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Graviora Manent: heavier things remain

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GRAVIOIRA MANENT:
HEAVIER THINGS REMAIN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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
Andrea Barbier
B.F.A., Savannah College of Art and Design, 2004
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Abstract

The photographic collection *Graviora Manent* addresses the complexities and deciphering of human relationships, intensified through the decisive acts of obscuring or revealing formal information. The pictures are made using an alternative French photographic method called mordantage, which physically alters the surface of the gelatin silver print using a combination of chemistry and water. The images frequently include recurring elements of my own dreams, as well as figures set in recognizably interior or exterior environments. Recurring themes in the series include what is public vs. what is private, voyeurism, familiarity, and the unknown.

Introduction

To contextualize the work *Graviora Manent*, which translates to *Heavier Things Remain*, I look to early photographic processes, post World War I collage art, Surrealist art from the 1920s-1940s, and contemporary artists working in similar ways. Processes that are now considered “alternative” were initially invented for necessity; for example, mordantage was originally designed to be applied to a negative, not a print, in order to convert the negative into a positive. Years of experimentation and innovation have refined many of these historical processes into their functioning forms today.

I alternate between working with a single photograph, and compiling multiple images to suggest new narratives. As I build these scenes, I refer to Modernist collage art, be it in Dada, Surrealist, or Pop form. Collage art, and specifically the photomontage, can relate back to combination photo printing of the mid-1800s. Artists like Oscar Rejlander perfected the art of combination printing, or building extravagant photographic images out of several negatives. Modern collage art began after WWI, and allowed for the juxtaposition of uncommon elements to form new relationships, highlighting the concept behind each piece.



Image 1. Max Ernst, *Sacred Conversation*, 1921, collage/photomontage.

Curator and art critic Lucy Lippard wrote on the subject:

Collage has been the major transformational tool of twentieth-century art, offering a way of rearranging the parts to create a new hybrid whole. The Dada-Surrealist wedding of unlikes continues to be a fertile esthetic device. Conventional photography might seem to have little to do with this trajectory, but photography and collage/montage have interwoven fates. Precisely because it was once supposed to be the vehicle of truth and realism, photography's role in subverting both has been particularly potent.¹

Much as Surrealist artists, filmmakers, and writers did, I often include recurring elements of my own dreams in my images. This practice was promoted by Andre Breton, who originated the Surrealist movement, as well as automatic writing, drawing, and image making, which stressed the importance of creation from the artists subconscious. My work feels very connected to that of calculated and conceptual Surrealist filmmaker Maya Deren, whose dark and symbolic films accentuate themes of intrusion, the stranger, the uncanny, and the dreamscape.



Image 2. Maya Deren, film still from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943.

¹ Shelley Rice, *Inverted Odysseys* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 28.

In the late 1940's, Deren wrote the following:

Today man has discovered that that which seemed simple and stable is, instead, complex and volatile; his own inventions have put into motion new forces, toward which he has yet to invent a new relationship.... Each individual is the center of a personal vortex; and the aggressive variety and enormity of the adventures which swirl about and confront him are unified only by his personal identity.²

The ideas of complexity within simplicity, and finding personal identity within a greater enormity are all present in the images that make up *Graviosa Manent*. As a viewer looks into the constructed landscapes, it becomes easy to project personal experience into the faintly familiar settings; to find connecting elements between images that lend themselves to an ever-evolving narrative.

Many contemporary photographers have returned to tactile photographic processes and experimental printing. As we are continuously bombarded by monitors and digital imagery, the desire for something tangible grows fervently. This trend is not exclusive to photography, but can be seen across all artistic mediums. The phrases *homemade* and *one-of-a-kind* are esteemed while phrases like *mass-produced* are regarded with disdain. Writer Felicity Cole discusses four British artists who are manipulating the boundaries of photography in her essay "The Photograph as an Art Object." She concludes the essay with the remarks,

The physical nature of the work is paramount, which perhaps reflects a reaction against the pervasion of screen-based imagery which surrounds us today. In one sense they (the artists) are continuing a tradition of manipulation and enhancement in photography but, in this digital age, the 'handmade' is perhaps assuming new importance. These artists are creating unique 'objects' or producing work in very limited editions, which counter the ease of reproduction of digital work today.³

Artists like Ian Ruhter and Shaun Irving have physically transformed large vans into giant cameras, producing singular large-format photographs using traditional development processes. Sally Mann has set aside her large format

² Ibid., 15.

³ Felicity Cole, "The Photograph as an Art Object," *Photomonitor*, (March 2013): 1.

film in favor of the historical wet plate collodion process on glass negatives. Vietnamese photographer Binh Danh invented the process of making photographs on foliage, which are not only non-reproducible, but have a limited lifespan as well.



Image 3. Binh Danh, *Holding #2*, 2009, chlorophyll print and resin.

