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A Peculiar Paradigm of Perpetual Parallax

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Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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A PECILIAR PARADIGM OF PERPETUAL PARALLAX

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
Randi Marie Willett
B.F.A., University of Louisiana Lafayette, 2010
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Works	iv
Abstract	v
A Peculiar Paradigm of Perpetual Parallax	1
Aforementioned	
1. Enter	
1.1 Trickery	14
1.2 Theater of Mind	17
1.3 Threshold of Escape	20
2. Elements	
2.1 Text	23
2.2 The 19 th Century	25
2.3 Thirteen Women	27
3. Exit	
3.1 Tragedy	29
Methodology	
4. Photographic Illustrations	31
Bibliography	39
Vitae	41

List of Works

Title 1 - <i>Alis Tonsis Volat</i> = (She Flies With Clipped Wings)	2
Title 2 - <i>Corvus corone</i> = (Carrion Crow)	3
Title 3 - <i>Catena</i> - (Ropes)	4
Title 4 - <i>Inanis Festum Cogitationis</i> - (An Empty Feast, Reflection)	5
Title 5 - <i>Nunquam Minus Solus Quam Cum Solus</i> = (Never Less Alone Than When Alone)	6
Title 6 - <i>Perpetuam Parallaxis</i> - (Perpetual Parallax)	7
Title 7- <i>Deprensi Pupa</i> = (Entrapped Doll)	8
Title 8- <i>Obscuris Vera Involvens</i> = (The Truth Being Enveloped by Obscure Things)	9
Title 9 - <i>In Absentia Luci, Tenebrae Vincunt</i> = (In Absence of Light, Darkness Prevails)	10
Title 10 - <i>Mors potior virtus Damnum</i> = (Death is Preferable to Loss of Virtue)	11
Title 11 - <i>Esse Quam Videri</i> = (To be, Rather Than to Seem)	12
Title 12 - <i>Sola Dosis Facit Venenum</i> - (The Dose Makes the Poison)	13

Abstract

Reality estranges as an encumbrance, a cage that traps with its clipped wings, layered veils, and stiff blankets. This hold subsists as an immovable vessel potted but never earthbound—mounted in a strained compartment, like jars with tight lids, lacking: in air, in breath, in imaginary attributes. Finally, with a last breath, an emergence blooms upon that which contextualizes momentary “reality” or rather that which defines a metaphorical escape from... actuality.

My singular endeavor is to escape.

My momentary escape is found in the illusory.

My illusion is a perception of reality and with this perception I find my singular endeavor... escape.

With this work, I want to shift the ever-changing, kaleidoscope imagery of what is seen and what was seen in which our initial perception reads differently when we fit together varying fragments of a photograph. In doing so we look for not what is reality, but that which we have been primed to look for something false. Surrounded by enigmatic narratives, the works reveals two sides of peripeteia moments. Interrupting these works as fictions or to create a notion of fantasy that is read as purely theater exposes that escape is inevitable regardless of circumstance, but in which way we meet with escape is veiled in darkness.

May all those who proceed ahead become a player in the works of their own accord...

“A Peculiar Paradigm of Perpetual Parallax”

Gather ‘round all of you, for I have ambiguities for each one of you!
Of these allegories, look closely, they hold illusions and mysteries;
So if you happen upon an oddity, turn the lock and escape quickly.
For these places are not quite safe, for a child nor a waif,
Each of these peripeteia, may seem to touch paramnesia,
But I entice you; please... have a closer view.



Title 1 - *Alis Tonsis Volat*
(She Flies With Clipped Wings)

Locked up tightly hidden in her room, thinking, dreading of impending doom,
All she wanted was to say, "Please leave me and go away."
Followed by their watching eyes, it was all but her surmise.
Took she to her curtain hangings, twisted, knotted, she was making,
Her attempt to find a silver lining, she at once took to climbing,
But when they came to make bed check, they found her swinging by the neck.





Title 2 - *Corvus corone*
(Carrion Crow)

A tendency for addiction ran in the family, it won over even sanity,
Once she had sipped of sweetened tea, it became fruit from the forbidden tree,
Months and years passed onward, and the poison conquered,
All her aspirations, for you see, were lost in paying the petite bourgeoisie.
Soon she found herself asunder, having made a cheque blunder,
And the only thing left for her to show, was in crumbs of gateau.





Title 3 - *Catena*
(Ropes)

Much like the preceding story- here lays another Memento Mori:
When she discovered she was to wed, she took her stash of “sugar of lead,”
Put it in her tea cup as a morning dose, hoping soon she’d be a ghost,
Her fever came and went away, by the lamplight she did pray,
Not for mystic healing power, but that her life would end upon the hour,
When morning finally did arrive, she was found no longer alive.





