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In the wake: a Louisiana memoir

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IN THE WAKE:
A LOUISIANA MEMOIR

A Thesis

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Ryan Lindburg
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

List of Figures

Abstract

In the Wake: A Louisiana Memoir

Works Cited

Vita
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign .......................................................... 3
2. Convergence of Katrina Shrouds and Refugees ......................................... 4
3. The Resilience of Children ................................................................. 5
4. Katrina Shrouds ....................................................................................... 5
5. Example of pace quickening through spacing in Refugees ....................... 7
6. Example of slowing time through stretched panels in Refugee ................. 8
7. Detail Katrina Shrouds ............................................................................. 9
8. Detail Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign ........................................... 10
9. Detail Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign ........................................... 10
10. Detail Houseguest .................................................................................. 11
11. Page from A Mardi Gras Fable ............................................................ 12
12. Selfish Savior ......................................................................................... 13
13. Houseguest .......................................................................................... 14
ABSTRACT

This thesis project was an exploration of narrative artwork through installation. Throughout the exhibit, I used multi-panel wall pieces, traditionally bound books, and fake walls to create an unbound book for the viewers to walk through. The pathway through the gallery provided my plotline; the works manipulated the pacing of this plot through their size and placement on the wall, with careful attention given to changing perspectives through the height of the hanging, as well as adjusting time by varying the space between the panels. Multiple print mediums were used in an effort to change the tone between pieces. This was a first attempt at installation that provided numerous ideas for changing the style of this exhibit and potentially new installations.
IN THE WAKE: A LOUISIANA MEMOIR

mem’oir (-wor), n. [Fr. mémoire, a memorandum, memoir, from L. memoria, memory.]
1. a biography or biographical notice.
2. a report or record of a scholarly investigation or scientific study; a monograph.
3. [pl.] (a) a report or record of happenings that is based on the writer’s personal observation and knowledge or special information; as memoirs of the French Revolution; (b) an autobiography or autobiographical record; (c) a record of the transactions of a learned society.

My name is Ryan Lindburg. Some of this might be true.¹

Perhaps if James Frey had used this as the opening line of his book A Million Little Pieces, he could have avoided the wrath of Oprah. By not admitting up front that parts of his book were fabrications, he crossed our society’s implied definition of a memoir; that is, that a memoir is factual information. Yet the word shares its root with memory, an amorphous creature that dulls with time. Memory is a very personal perspective of events and happenings. It is not uncommon for one to misremember an event and to relay an untrue story. This does not make one a liar, just an unreliable witness. This does not redeem James Frey, and it may not save me in the end either.

It is my intention with the installation In the Wake: A Louisiana Memoir, to follow the third part of that definition, and especially part (a), while at the same time exploring the nature of a book (narrative, time movement, and place) in an unbound environment. Not all events depicted in the exhibition specifically happened to me, yet all were in some way observed by me. There are exaggerations used to emphasize the

¹I was always taught in fiction class that people more readily believe an imperfect narrator than a perfect one.
emotional impact of these events, stylistic choices meant to find poetry in these moments, and fictional accounts to illustrate the musings of my mind. In the end, they add up to a record of my time spent in Louisiana following the events of Hurricane Katrina and the state’s recovery.

In order to best recreate the nature of a book, I needed to first break out of the single panel narrative structure. Most narrative art attempts to freeze an event in time, or to sandwich multiple parts into one composition, whereas a book makes use of numerous pages to convey the story. The advantage of this is the buildup of information. Novels allow a writer to splurge on details in order to strengthen the reader’s mental picture of the narrative. In turn, by using multiple panels to relate the stories, a richness of information is added to the works. In the piece Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign [Figure 1], numerous little symbols cover the composition, adding to the map-like visuals as well as providing snippets of the various adventures involved in my moving to Louisiana. Within a single panel, these nuggets might get lost or overly complicate the imagery. By extending the composition over numerous panels, the symbols get a life of their own while adding up to a complete narrative.