In our quest to redefine contemporary photography, separation from the Digital Age is critical. As an artist, the only way to combat this is through the creation of something unique and tangible, visibly connected to the hand of the artist.

1. Process

I work with an alternative photographic process called mordançage, which in French translates as “to bleach” or “to etch”. A silver gelatin print submerged in the mordançage chemistry will first bleach to a pale yellow color and must be redeveloped. During this bleaching step, the chemistry will lift densely concentrated areas of silver salts off of the paper, allowing for these areas of emulsion to be manipulated or removed. I began by applying the formula to photograms that I made, and have progressed to my current way of working, which involves building digital negatives on acetate and contact printing those in the darkroom on silver gelatin paper.

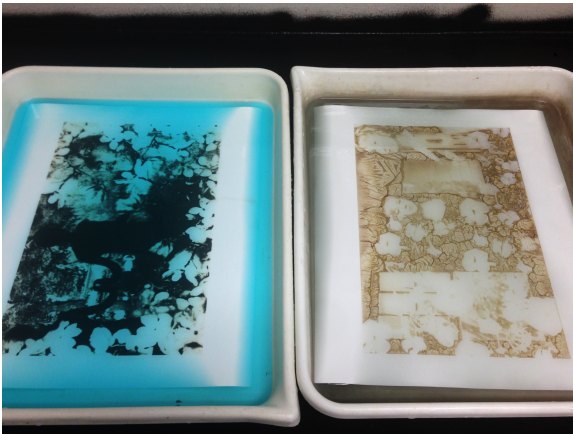


Image 4. Process #1



Image 5. Process #2

The particular technique that I use was developed in the 1960's by Jean-Pierre Sudre, a Parisian relocated to the Provincial village of Lacoste, France. Sudre, who originally studied film, was known for his chemical experimentation in photography and later, the workshops he held at his home. His wife, Claudine, was an expert printer of historical photographic processes and a source of knowledge through Jean-Pierre's photographic developments.

Photographer Craig Stevens is credited for bringing this practice to the United States. He learned mordançage from Sudre at one of the previously mentioned workshops in the early 1970's, and has actively promoted the method since then. The only other noted American to study directly with Jean-Pierre Sudre is Elizabeth Opalenik, who learned mordançage from Stevens at the Maine Photographic Workshops. In 1983 she began assisting Stevens and Sudre with workshops in Lacoste, but it wasn't until 1990 that she seriously delved into the medium. Opalenik is noted for her contribution of expertly manipulating the

“veils” (previously, the practice had been complete removal of lifted emulsion and toning of the altered prints). Her book, *Poetic Grace*, is one of the only publications in America that includes an entire body of mordantage work.



Image 6. Elizabeth Opalenik, *Untitled*, mordantage silver-print.

I believe that the process is inseparable from my image content. The silver gelatin print acts as an under-painting to the chemical and physical alterations that complete the surface. I am attracted to this particular alternative practice because it is simultaneously controllable and unpredictable. Each piece is unique in its resulting coloration, reshaping of emulsion, and redistribution of silver.

2. Obscuring and Revealing

What the process of mordançage lends to the artwork is a deterioration of information, especially regarding the darker areas of a specific piece, which I am mindful of when I am creating each image. The chemistry causes the dark areas to bubble, releasing the emulsion from the paper and allowing the silver salts underneath to move freely. These can be removed entirely with the aid of a cotton ball or soft paintbrush, or the residue of the silver can remain, leaving a hint of the image that previously was in the space, though it appears soft and hazy in comparison to its original state. This allows for the aforementioned collapsing of subject with space, by removing details and often entire sections of an image that may have provided context, but is now void and waiting for a viewer to mentally fill in the gaps. This functions in the same way that our brains fill in the gaps of words with missing letters; we don't require every bit of information to understand what we are seeing. However, pushing the viewer to fill in the gaps for themselves encourages a personalization of experience with each individual photographic piece.

That which remains in the image becomes the contrast to what is taken away. As figure and space alike meld into one, we start considering form as well as the interaction of subject to subject, or subject to place. New patterns and shapes emerge that enhance either subject becoming background, or a subject's isolation from background. These patterns and shapes often serve to create bonds between figures that may not exist as clearly in a traditional, representative photographic space.



Image 7. Andrea Barbier, *Kitchen Encounter*, mordançage silver print.

For example, in *Kitchen Encounter* (Image 7), a fused domestic interior and exterior space unites both figures through created negative space and texture.

The removal of information can serve to either draw together or enhance the separation of the two figures and two spaces.