Title 4 - *Inanis Festum Cogitationis*
(An Empty Feast, Reflection)

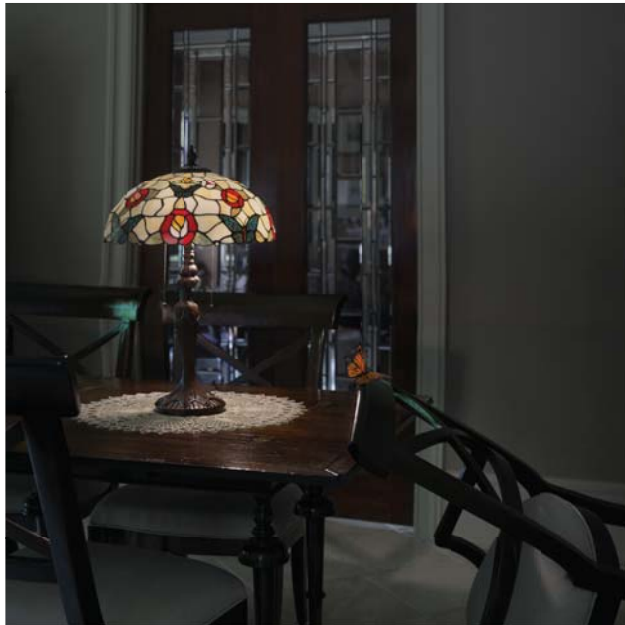
“Oh, I just feel so queer right now. Like I will disappear, shan’t be found.”
This is what she would reply to inquiries, of her health, her life, her histories.
Seldom did she eat a morsel; never did she leave the borstal.
There she withered for a length, losing all of her strength
Scarcely could she be seen in her mirror, from the inside nor exterior
Her final words were this: “Leave me here to reminisce.”





Title 5 - *Nunquam Minus Solus Quam Cum Solus*
(Never Less Alone Than When Alone)

Waiting until the clocks chimed eight, she had always been au fait.
Her monsieur was always late, wandering the streets calling it a “fete.”
Smiling sadly, looking down, dressed to “tee” in her finest gown,
When the clock read five to ten, she had decided on her end,
When he came home upon the hour, found she’d jump off from the tower.
Painted crimson upon white canvas, the ground credo her last sanctas.





Title 6 - *Perpetuam Parallaxis*
(Perpetual Parallax)

Every piece of looking glass, she would take a peek, a look, a glance,
Each and every passing hour, she saw more imperfections, a wilting flower.
All the potions she had collected, all the patience she neglected,
Could not keep her from decay, this soon became her dismay.
So she chose to put a stop, with the chiming of the clock
Broken mirrors, strings of pearl, and there the severed head of the girl.





Title 7 - *Deprensi Pupa*
(Entrapped Doll)

They had told her it was just a stage, which she would grow out of in due age.
Dressed up nice and properly, did not make her sentiments flee easily.
It was true her thumb was brown, deadening all that seemed to come around.
She had tried her luck with many things, plants, and cat, and animals with wings.
Though they did not seem to ever flourish, she set to learn the act to how to nourish.
In the end hopes were failed, her mind becoming more and more derailed.





Title 8 - *Obscuris Vera Involvens*
(The Truth Being Enveloped by Obscure Things)

It had all been but a lie, and her only alibi.
That she had seen these holy visitations, which were nothing but hallucinations.
And like a dreaming vision, her mind was an excision.
Of her body and her faith, now everything acted as a wraith,
Light and darkness needn't matter; she spoke in sentences filled of natter.
Wearing her mourning cloak, she disappeared in a puff of smoke.





Title 9 - In Absentia Luci, Tenebrae Vincunt
(In Absence of Light, Darkness Prevails)

Times had changed for the better and the worse- both had seemed to be coerced.
 She was changing too it seemed, pinned up frustration of a fiend.
 Entrapped emotions of hatred, for the times so sacred and jaded,
 What then burst out from her throat, she did not intend to misquote,
 “At midnight, in the month of June, I stand beneath the mystic moon...”¹
 Found her in the court of law: connive, she was tied to a stake and burned alive



¹ This quote is from the first two lines of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem *The Sleeper*. The poem addresses a woman who will never wake from her death-sleep, which he does in several others of his poems. This



Title 10 - *Mors potior virtus Damnum*
(Death is Preferable to Loss of Virtue)

Under tidy dress and bonnet, she hid her secret in a locket,
Sold flowers by the day, and tickets at night for the play,
She did ponder the opinion of living as a bluffer, if she had all but to suffer.
In a moment set ablaze, set off in the street with bouquets.
Hidden in her pretty basket that she carried, her mind keep severely harried
When she finally came unglued, slew herself aft'r killing two.





Title 11 - *Esse Quam Videri*
(To be, Rather Than to Seem)

She collected various spoons, always counting them after her Sunday commune,
This fascination had once begun, when brunch at her aunt's was almost done.
She was eating soup, which was to coincide with when she heard that her mother had died,
Many thought this was a form of grieving, but looks can be deceiving,
In that spoon's concave surface, she could see the world's absurdness,
And when the time came to guise, she pried out her own eyes.





Title 12 - *Sola Dosis Facit Venenum*
(The Dose Makes the Poison)

Grinding of a growing city, she could no longer live so gritty.
Needing a place of tranquility and peace, this been become her caprice.
Packing tea and condiments, making her way into “the desolate.”
Soon the tyrannizing become a distant murmur, but time’s ticking was much firmer,
Stricken with an asthma attack, when she noticed her teacup with a crack.
For you see this air was no antidote, ‘twas too late, the pollutants slide down her throat.



Aforementioned



My work acts as a metaphoric prism into perception. Simply put, this work explores moments in what is real and what is fabricated.

