my early fascination with the intimidating layers of the darkness.
PHOTOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

For the past two years I have photographed with digital equipment. I broke away from traditional practices in order to obtain greater control over the outcome of the images. I soon learned that by observing color temperature changes in the scenes, and digitally adding or subtracting details, it was possible to suggest that the intimidating layers of the darkness are found in the mind, if not the eye, of the beholder. Still, although digital practices are not at the forefront of my work, they do provide the necessary tools to achieve the end results I desire. The photographs vary in size within the panoramic format, which gives the impression that imagery can extend beyond the frame into an unseen space.

When studying my images, I considered the notion that photography is often regarded a record of place or time. About fifty percent of this work consists of adaptations of actual places that exist in the real world. I have taken photographs of places and changed them to how I saw fit. Accordingly, the result in each case is a place conceived from my own thoughts and memories, one that is not a record of place, but of the imagination. Therefore, I feel that I have made my own record of place.

Creating this body of work happened to be very labor intensive. The process takes hours, if not days, to complete a finished photograph. Hours are spent scouting locations, and not always finding what I’m looking for. In order to exercise greater control over the scene, I utilize tools such as floodlights and a gasoline-powered generator. Thus, much of the night is given to setting up equipment and illuminating the scene in the most favorable way. This practice gives me the ability to include or omit objects in any given scene. While photographing, I am not always sure what context an image will eventually inhabit, for much of the creative process is
spent in the post-processing stage. As the photographer Jerry Uelsmann explained in a 1993 interview, “I get a lot of ideas in the middle of the process while I’m watching this thing happen and because I’m constantly readdressing the evolving image.”

I feel a strong connection to Uelsmann because of this approach to image making. Similarly, as I examine my photographs, my ideas begin to evolve, and so the result often represents a significant development from where I began. Nothing remains as it was originally seen.

*The Slaughter Houses* (illustrated above) is perhaps the most important composite photograph I have created. It consists of four buildings on Highway 19 in Slaughter, Louisiana. Originally the structures were about 100 feet apart, but I compressed the spaces to enhance a “neighborly” impression. Although this scene is not included in the thesis works, it nonetheless served as a launching pad for what would come next. It also gave me the confidence that through digital means there were no limitations for producing more complex photographs. This process pushed the boundaries and my capabilities alike, while confirming my idea that even though my panoramic scenes are a fabrication and anything but real, viewers are invited to form their own interpretation.

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Used Tires (above) is an image that was photographed in my hometown, literally just down the street from the old porn shop. It was important to have some actual photographs from my hometown, given that I am referencing the memory of how life appeared to be as a child. Initially, I was attracted to the center building, as I imagined it to be on the verge of collapsing, though in fact it was still in use. This was a common theme growing up in Oklahoma. Life paralleled decay. Through all the years of passing this structure, it seemingly did not change; it was as if the owner kept up the maintenance just enough to keep it alive. Since I usually aim for balance and symmetry in my photographs, it was necessary to mirror the garage to ensure that the composition was not too heavy on either side. A goal of mine is to always give the impression of realism. As a result of this, certain aspects of the garage were removed or altered to help solidify this realism. The adjacent garage was also mirrored to create a repetition within the image, creating a heightened awareness of the central structure.
Repetition is also used to complement image pairings such as *Neighbor* (illustrated above), where two structures are conjoined into a single scene. To enrich structures or buildings, I sometimes pair them with other structures. The choice of pairing is dependent on the scene. This method is not, however, always utilized. If the scene is strong enough to stand on its own, then it is not modified. The image pairings are not meant to compete with one another, but to complement each other.

Along with repetition, isolation heightens the awareness of a structure and makes the viewer feel as if he or she is there within the scene. Farm *Fresh Produce* (above) and *Not Home* (below) are prime examples of this. Through the use of spotlights and empty horizons, the building becomes the main focus, while the dark areas take on an enigmatic quality.
Those who scrutinize my photographs often note that they possess the quality of stage sets. Although this was not my intention, I cannot deny that it is true. In fact, the idea goes hand in hand with the fabricated scenes. Stage sets are created to produce certain feelings or emotions to accompany a story. Similarly I create scenes to follow my own thoughts and ideas.