The removal or manipulation of visual information also enhances the unsettling, or uncanny, feeling that the photographs convey. Sigmund Freud qualifies (aesthetically speaking) the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”⁴ German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch offers the following explanation:

With the word *unheimlich* ['uncanny'], the German language seems to have produced a rather fortunate formation. Without a doubt, this word appears to express that someone to whom something 'uncanny' happens is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a lack of orientation is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident.⁵

Though a debate exists whether *uncanny* is more tied to what is familiar or what is unfamiliar, both men affirm that the sensation is one of dread or disorientation. The lack of orientation that Jentsch mentions is among the strongest contributions that the mordantage process has on the silver gelatin prints. By erasing or fusing reliable detail, once familiar spaces become unfamiliar, and conversely, unfamiliar spaces become unsettlingly familiar.

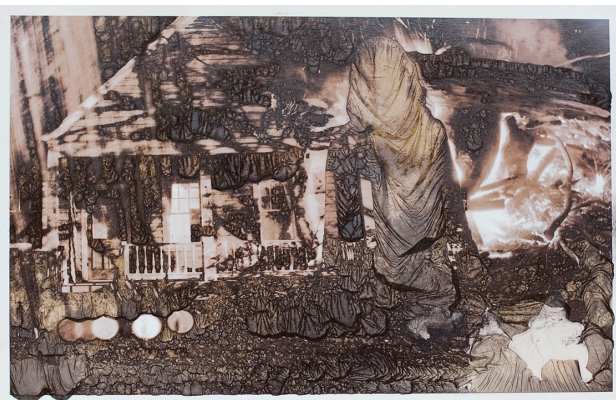


Image 8. Andrea Barbier, *Haunt*, mordantage silver print

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” 1919, Trans. David McLintock. (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁵ Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” 1906. Trans. Roy Sellars. (Oxford: Angelaki. Vol. 2, Issue 1, 1996), 2.

3. Relationships of Characters

UNDERSTANDING OF SELF

The images about relationship with self are usually the more introspective, formally minimal images. These spaces are not chaotic. They are primarily quiet, interior locations, although the space may be undefined. They include a solitary person whose face is sometimes looking as if it's a mask. There are often reflective surfaces present, but the person looking into the mirror is not necessarily the person looking back. In these images the individuals seem to be split into two parts: one a true reflection and the other more dark, sinister, or unfamiliar. The familiar self gazes at its own reflection, as the unfamiliar self gazes confrontationally out of the picture. In *Self-Portrait in Mirror* (Image 9), the face split down the middle suggests similarities to Picasso's "Girl Before a Mirror" from 1932, or traditionally carved African masks. They read as less human and more constructed, which is inherent to human behavior. In this grouping of images, the figure activates the space as opposed to the space activating the figure.

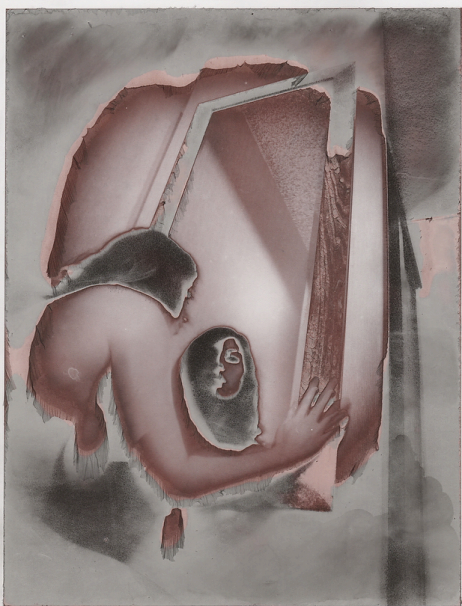


Image 9. Andrea Barbier, *Self-Portrait in Mirror*, mordançage silver print.

UNDERSTANDING OF SELF IN A RELATIONSHIP

In the images involving two or more people, the characters are positioned in response to one another. There is the couple, whose interactions with each other vary physically and emotionally, who exist in spaces that begin to dissolve into nothingness, either isolating the figures or becoming a part of them. Gesture becomes important in these images – the dropping of a hand, the covering of a mouth, the longing embrace. The photographs are grouped in ways that allow for gesture to complete a narrative connection through multiple photographs. In the essay “Neither Speech nor Icon”, Mieke Bal discusses the concept of semiosis in art, or nonverbal communication through signs. She writes, “The insight that vision is as much subject to the social construction of the visual fields and the modes of semiosis we are trained to adopt as speech is subject to the social construction of discourse has been an important impulse for a critical approach to visual art.”⁶

As the interpretation of the stories within the imagery relies entirely on nonverbal communication, we clarify each narrative through our accumulated understanding of gesture. For example, in *Needless #2* (Image 10), the implications of a couples embrace with a slight dip, separated by both physical location and emotional distance from an unnoticed onlooker braced against a wall, builds a scenario that is suggestive yet leaves space for reflection.



Image 10. Andrea Barbier, *Needless #2*, mordancage silver print.