1. Entry

1.1 Trickery

I have all but lost my actual memories of that time; now what lives on in their place is what my mind has made up. Nothing of what has been seen will ever be viewed in the same way again. We become more informed after that time, and our mind replaces that naivety and actuality with what best fits into the left over space. I can never see you the same again after you left my arms, January 20th 2008, not in my mind, not even when looking at you in a photograph. Both my mind and the photographs deceive me. – From my journal, undated

Photography's "trickery" is what drew me to the medium. Artists like Jan Saudek, Jerry Ulessman, and the handfuls of Pictoristists gave me a glance that the artist's eyes were not always seeing what the camera documents. Due to the perceived notion that photography mirrors what is in front of the camera, my photographic work acts as a metaphorical prism that blends "what is in front of the mirror" and "what is simply created from the reflection of light," and thus an illusion of what is a perceived reality. In many ways, what influences my artistic practice is what is perceived, whether the viewer believes in photographic integrity of what is seen or whether they question what lays hidden in what is given to be seen.

Photography was initially used as a scientific instrument to document and as a recording device. It was supposed to take away the artist's hand and subjectivity— in turn, recording an accurate representation of what was in front of the camera. However, as the cost of photography decreased and its “alchemic wonder” became accessibility to amateurs and hobbyists, the process continued to expand what accurate representation was. Could depiction ever be completely accurate or did the use of chemical mediums and process show what the photographer's eye, the artist's eye, gave to the viewer to see. What was seen as an accurate representation of nature opened a journey into perception and a place in the realm of fine arts. With this way of perception came an evolution of the ideals of what photographic art was.

With this notion of representation of reality, I play with reality.

When I first came upon the photographic arts, there was a shift occurring in the medium. Digital photography was overtaking analogue photography. The general public understood the term “Photoshop” and the falsities involved with the software. I became entranced with the notion that somehow a gelatin silver print confirmed that viewers believed in the integrity of the print, however the same did not hold true with a digital C-print, no matter how truthful in its subject and representation. Viewers have become primed to expect digital manipulations, and photography has shifted from a medium of “exact replication” to something of an “idealized representation” from what we trust. Though in truth, manipulations existed even in the chemical darkroom just as much as they did in the digital darkroom.

Nearly every kind of manipulation we now associate with Photoshop was also a part of photography's predigital repertoire, from slimming waistlines and smoothing away wrinkles to adding people to (or removing them from) pictures, changing backgrounds, and fabrication event that never actually took place. From Talbot's day onward, as the art and craft of photography have grown increasingly sophisticated, photographers have devised a staggering array of techniques by which to alter their images, from multiple exposure and photomontage to combination printing, airbrush retouching, and other darkroom magic. Taken together the pictures created by these means constitute a secret history of photography as a medium fabricated truth and artful lies.²

With this work, I set out to not wholly veil the falsehoods in my photographic work, but to embrace the falsities, leaving a piece to be considered, so as to obscure the topic of perception further. This is where the quality of "magic" or "illusion" is implemented in my work. The act of photography for me is one part truth telling (so the audience is drawn in), one part fabricating (to intrigue the audience), and one part conjuring (to convince and captivate the audience). What happens to a viewer's acuity if observing printed photographs that are hung must have some type of manipulations, in fact do have them? What then would happen if within the frame exists something that reveals the scene as being staged in front of the camera rather than being created purely in post-production? Do the manipulations that were discovered then become more real or is there a parallax created in the fact that the staging of the staged was fabricated? Would the photograph then be looked at as somehow more truthful? Or does the viewer stop think of what is wholly there and then become interested in the scene that is taking place in the photographic window in front of them? And as such the notion of reality and fiction works together in creating a moment of escape?

² Fineman, Mia. "Introduction." *Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop*. Houston: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012. 280. Print.

In working with subject matter of trickery, I tip my hat to the tradition of staging and manipulation that has been wrapped in the photographic arts since the inception.

Combining it with the

These photographic illustrations act as an illusion of what is seen and what is reality. The viewer is presented with text and visual elements. The written and visual form of these works lead to interpreting the pieces as works of fiction, albeit with non-fictional qualities. It is what is in the writing, notions of death, despair, heartache, and loss, that has the viewer recognize, it isn't all what is seen, as the words suggest a finality or an escape from these notions. There displays beauty in darkness; a glimmer that is not seen while surrounded by the brightness of lights, but when engulfed in the blackness and shadows that the small flicker of a candle's light becomes brilliant and singular. When the viewer looks at the elements together they are translating the text and visual, having the light to deciphering becoming more pronounced.



1.2 Theater of Mind

I create a photographic stage, as a metaphor for the inner dialogue that cannot be heard but seen. In visual form, the audience is only allowed to access to what is happening through visual clue and context. However, the reveal comes of the trick comes from what is heard through the use of textual language. Visual cues are used in this series to create a sense of interiority, but this relies heavily on how the viewer deciphers the cues. The use of interior space, vignettes, and short depth of field can help create a sense of interiority, to help place the viewer. I set emphasis on keeping the visuals distant and dreamy, touching on the quality of the ethereal and disorientating due to perspective shifts and the illusory-

like frame. This element can also be found on the stage in the form of backdrops, once again pointing the audience to “see what you will.”

In this inner dialogue, comes language and prose, text accompanies the works giving us a glimpse at something that ties the symbolism and two-sides of the imagery together. Within the poems we are able to recognize that death is a reoccurring theme. The visual is not showing us the full story, but is giving us threads to a web, a web that I built to entrap and hold these scenes of death, to keep them locked in the images. My intent is to escape, to escape from this place or escape to this place is a question of how you perceive that work.