Often times, narrative is used synonymously with plot. Plotlines can take on different styles: the traditional chronological order, in which time flows in one direction; the spiral, in which the narrator returns to key events with new information2; fractured, in which the chronology is broken up and reordered3; and the nearly non sequitur4, in which

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2 Perhaps best illustrated by Toni Morrison’s Jazz.
3 See Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs.
4 I write nearly, as Scott McCloud points out that any two random images take on a relationship when placed together whether it seems logical at first or not.
1. Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign
visual descriptions trump plot\(^5\). For the most part, the installation follows a traditional chronological order, which is the most familiar style for a viewer, as it is common to novels and imitates day-to-day life. Since the exhibit exists as a book unbound, a pathway was created to mimic the turning of pages in a book. In this way, the viewers’ walking becomes part of the plot; the viewers experience the time traditionally given to the turning of pages through their movement from piece to piece. In addition, there is a modified fractured chronology in the convergence of the works *Katrina Shrouds* and *Refugees* [Figure 2].

\[\text{Figure 2. Convergence of} \ Katrina \ Shrouds \text{ and} \ Refugees\]

\(^5\) This is found in many of the short stories by Donald Barthelme.
The former continues its timeline above the latter and eventually merges at the conclusion of the *Refugees* chapter before segueing into the piece *The Resilience of Children* [Figure 3].

3. *The Resilience of Children*

This convergence was necessary in order to transform the significance of the curtains in *Katrina Shrouds* [Figure 4].

4. *Katrina Shrouds*
Initially, the work functions as a reaction to camera footage of New Orleans as a helicopter circles the Hyatt Hotel. One façade of the building is a series of broken windows; their curtains sway in the wind as if part of a ghost town. They are the remnants of disaster. Many other images from that day have faded in my mind, but I still see the sway of those curtains. Sometime later, while touring the Ninth Ward to see the rebuilding efforts, I was struck by the vibe of the neighborhood. Some houses were remarkably nice while others were mere burnt-out shells. The sounds of construction echoed throughout the streets. There was sadness to the elderly sitting on their porches staring at walls. Yet within all this noise and apathy, I found three children playing. They ran through the yard chasing each other with shouts and cheers. This moment was the sound of rebirth; those children won’t remember Hurricane Katrina except through stories told to them. I was struck by the ability of children to soldier on in the wake of disaster and decided that children would take my symbol of destruction and change it into a symbol of recovery through the boy using the curtain as a cape. In order to facilitate this transformation, I needed to split the chronology into two separate timelines that coexist on the wall.

Besides the pathway working as a time device, each piece contains elements of time through the size and placement of the panels. Following the rules of Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, time can be manipulated through panel size in that a longer panel indicates a larger passage of time than a shorter one; also, the more space between panels, the more time has passed. Both uses can be seen in the piece *Refugees*. Most of the panels are 15” x 15” and evenly spaced until the transformation of the harmonica
player. At this point, the panels becoming thinner and are placed closer together to speed up the “reading” of the moment until it explodes in a larger panel [Figure 5].

5. Example of pace quickening through spacing in *Refugees*

The piece returns to the 15” x 15” format until the panel of the handshake, which stretches the longest of any of the panels as if to freeze the moment [Figure 6].

In addition to size and placement, the sheer number of panels can indicate time. In *Katrina Shrouds*, the extension of the piece through multiple uses of the same panels over the wall slows down the time elapsing both physically and visually. Physically in that the viewer is traversing a longer section of the path and visually in that the repetition creates a feeling of timelessness, as though all movement has stopped.
6. Example of slowing time through stretched panels in *Refugee*
In this way, the multiple panels create a sense of place as well. Hotel rooms are just like a print: they are all created to look the same and have their edition number on the door. By using the same panels over and over again in *Katrina Shrouds*, the nature of a hotel is recreated on the wall [Figure 7].

![Image of multiple panels](image)

7. Detail *Katrina Shrouds*

Shape of the panels can inform place as well. In *Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign*, each panel is cut to the shape of the state in which that part of the story takes place [Figures 8 and 9]. The white space around the panels reinforces this notion more strongly than the borderlines drawn on a map. Each state is separated from its neighbor to visually highlight its shape. This also relies on the experience of the viewer. The rectangular shape of Wyoming and Colorado leads to their being easily mixed-up, yet
8. Detail Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign

9. Detail Prologue: Almost There; A Bad Sign
Texas is rarely mistaken for anyplace else. Beyond conceiving a physical place, the multiple panels facilitate the creation of an emotional place as well. As stated before, the repetition of hotel rooms conveys a sense of timelessness that speaks to the desolation of New Orleans after the hurricane, the somberness of the event. In contrast, the tightness of the panels in the piece *Houseguest* highlights the tension and agitation caused by the scurrying of mice across the ceiling.

