Recollections of Paradise Lost

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RECOLLECTIONS OF PARADISE LOST

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
Japheth Alan Storlie
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ABSTRACT

Recollections of Paradise Lost is both a memoir and a fictitious account. While the images in this series are based on actual people and events from my childhood, they are nonetheless implied narratives.

Through the employment of universal symbols of childhood nostalgia such as tricycles, tire swings, toys, etc., these photographs are intended to implore the viewer to make connections with their own pasts. These narratives are meant to captivate and enchant and at the same time, disturb and haunt. Ultimately, the objective is for the audience to reconsider and re-experience the joys, fears, losses and traumas associated with childhood experience and memory.
INTRODUCTION

“There either is or is not a way things are.
The color of the day.
How it felt to be a child.
The feeling of saltwater on your sunburned legs.
Sometimes the water is yellow.
Sometimes it's red.
The color in memory depends on the day.
I won't tell the story the way it happened.
I'll tell it the way I remember it.”

-Mitch Glazer, Great Expectations, 1998

For the past two and a half years, I have traveled the back roads and byways of rural, Southern Louisiana. As a non-native of Louisiana, my adventuring began with a curiosity of the unfamiliar and a fascination with Southern culture. At first, I was engaged in a peripheral study of architecture, signage, and decaying structures in a desolate landscape. As I narrowed my focus to the plethora of destroyed/abandoned homes that I frequently encountered, I began to contemplate the loss of my own childhood home. I thought about the implications of such a loss on a child’s psyche and the possible effects that it could have on development and personality. What began as a superficial study ultimately became honed introspection.

It is said that a child’s development can be directly linked to the home in which they are raised. But what happens when home life is disrupted? What happens when the home dissolves, is destroyed, or simply sold? Will these scars affect the rest of one’s life? Will they influence the experiences and perceptions of one’s adulthood? Does anyone
ever really stop longing for home? These are the questions that I examined over the course of the last year, questions which I have attempted to address through my photography.
OTTERCREEK

I grew up on a 40-acre slice of rural eastern Iowa called Otter Creek. It was there that I spent my early childhood, raised among the sweet briers and the thorns. In this untamed place, the wilderness and thicket overtake the earth and swallow it whole.

My parents moved to Ottercreek in the seventies. They were a free-spirited, newly wed couple that had found themselves caught up in the monotony of a commercially driven society. My father worked for John Deere in Dubuque, Iowa and my mother managed a store in a large, neighboring shopping center. My father (much to the chagrin of my mother) decided that it was time for a change. He felt that the corporate world had begun to clutter and complicate their lives and the only answer was to take up a new, simplified one, and simple it was.

After a little searching, he discovered and purchased forty acres of majestic forest just south of Dubuque in rustic Otter Creek, Iowa. The land was so thick with timbre and underbrush that there was no place on which to build a house. They cut down only enough trees to create a clearing for a house, shed, garden with an orchard and a quarter-mile one-lane driveway. The woods were so dense that when traveling up the quarter-mile driveway, a visitor would not see the house until they were right in front of it.

My father built our home, from foundation to roofline with his own two hands. It was an A-frame style structure, built on the edge of a limestone cliff, overlooking a shallow valley floor covered by the fallen leaves of walnut, maple and oak trees.
Among the many simplicities of their new life was a lack of certain amenities; although the house had electricity, it lacked running water, which meant no toilet and no shower. When it rained in the summertime we would go outside under the downspout of a gutter with a fresh bar of Irish Spring and take a shower. Even now, I can still smell the rich lather and feel the warmth of the late afternoon rain on my skin.

No water also meant no toilet, so there was an outhouse some fifty yards from the front door. As a child, awoken in the middle of the night by the need to “go”, I recall standing timidly at the front door and peering out into the dark night; imagining wolves or coyotes, waiting to feast on a little boy, lurking in the shadows cast by the moon’s full light. At about age five (after a spanking from my aunt), I, bewildered and confused, learned that it was improper to urinate on a tree in a public place. My parent’s choice to use an outhouse and pump for well-water, or for that matter a cast-iron wood burning stove, was not of financial necessity, it was a decision made to live simply and more natural.

In 1988, my parents were faced with a dilemma. My mother was running the family restaurant Honey Bear’s, in Maquoketa Iowa and putting in sixteen-hour days. On top of that she commuted twenty minutes to work twice a day. In wintertime, this commute was becoming an unbearable chore. My parents were forced to make a decision; the dilemma was to sell the restaurant and find a different source of income, or sell the house and move to town. Since the restaurant was the family breadbasket it took precedence. Therefore, the house was put on the market.

We moved that year, leaving the only home and way of life I had ever known. Ottercreek was a place of peace, tranquility and refuge. Although the town of Maquoketa
was rather small (with a population of approximately 6,500), it was a completely different world to me. I wasn’t ready for such a drastic change at the impressionable age of seven. For example, isolated in Ottercreek with very few neighbors, my brother and I were best friends. However, after the move, my brother was able to hang out with his friends from school and I became more of a hindrance than a companion. Also, there was a city park across the street from our new house, but the slides and swings were no substitute for the frozen ponds that we skated on in the winter or the natural bridges created by trees falling over babbling creeks.