I want to convey theatricality in the work to present the idea of a journey into an inner mind theater of someone; that being the artist as the storyteller. This illusion of a single person’s Theater of Mind needs to be evident as well, so as to work linearly and keep the viewer from believing that this could be a singular work. Repetition of props, colors, a use of veils, and format helps guide the viewer into interpreting visual cues as meaningful in translation and time.

And so with this notion, I allow the viewer a closer inspection.

In many illusion and magic shows the magician asks for members of the audience and participants to come on stage and inspect the platform. These viewers then look and search for proof to be found to reveal the illusion, being able to call the magic a hoax. This allows the viewer to become an inspector. The magic act has not been completed or fulfilled, but there is a want to believe in what the magician gives their audience to see. The

illusion is performed after inspection and most of the time, if the trick goes well, the audience is pleased. Like those participants, I want my audience to be able to look closely, inspect, and find within the work elements of manipulations that have them question something else outside of the ordinary. This once again depends on perspective and how much the viewer wants to believe in the photographic illustration's integrity or fraudulence in how it was created and exists. The symbols, discrepancies and mismatching elements in the artwork, are what unlock the truth in the image, but even then, there is the possibility of something missing if the viewer was not "watching closely."

This dynamic brings me to the point that, magical acts make use of veils to cover and uncover an object, keeping it from the viewer while the illusion happens veiled behind it. Whether for a split second or for a longer amount of time, the magician has to determine what will capture his audience without having suspected something of the truthfulness of the illusion. These veils on my photographic illustrations are in pictorial form.

In the way of making illusions and representations to reality, I set to find how to display my artwork as their own illusions. I wanted a tactile and two-dimensional quality that would not remove the work too far from the 19th century subject matter or have the works only exist in a digital form. Having them in digital would be much less convincing to an audience who reference digital with manipulation and Photoshop as I have mentioned. This lead me to the technique of lenticular printing. They have an optical illusion quality, though require no special aids for viewing. As the viewer approaches the works, the image shifts and changes depending on their viewing angle, as do many of the symbolic elements. Roses change to birds, light becomes smoke, and living becomes dead as the image is

looked upon. These are placed there to have the viewer wonder what is taking place under, behind or in them as they change and what can these changes represent in the work. This in-turn invites the viewer to look at what is in the work to decide which is really there and what items might hold symbolic meaning.

Symbolism in the work connects to what is theatrical and magical, because I want the viewer's mind to quickly adapt to questioning what is happening in the images to give context to how they answer what is real and what has been made to appear so.



1.3 Threshold of Escape

Our only chance to escape the blight of mechanization, of acting and thinking alike, of the huge machine which society is becoming, is to restore life to all things through the saving and beneficent power of the human imagination. – Clarence John Laughlin³

The repeated notion of escape is prodigious in my work. In fact, the act of creating work is an escape for me as the artist. This work is an excursion into an escape, a place to ponder and wonder over, for the viewer to question his or her own perceptions. Not all places in daydreams are charming and delightful as I learned early on in my own dreaming and waking world. Like the sleeping mind, the work has its own way of conveying morose sentiments. The viewer has but to stop and look for how to work the locking mechanism to open the chest of drawers; the allegorical lies within, waiting to be sifted through.

Firstly, there is a reoccurring sense of flight in the artwork. Flight has been a reoccurring theme in my dreams and my thoughts. Not just the act of flight, but how it translates to the meaning of escape. Winged animals and creatures, aircrafts, things

³ Meek, A.J, and Clarence John Laughlin. Clarence John Laughlin: Prophet without Honor, Foreword by John Lawrence. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2007. 144. Print.

seemingly weightless and ethereal have worked their way into most of my photographic illustrations. There are two delineations made that I see flight being interpreted as: flight can be defined by the want to flee from a situation, but it can also translate to wanting to rise above a situation. Many of the pieces of work show animals of flight that are either entrapped in something that hinders flight, so that they are unable to fly, listless in a cage, or dead. This parallel holds true to those animals and cages pictured in the work. They are boxed-in a domestic setting, hiding away underneath something physically tied or weighed down, showing that their sense of flight has also been taken from them like those animals. They cannot flee the situation that stands looming around them and they have been contained so as to not rise above it. And so while the viewer is looking into this place, having a sense of escape for a moment, these characters act as trapped birds or pinned butterflies contained in the square of the picture plane.

Secondly, the artwork has a seemingly claustrophobic quality, with no room for movement or air to breathe. The amount of repeated objects, such as books, dead flowers, cages, books, and bottles dominate the frame, bringing to question why the object is so important or prominent in the work. With this repetition, I want to have the viewer aware that this object is of importance in processing the image's symbolism. This sense of claustrophobia holds true to the exterior spaces as well. The heaviness of the frame keeps everything beyond exceedingly out-of-reach or inhabitable. Windows are near, but they are closed and locked— inaccessible for escape giving the character that frail sense of hope, of being on the cusp of escape, but it is always unobtainable. Longing for a way out, but being separated by glass signifying the similarity of bars on a cage that lets you glimpse the outdoor, maybe even being able to spread out the arms near to the outside, but not being

able to emerge into the open-air. This creates a tension, causing the viewer to ask, what is outside of the frame that we cannot see? Safety? Is this space a creation of the person in the frame, or are they puppets to this masquerade. like that of porcelain dolls on a shelf?