The final presentation of this work comprises varnished archival pigment prints on watercolor paper, mounted on aluminum. Their appearance is that of a razor-thin photograph floating in front of the wall, unbound by a frame or by glazing, providing a more intimate experience for the viewer.
INFLUENCES

During my graduate career, I have had many photographic inspirations, but two main influences stand above the rest. The artists also happen to photograph at night.

The work of Frank Relle is a profound influence and has been extremely helpful in the quest for my photographic voice. Relle is a New Orleans-based photographer, known for his nightscapes of post-Katrina New Orleans, who apprenticed under Arnold Newman and Mary Ellen Mark. The photograph Debreuil (right) served as an archetypal image for my work. The framing and exposure makes for an appealing melancholy feeling, at once lonely and eerie. Prior to discovering Relle’s photography, I had not considered the use of color to photograph at night. Previously, I would have thought the images unsuccessful due to shifts in color temperature created by peculiar mixtures of light. Another influential artist is Lynn Saville, a New York-based photographer who works just before sundown during the twilight hours. Saville works in remote and isolated areas of New York, primarily in Queens and the Bronx (see illustration at left).
Her work has been very influential on me owing to the ambiguity of the spaces. Questions always lingered in my mind: Was she alone or was someone lurking around? What was the drive that brought her to these areas? In some of her photographs that question is answered, but ambiguity was something I strived for during my own photographic outings. In Saville’s photographs everything seems quiet and lonely, but at the same time signs of life are apparent. Saville’s use of mixed light sources creates a very compelling mood.

I have also been influenced by the filmmakers Wes Anderson and Chan-wook Park for their use of lighting and composition, which have been especially helpful in developing my way of seeing. Park, best known for his films Lady Vengeance and Thirst, is a South Korean filmmaker whose dark stories and dramatic lighting create strange but yet gripping narratives. As in the example illustrated below, the dark lighting effects in his films play an important role in the overall feel of the entire story. They go along with his idiosyncratic methods of storytelling, which create compelling and emotional films.

The films of Wes Anderson have helped me to develop my eye with framing and composition in this body of work. The framing in his movies is always very direct and symmetrical. He shows viewers what he wants them to see in a straightforward manner and without ever compromising the concept with odd angles. This practice shows that Anderson is
very methodical in his approach to framing and compositions. Every frame seems to be well-thought-out and shot patiently.
CONCLUSION

Although I was driven to photograph at night due to daytime responsibilities, this work has heightened my appreciation for the quiet eeriness of the night, as well as my love for vernacular architecture. In the past two years of working on this project, I have developed a gift for depicting realism in fabricated photographs. As new technologies develop, I hope *The Quiet* will continue to challenge viewers to question the authenticity of images they see.

Through my nightly travels I have enjoyed the act of bringing new life into structures degraded or forgotten by time. Even though this project is finished, I plan to further pursue this idea of architectural ecology. Everything I have photographed has a relationship with itself and its surroundings. It is my belief that the photographs do not only portray deterioration in the world, but how life can be simple and mysterious at the same time.
REFERENCES


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Figure 1: The Slaughter Houses

Figure 2: Used Tires

Figure 3: Neighbors
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Figure 5: Not Home

Figure 6: Sno Cone Shack
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Figure 16: Lynn Saville, Pepsi Sign
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Figure 18: Clip from Wes Anderson’s The Darjeeling Limited
VITA

Shannon Kolvitz was born in Jacksonville, Arkansas, in 1985, but shortly after moved to Oklahoma where he grew up. From a young age it was clear that he had a profound interest in all things photography. That interest came from his older sister having photographs pinned all over her walls. During his first college photography class he saw how passionate his professor was and discovered how influential this would be on his life and the work ethic in photography. By May of 2007, Shannon received his Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree in photography from the University of Central Oklahoma. After graduating he decided that he was not finished with his education and wanted more for himself. Currently Shannon is living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with his wife and daughter, pursuing his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in photography at Louisiana State University.