*Houseguest* brings up another element to the installation: the use of text within the images [Figure 10].

10. Detail *Houseguest*

Books are built up through text, but I did not want to use the paragraph structure as part of the exhibit. Instead, the text flows through the compositions as a visual element. In *Houseguest*, the word “skitter” starts small and builds up through layers to recreate the
sense of noise and eventually funnels to a decisive “SNAP!” as the mousetrap closes on its victim. *A Mardi Gras Fable* is a storybook and uses more whimsy in its textual layout, with sentences wrapping around images and words dancing in imitation of their meaning [Figure 11].

The word “jump” leaps up the page and the word “spin” circles upon itself. Another challenge with the text was deciding how much to use. *A Mardi Gras Fable* could easily have been a traditional fairytale with a full story, using the images as illustrations. Instead, the text has been distilled down to its core elements and acts more as poetry than story. It exists to give my impressions of the moments, as small insights that work to enrich the reading experience of the images.

The final concern for this exhibit was voice. By unbinding the memoir, numerous voices could be used without causing confusion, thanks in part to the visual break
between the pieces. In this way, the fantastical style of the book *A Mardi Gras Fable* can exist next to a more realistic rendering in *Selfish Savior* [Figure 12]⁶.

12. *Selfish Savior*

Without the spacing permitted by the installation, the transition could be jarring. Along with the spacing, I used different print mediums to illustrate a change in tone. *Refugees* uses lithography to create a murky mood; the washes add a layer of ambiguity to the scene. As the piece shifts to *The Resilience of Children*, silkscreen becomes the dominant medium due to its graphic style that creates a simple line work reminiscent of

⁶ Although this piece has its own fantastical elements to it, its visual tone is not storybook-like.
storybooks. In *Houseguest*, many print styles co-exist within the panels [Figure 13]. The main body of the piece uses lithography to create the atmosphere of an apartment at night, but the main figure is done in relief to create a highly charged anxiety that separates the figure from the background. The text is done using silkscreen, which can imitate both lithography and relief to some degree and acts as a bridge between the two styles. The piece then shifts to a panel employing etching, which through its nature of time biting and embossment renders a somber stillness in contrast to the anxiety of the main panel. In addition to these tonal shifts through changing mediums, the perspective of the viewer changes with the placement of the panels on the wall. To increase the child-like nature of *The Resilience of Children*, the panels are hung at the eye-level of a
child; thus an adult must stoop down to view the work transforming their perspective to that of a child’s world. Besides panel placement, the point of view within the exhibit morphs from first-person to third-person. Some of the works, like *Katrina Shrouds*, have no explicit characters to them; the viewer sees the world through my eyes in these instances, much like a first-person narration in a book. Other pieces make use of self-portraiture and thus fall into the third-person narration style in which the viewer sees me as just one of many characters. Both lend themselves to different aspects of narration. The first person is more intimate and personal, with the journey being from one perspective. A third-person narrative makes use of multiple perspectives to explore various and conflicting attitudes.

Most importantly, voice presents truth. As stated in the beginning, I was not concerned with factually recounting my Louisiana stories⁷. I wanted to find truth, which is a matter of perspective. Part of setting up this installation was to meditate on the memories of my time here and to discover what I felt about this region. That is where the exaggerations and the poetry and the fiction came in. They distill all this information into a perspective, a voice.

My name is Ryan Lindburg. And all of this is true.

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⁷ Although, to be fair, they are based on facts.


Tarantino, Quentin, dir/screenwriter. Pulp Fiction. Miramax Films, 1994

Tarantino, Quentin, dir/screenwriter. Reservoir Dogs. Miramax Films, 1992

VITA

Ryan Lindburg was born and raised in Montana. He attended The University of Montana where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts with an emphasis in printmaking as well as a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing in 2000. While there, he worked as a print assistant for numerous artists such as Miriam Schapiro and Tony Fitzpatrick. In 2005, he started attending Louisiana State University just in time for Hurricane Katrina. He received his Master of Fine Arts in studio art in 2008.