The Decadence and Symbolist visual artists and writers were known for shunning society. They looked to escape this world and stylized the world with an imagined quality. They emphasized sensual beauty and connections between the visual and verbal forms; this would be known as “art for art’s sake.” I choose to use stylistic notions of the Decadent and Neo-Symbolist movements to place emphasis on these notions that so closely relate to the sense of escape. Visually the work of Konstantin Somov is interesting in that this Russian Decadence artist used morbidity to mock the social standards for women. The work seems to tell a tale of death as a way of overcoming them.

Nightmares and sleep paralysis has plagued me most of my life. These experiences started when I was too young to remember my age, continuing on and intensifying in my childhood. As a result of these, I began to feed myself fairytales as medicine, the long-winded, elegance written in the books of the 19th century, and theology. There are two sides to every coin, and I started deducing that even in beauty there was darkness that cannot be completely escaped, as they exist together. Throughout my adolescence, and into my young adulthood, my nightmares became increasingly post-apocalyptic and fears were not just shadows, monsters or what unseen apparition lurked at the top of the staircase.

Toward the middle of my undergraduate studies, death faced me in the form of taking someone I loved deeply. This remains incredibly difficult, because of how cliché--feeling the words seem as I say and write them, but I did not know they were dead in the moments before I touched them; they looked peaceful and mesmerized by the movement

of water I found the body near. The realization did not settle in to me until the glassiness of the eyes remained unblinking, the firmness of the body, and the eerie quietness. It had been a beautiful moment until my animated hand made contact onto something so rigid, cold, and lifeless. I fell into a well that I have never been able to crawl out of or has a bottom. Throughout this time art making, both visual and written, became a way for me to bury my increasingly frequent disturbing dreams and I began to understand them better through dream interpretation. I learned what they meant and how to control my dreams.

Healing comes with more difficulty than dreamless nights do. Nightmares and terror prevail for me, yet in knowing myself I have conquered much of my fears and memories. During the beginning of my last semester of my MFA program, I was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder after being in a nearly fatal car accident. During that extraordinary moment of eerily peaceful silence, I fell into a moment of unconsciousness. I did not dream. When I came back into the conscious world, I wasn't sure if I was having a nightmare or if I was living one. Surrounding me was glass from a shattered windshield, crushed metal, and the smell of fresh-tilled Earth which made me think of all the times I have buried song birds that my cats have grabbed out of the air mid-flight. Things are still muffled and I am left wondering if I may have died, which I am told is "just not true." This "death" is where my mind has wanted to escape to for so long and I can not seem to pull it back into what my reality is.



2. Elements

2.1 Text

Text creates an entirely different revelation than that of the visual. It must describe that which cannot be seen. It is versatile in that it can hide or reveal as much as the author

wants to, it can reveal all as omnipotent or have the viewer see only a single facet, and it can show the inner dialogue of a character, something that does not always translate from a visual experience. With the use of text, the notion of layering information is considered along with the visual, though not necessarily informing as to give a complete denotation. Not just with the words that are introduced, but also the way language is used and how it is presented for viewing.

In incorporating text as a part of my work, I chose to use a couplet-rhyming scheme to mimic the popularity of its usage in nursery rhymes and 19th century poetry. This format of text also plays upon how we perceive. Often times, due to the rhyming nature, the text is considered childlike and pleasant in its contents. However, the text I am presenting is heavy, and each line digs deeper into the story, unearthing and unburying the darkness of the delicately woven web depicting the visual. The rhyming and rhythm reminds me of a hymn or a repetitious prayer that gets muttered.

Like prayers, my titles are in Latin, with English equivalents underneath. Having them presented this way allows for two things: it allows the viewer to experience the peculiar feeling of seeing Latin, which is a dead language addressing that peripeteia, that end in death. And it allows the viewer to momentarily reflect that death is universal. Latin was spoken in mass at the Roman Catholic Church that I grew up in. In my mind, it was a secret language that was impenetrable—that in its secrecy it held a illumination to the divinity of the religion. Many organizations still use Latin, though it is an unspoken language, for their motto. It has changed over time from a language of religious order to that of the scientific classification of animals, plants, and of names of medication. I suppose that to me hearing these titles feels like I am swallowing a medicine that covers over the

darkness of my mind with its mystical healing power, like that of a prayer and a sprinkling of holy water.



2.2 The 19th Century

I have previously mentioned several elements that pull from the 19th century, magic, theater, Decadence and Symbolist art, poetry, even the dying Latin language. Here I would like to touch on a few other elements in relation to the 19th century and why I choose to draw from this era.

My photographic illustrations are in scenery, vaguely reminiscent of the Victorian Era (or the corresponding Belle Époque), including props, costume, and atmosphere, though mine hint at something more modern, and thus in a time of their own. This air of a by-gone era within the modern context is able to place my work in an unaccountable framework of neither historical nor contemporary accuracies. I have the ability to pull context from either morality or standards without having to be entirely accountable for these elements melding together because this world is one created for a purpose of exploration into perspective rather than a statement about it.