The other images in *Graviosa Manent* that deal with two or more figures have a distinctly different relationship than the images of the couple. These images deal with a comparatively recognizable figure (for example, a child)

⁶ Mieke Bal, “A Mieke Bal Reader,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 297.

accompanied by a gowned woman, who acts in some scenes as a motherly, protective figure, and in others, as a stranger. In both *The Watchers: City* (Image 11), and *The Watchers: Mountains*, two gowned women populate the space, watchful and omniscient over their respected landscapes, and representing knowledge and understanding.



Image 11. Andrea Barbier, *The Watchers: City*, mordançage silver print.

UNDERSTANDING OF SELF IN A SPACE

Several images are comprised of figures that represent the relationship of a person to a space. This may be a single figure, as in *Girl in Dress: 31 Windows* (Image 12), or multiple figures, as in *Communion of the Vestals*. The dynamic shifts from internalization of thought or emotion to an external response to a situation. In *Haunt* (Image 8), a figure walks away from a house on fire; in *Girl in Dress*, a woman melds into a disintegrating background of windows and trees. One figure seems to thrive in the chaos, while the other is being slowly taken away by it.



Image 12. Andrea Barbier, *Girl in Dress: 31 Windows*, mordançage silver print.

The collapsing of internal with external spaces, of figure and location, is important in its representation of how we adapt to embody spaces. G r me Truc, a Social Sciences doctorate specializing in the sociology of emotion, memory, and collective identity, discusses Maurice Halbwachs' studies on the relationships between space and memory in his essay "Memory of Places and Places of Memory." Truc says, "Our memory is framed by spatial reference points: places, sites, buildings, and streets give us our bearings and enable us to anchor and order our memories. So the material alteration of these places can lead to the substantial modification of our memories, and even their disappearance."⁷ Truc also discusses our ability to form memories from reading, as opposed to physical experience, or from something as intangible as another person's account of a space. Thus, the nature of our memory is delicate at best. We respond to locations that may or may not be accurate depictions of the truth. However, it is this specific relationship of human memory to space that gives space significance and allows for complete mental submersion into a scene.

⁷ G r me Truc, "Memory of Places and Places of Memory: For a Halbwachsian Socio-ethnography of Collective Memory," (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 148.

4. Public vs. Private

As spaces continually shift from interior to exterior, from domestic to landscape, the theme of what is public and what is private is frequently revisited.

Characters may act as intruders even in their own scenes. Through the past few years of working on this project, the settings that the figures occupy have shifted from predominately safe, domestic interiors protecting single figures, to increasingly chaotic exteriors that feature a multitude of figures. Often contained spaces include windows or doors, implying the possibility of intrusion or escape.

Growing up in a large southern family, I was taught that there are subjects that people talk about, as well as a host of things that go unspoken. Factored into this is a concern for safety that I feel for both those around me and myself. For me, a sense of calm exists in the passive interior space that gets lost in open exteriors. Originally I felt more of a need to 'protect' the figures in each environment, but out of that grew a need to represent the uncontrollable and voyeuristic tendencies that come with larger groups of people. The diversity of these groupings and locations is as important as the daily complexities of our inner thoughts, our need to hold things sacred and secret, and our need for expanded interaction and input.

As we address the idea of the larger group, we turn away from all previously discussed relationships between characters and move into scenes that are now overtly public. The collective body of people I depict act as voyeurs, watching people on screens, who in turn, gaze starkly out at the viewers. Most of the figures in my project stray away from direct eye contact, which creates a startling contrast in the few images in which a figure in the images starts looking back, as in *Voyeurs: Nashville* (Image 13). We, as viewers, see what the watchers see. They at no point respond to us, but focus intently on the images projected in front of them.



Image 13. Andrea Barbier, *Voyeurs: Nashville*, mordantage silver print.

Conclusion

The images that were made for *Gravira Manent* are a very personal exploration of the nature of human relationships. The beauty of the application of the mordantage process is that through the removal of visual information, each photograph is able to become universal. The lack of formal information opens the door for each viewer to project their own memories into the photographs, thus creating an idea of familiarity for each scene where the photographs become a unique story, an individualized experience for every person.

Installation Views



Image 14. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #1.



Image 15. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #2.



Image 16. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #3.



Image 17. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #4.



Image 18. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #5.



Image 19. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #6.



Image 20. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #7.



Image 21. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #8.



Image 22. Andrea Barbier, Installation View #9.

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Vita

Andrea Barbier received her BFA in Photography from Savannah College of Art and Design in 2004. After receiving her BFA, she spent 6 years in Georgia working as a camera educator for Canon, USA and art gallery director at Gallery RFD. She is currently a 2014 M.F.A. candidate in Studio Art at Louisiana State University. Her work has been included in *The Art of Photography Show* at the San Diego Art Institute, as well as the recent exhibition *The Unreal*, at the Kiernan Gallery in Lexington, VA.