The 19th century began the paving to open society and created a world that would become more interconnected thanks to the Industrial Revolution, emerging middle class, and human rights laws. Photography had a key role in this, as photographers traveled the world photographing, cultures, wars, people, animals, and architecture that people had never seen before, printing and distributing them for the public to see. What I see is a dawning to the digital age approaching. Photography no longer holds that same validity as

the value of place in truthfulness. We question these frozen moments, not as fake, but as something that some be, but with a little post-processing along with it.

During this time, magic was at its “golden age,” there were growing numbers of believers in Spiritualism, and photography was being used as a way to prove that the believers of the religion existed. And all of these things had a public basis of trickery. People who had more disposable income would go to the theater to get away from what was happening around them. Spirit photography became popular, the world turned to cases such as the Cottingley Fairy Photographs, authors began looking to Aestheticism, Decadence, and Symbolist writing over the Naturalist approach, and Penny Dreadful became an incredibly popular pastime. Doctors even prescribed patients to leave the city for country air, because the city was too noisy, too crowded, had bad air, and a slew of other reasons.

As I have mentioned earlier, there is a somewhat forgotten language in much of what was included in paintings and photographs up until the turn of the 20th century. This language intrigues me greatly, just as dream language, Latin, and the language of flowers does—due to the sense of secrecy and exclusiveness they hold. Cleverly hidden away are symbols, from the unobservant viewers, that seem like trickery but become the map to finding enlightening.

And yet in wanting to use the 19th century as a catalyst to look back on the wonders of the Victorian Era like morbidity and trickery, my experiences have been in the late 20th and 21st century. My photographic illustrations are neither authentic in their approach to the 19th century nor should they be seen as such. They are an ode to a time that my mind created.

A common theme in the Victorian era was death. It was not so removed as it is with our society; the Victorians had sickrooms and mourning rituals embedding into their society, books, art, and minds. Having read many novels written in the 19th century, I get a glimpse that women were expected to practice mourning rituals that did not have to be upheld by men the same way or length of time: women wore black mourning attire, had to isolate themselves away from participating in any social entertainment, doorbells were silenced, doorknobs covered in black crape, they covered the mirrors in their houses, locked the piano so no music could be played, and servants, carriages, and nearly everything in the household was covered in black while in mourning. They were reminded daily of death and entrapped in a cage society have made surrounding death. My observation of this led me to see my dreaming realm and this society from the past paralleled.

My want to escape into this era rests in certain that the Victorians they held the subject matter as a part of customs and society that my own society death has found almost taboo.



2.3 Thirteen Women

The pictorial representations of dead women became so prevalent in Eighteenth and Nineteenth century European culture that by the middle of the latter century this topos was already dangerously hovering on the periphery of cliché... Like the purloined letter on Poe's story, representations of feminine death work on the principle of being so excessively obvious that they escape observation. – Elisabeth Bronfen⁴

The women in my photography harken back to the sentiment of escape and entrapment. The Victorian Era had many social ties, to women in particular. It was a

⁴ Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Preparation for an Autopsy." *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. 2nd Rev. ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992. 3. Print.

tradition in my family, for many years while I was younger, to carry on many rituals and customs that my Great-Grandmother had passed down to my Momo (the Cajun French form of Grandma), and Mother. Many of these traditions were Victorian and proved to die out with time as women in my family began to leave the house for the working world. It would constitute to say that those actions that were acceptable involved women being home and working in the home. The world outside of the house was not a woman's, but a man's. A cage was made, and it took my family generations to sojourn most of these traditions. It has only been recently that I have begun to cover mirrors again when mourning a death in my family. I still feel a need to respect some of those long removed traditions because it only feels right. My Momo still keeps herself inside the home for months after a death, no parties, no music, and no visitors. So in my work, I chose to depict women in the artworks, because of the traditions that seemed to entrap women from finding she was more than a domestic dweller. An open door of a cage might go unnoticed to many birds that have been engaged for too long.

Many of the props and elements of symbolism are associated with feminine qualities. Much of my work displays much of my own dream's symbolism that is analyzed with several different interpretations as well as much of my own personal experience with the objects as a woman. The language of flowers, Freud's (and other psychologists) essays and books on dreams, and dream meanings by many different religions all play in what is being said in the work through the objects. The feminine quality of them is to echo my sentiment of beauty in darkness.

In the gallery exists a stage that I fashioned as I would for when I make my initial photographs. This is to represent a thirteenth woman. Her character is related very much

to my struggles this semester throughout my working process, though I still do not see this work as an autobiographical representation. The stage does not have a woman in it; it is devoid of someone, however traces of her are left behind. In the papers left behind in a pile with her hand-writing, an incomplete poem, a light left on, a cold cup of tea, and so on. We are left to decide whether she escaped, whether she intended to finish the letter... or was the viewer meant to see the words on the page? Is this red blood or red ink that has been spilled? Is this all an illusion?



3. Exit

3.1 Tragedy

Photography is the study of light; literally translated from the Latin root photography means, sun painting, but to me it is what lies in the shadows, the unseen, that interests me. That is why I choose to photograph with longer exposures and my photographic illustrations are filled with black and darkened areas.

In the end these works show a perspective of escapism, a longing to be removed from the here-and-now to somewhere else; in the end, we all find an inescapable moment called death. The characters are shown in peripetria moments, from lampshades with guillotines opened and closed, lights on and off, birds in cages restless for flight only to be free with an empty cage remaining, and ropes swaying empty and the same ropes wrapping around the character; the symbolism held within the photographic illustrations and often times in a glimpse in the proceeding work, alludes to death.

The idea of creating something between a fairytale and a nightmare is appealing. Sleeping is a prelude to the act of death. The quote “she almost looks like she is sleeping”

plays on that prelude. The tradition of *Memento Mori* photography forever captures this eternal sleep. Having a wake before a funeral can look mysteriously beautiful or horrifying. It depends on what aspect you look at, what perspective. Lastly, all these themes of escape, death, and tragedies intermingle in my own world and I find myself navigating with these non-fictions to escape the tragedies in my own life. The fact that the word tragedies has “dies” in the spelling while the word dies speaks of the act of dying, and the end result of a tragedy, loops around to my wonderment over the traditions of death.

I long for a sleep such as death, where I can no longer dream anymore. I am looking for a way to find this... whichever way my mind decides to perceive it.



Methodology



Photographic Illustrations

Each work begins with a dream or vision. I record every one of my dreams, nightmares, and episodes of sleep paralysis so that I may have a working catalogue of subject matter and scenes to revisit or otherwise use as source materials any given time. This is my “envisioning” phase. Many dreams linger for some time until I am able to grasp what my subconscious was painting. These dreams and visions are the foundations of my art, though many times I diverge from the original subject, so as to create a cohesive aesthetic and underlying theme.

Dreams do not always have a linear flow nor does the subconscious present itself in the same fashion time-and-time again—rather each seems to be its own chapter of a story in my unconscious mind’s eye. This acts as my “decoding” phase. To remedy these inconsistencies, I have worked with a process called “lucid dreaming” that allows me take charge over my dreams. My interest in the macabre and darkness in fairytales leans to my researching and reading on any given subject matter. I took from the idea of what is often seen in contemporary times as Tableau genre painting during the mid-to-end of the 19th century, and investigated the more-than-meets-the-eye symbolism and representations embedded in these works. Enclosed within were moralizing messages or allegories of virtue or vice along with symbols that spoke of the artist’s views.

Another remedy is to constantly read on subject matter that I would like to have present in my dreams and to research about hidden messages in painting of the past. The

audience knew of these symbols hidden in the painting during that time. However, much of the contemporary audience now see these antiquated paintings as simply portraying commonplace engagements of a bygone time due to their lack of historical knowledge and lack of exposure to symbols. The extensive era of symbols in representational arts is almost completely lost, and is nearly unknown to the majority since the turn of the 20th century.

When I have explored the meaning of my dreams as fully as need be, I form questions to ask myself. These methods of decoding are how my works start off, before starting on a visual form; each is polished in different ways dependent on their shape. The next step is the planning stage; I begin writing and sketching to instigate interpretation as to why this scene is occurring. Questions include:

- ❖ Who is this person?
- ❖ Why is this character involved in this task?
- ❖ What does the setting and props represent via dream interpretation?
- ❖ How can I define escapism through their predicament?
- ❖ Why is it that my subconscious depicted these things to reveal this message to me?
- ❖ Does this end tragically? If not, how can I make it end that way?
- ❖ In what way can I use this story to speak about the theme of escape?
- ❖ What can I change?

Once I feel familiar with the character and her plight, I set to work on creating the many different elements that are depicted in my work; this includes the set and objects or symbols just as much as the character and the story.

My imagery's capture and even final printing process are rooted in the photographic realm; however, the final artwork is mixture of many different practices. As such there are a number of steps and stages that must be done before it leads to photographing.

In creation, I collect, build, sew, and make most of the props, costumes, and sets that are used in of the images. With these props that I build or make for the set; this practice ties me to the staging quality that was used in the early photographic portraits of the 19th century. These portraits were creating a view of the sitter, often times placing objects in the scene to imply something. I, too, have these objects placed with the character to give you something to base the scene around. In placing the props and figures in my scene to be captured, I feel that it becomes more of a stage, recreating and reenacting a dream. In some instances I am able to collect objects to have in the scene. While this sometimes can be both time consuming and costly, I have been able to use digital manipulation to achieve the look I would like, while cutting production costs. This does pose the issue of, often times, timely post-production, but the understanding of this will be explored further later. Each dress is sewn or altered by me and represents the tradition of sewing by the women throughout the centuries. This is important to me as a tie to the tradition of craft that is linked to women and domesticity.

The place in which I photograph is also scouted out, altered, and decorated as much as possible for the in-camera photography. To me, the process of creating the scene is just as important to me as fabricating post-production. Building on location and post-processing adds an element of reality and altered reality to my working process, in the same

way my dreaming mind can see something I how and am familiar with alongside something that is not logic if I were not dreaming.

My next step is to have my character, or model, come to the set. They are generally given a sketch and a short write up about the character and setting that they will be playing. There is a gesture they must perform and an action that is captured. They will repeat their interpretation until I feel that there are enough poses and gestures for me to work with. For this series, I also have the characters in a pose that mimics despair or death in the other photographic illustration that appears on the opposite side of the work, so as to have a show of a different perspective, just at the shifting imagery. Before I finish the photographing session, I tilt my camera upward or downward to add more of the set into the frame, as well as take a photograph of the set without the model in the frame at all. These additions, from the tilted capture, will be composited to create a square format so as to avoid cropping or risk of losing quality. It is important that I take multiple test photos and exposures so that I can compile the exposure I like best for different areas of the original frames of the photograph.

The photographing is the quickest part of the process.

After I have collected my initial photographs, I import and composite them in Photoshop. I first start by stitching together my full-frame photos into a square format image. I take into account the lens distortion and composition as I shoot on set so that my digitally enlarged images are well composed and as accurate to my sketch as possible. After the base image is pieced together, I begin to composite and manipulate the character and

objects. This can be a small, superficial manipulation, or more elaborate compositing and combining. This is my magic trick, and like a magician, I work on my “trick” until I am satisfied with how it will look to the audience when shown. While I work to create images that border reality, I leave small traces of things to be questioned in the manipulations—just as a magician leaves the audience wondering, “how was it done?” In that how might this lighting be as rendered? Is that perspective caused by a lens distortion or from post-production editing? Was that cat really there during the photographing session or was it added afterwards?

Much of the post-processing deals with layer masks and adjustment layers. These are used to change the colors, saturation, and quality of light. My images are slightly desaturated, to add to their mysterious, dated, and forgotten quality. I do not want the images grounded in time, but for the viewer to lose a sense of time or confuse it. Many of my photographic illustrations are photographed in the daytime hours, yet have a dark element to the lighting. This is achieved by controlling light, using multiple exposed frames in compositing, and further editing how intensely the dark and blacks are in the frame.

After all these edits are made, I am able to beginning the lenticular printing process.

The display of my photographic illustrations is extremely important to have the viewer interact with them. Lenticular printing allows multiple images to share the same picture plane and to be viewed without a special viewing apparatus, having them exist in front of the eyes as well as being an illusion. They exist tangibly. However despite this, the two images can never be viewed simultaneously. The viewer must physically change their

position to the work to see it in its entirety, looking at the work from different perspective each time. This act of separating one's focus also speaks of the perspective in a tangible and physical way. The viewer becomes metaphorically paralleled into this moment. To focus on one clearly obscures the other temporarily unless the viewer moves.

The lenticular process has been used for centuries, however the incorporation of the lenticular lens face-mounted to the work was not used until the mid-20th century. This allows the work to have motion, does not have to be viewed with special glasses, and remains on a two-dimensional plane. Using lenticulars, I explore perception by having the viewer's body become the hands that shift the kaleidoscope on what is seen and what was seen.

Choosing the correct subject matter and how you would like the images to "shift" became another concern. The type of lenticular lens glass must also be chosen early in the process. The glass is face-mounted to the image to keep the image from shifting and thus becomes distorted and unreadable. There are many different glasses. These are all measured in **LPI**, which signifies lens per inch. For the flip between the two images, distance the audience would be viewing, and size of the print, I chose 30 **LPI**. With this particular glass **LPI** there can be 24 individual images that can be used in the single print, or in terms of movement, there are 24 frames per lens.

I wanted to keep the figures the same, however when the shifting occurs there would be a transform or switch in the work to reveal more of what might be real and what is fabricated. This telling more of the story In deciding this I had to line up the images with one another in framing and crop. Due to the wanting a switch occurring from one side of the image to the other, the works have to be interlaced together on a 2-d picture plane.

This can be done using Photoshop or in an interlacing program. While the program automates the interlacing and calculates the total for you, they are incredibly expensive programs that are used mostly in commercial production. I was able to do the interlacing by hand via channel masks on Photoshop. The process is laborious and must be precise to the pixel because it must line up with the LPI of the lenticular glass. Channel masks are created for the images, layer by layer. Adjustments to compensate for printer color ability, lenticular glass color changes, and exposure shifts that occur are made as the last correction.

When these compensations have been completed, the image can be printed onto the paper. The work is printed on high gloss paper and face-mounted to lenticular glass via a cold-press laminator.

For the exhibition, I constructed a space that acts like a set for one of the works. It is the thirteenth work. I do not implore the viewer to interact with the space, however they may choose to enter the set and interact with it if inclined to become an investigator. While I staged the installation to look as though something has taken place, there is no figure present like in all of the prints—calling attention to the absence of a figure and displaying it as more like a tragedy. The elements in this particular stage are much more autobiographical in that they reference my departure from academia and the end of the body of work that is in the gallery. The pile of papers, desk, ink, writing utensil, and lamplight, all reference the hours spent in study and in creation. Editing and reediting of my ideas, working, to come to the point I am now.

The absence is important. Has an escape from the confines of this place come with enlightenment or despair? I may be the only one to know the ending to this story:

“Veritas liberabit vos. Quid est veritas?”

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Vitae

Randi Willett is a MFA candidate of Studio Arts; concentrating in photography at Louisiana State University for May 2016 graduation. However a strange series of events has since resulted in her mysteriously disappearing from her home along with her four cats, a trunk of very old dresses, and a camera. No one has found evidence of where she has spirited away to, but there is no suspected foul play or an otherwise noted paralleling paradigm. She has simply vanished from her home and has not been seen subsequently, albeit the rare instance of spotting her in an undisclosed pet supply store purchasing large quantities of canned cat food. It is suspected that these sightings might be her identical twin sister though this is still unclear. Sources have yet to be confirmed. Her last known communications with anyone were the hastily scribbled words on a piece of paper pinned to her front door reading: *Veritas liberabit vos. Quid est veritas?* (The truth will set you free. What is truth?)