In subsequent years, I struggled in school and with my emotions; I suffered from mood swings, ranging from extreme sadness to uncontrolled anger. I began acting out in class. At first I was the class clown, demanding attention from fellow students and consequently the teacher. Then I assumed the role as class bully. I would look for any reason to create conflict with other children. I picked fights on the playground and in the classroom. In the second grade I was placed in behavior disability classes and was scheduled weekly meetings with a counselor. This went on for much of my childhood. I had deep and lasting scars from having to leave the only home that I had ever known. It wasn’t until much later that I truly began to recognize my emotions and express myself in healthier, more productive ways.
THE WORK

A child’s memory of an event is often more vivid and fantastic than the actual occurrence. Most people believe that children are born with intensely creative, active imaginations. One notable example is a child’s construct of the invisible or make-believe friend. As a child matures, his/her imagination is often replaced by reasoning and analysis. With this in mind, each scene was approached from the experiences as both child and adult. From the perspective of child, clouded skies become more intense, colors more vivid, and the buildings illuminated in such a way that they take on a vivacity of their own. The sense of photographic reality juxtaposes this dreamlike quality, inviting reason. The adult viewer is left wondering, is this real? Is this really happening?

Although all the sites depicted in Recollections of Paradise Lost are bound to Louisiana, many act as surrogates for places from my childhood. They are also visceral reactions to places I encountered while traveling through the Louisiana countryside. For example: Grandma Rose’s House (Figure.4), is an abandoned mansion in Plaquemine, LA. When I encountered the structure, I was transported back to my childhood in Iowa. I can remember my grandmother’s, large, white, stucco house and the mystery and eeriness of the second floor and attic where she kept her antique porcelain dolls. I also recollect her terrifying black cat, Freddy, whom used to hiss at my brother and myself whenever we went to her house to visit. In two other scenes, The Wahl Residence (Figure.12) and Jamie’s Tree House (Figure.13), I think of the home of our nearest neighbor and their children’s playhouse.
Many of the photographs contain distinct memories and associations, while some are more ambiguous. These images were created to have a more universality. This approach can link the viewer with associations of their own childhood memories.

The compositions in *Recollections of Paradise Lost* are quite balanced, with the buildings placed dead center in the frame. I chose this type of documentary-style composition with Walker Evans, William Christenberry, and Stephen Shore in mind. As documenters, these photographers are cited for their artistic honesty. By approaching the building facades in this straightforward way, whilst creating my own ambiguous light sources and heightening the colors, I created a powerful juxtaposition. The contrast of reality and otherworldliness gives the building facades a two-dimensionality and appearance of a theatre stage set.

Trees and foliage dominate most of the scenes in this series. Some of the locations and buildings were over-grown in reality; in other images, I embellished the vegetation by adding trees and shrubbery to the environments, providing evidence of the earth’s rapid reclamation of human trappings. Another purpose of this embellishment is to further isolate the dwellings (as well as the viewer) and exaggerate the state of decay and disrepair of the houses themselves. The presence of thick shrubbery and timbre is also used to intensify the connection between these places with the woods of my childhood land.

The images in this series were recorded with a digital camera. Using a computer and multiple photo-editing software programs, I was able to control many aspects of the image: lighting, color, content, even the spatial relationship between the structures and the immediate environment. I am also able to infuse additional elements into the scene, for
instance, the tire swing in *Tire Swing* (Figure 7) and the Tricycles in *Mr. Morales’s Shed* (Figure 6), etc. With this level of image control and the ability to alter all aspects of the image, each piece was treated more like a painting than a traditional photograph. This process allowed for a further departure from reality and a venture into the dreamlike, yet it permitted me to retain a sense of the real world as well as the photographic element.

In the past, I often used the photograph as a tool of reference for my painting. With *Recollections of Paradise Lost*, my desire was to combine the two mediums. To emphasize the process of photo as painting, I chose to print the work on canvas with an archival inkjet printer and finish each piece with a clear varnish. The process permitted me to integrate my painting experience and background with the work. It also complimented the nontraditional photographic style and provided greater control of surface, reinforcing a physical connection with that of emotional or psychological elements.
INFLUENCES

For the series *Recollections of Paradise Lost* I drew inspiration from multiple sources. The most prominent of these sources is the work of photographer Gregory Crewdson. Crewdson has become a “household” name in contemporary photography with his deeply psychological subject matter and large-scale color prints. In his book *Twilight*, Crewdson constructs compelling dramatic moments and scenarios by incorporating intricately fabricated sets and thoughtfully placed models (Figure 17) Crewdson’s father is known to have been a psychiatrist who practiced dream analysis in the Crewdson home (Moody, 6). During his youth, Gregory would overhear the dialog between his father and his patients during sessions, which gave him ample subject matter for his art and motivated the dreamlike appearance of his imagery. What draws me to in his work is a sense of eerie quietness and the dreamlike realms that he creates (Figure 18).

Another photographer of great interest to me is William Christenberry. Christenberry’s ongoing study of rural Alabama focuses on architecture in an ever-changing environment. Two reoccurring concepts in his work are memory and the passage of time. Christenberry lives in Washington D.C. and makes frequent trips to Alabama (his childhood home) to photographically document decaying structures (Figure 19). He returns to the same buildings time and again, amassing collections of images of the same places that span decades (Figure 20). Memory and the passage of time are key themes in *Recollections of Paradise Lost*. In Christenberry’s work time is often recorded in a linear fashion, while in *Recollections of Paradise Lost*, time comes to a near stop. The passage of time is evident in the dilapidation of the structures and the growth of the vegetation on and
around them; however, the structures are plucked from the real world and the limitations that time and space oppose.

I also spend a considerable amount of time looking at paintings. For example, I studied the work of Edward Hopper (also an inspiration to Gregory Crewdson) and his mastery of mood and lighting. I looked to the Hudson River painters such as Fredrick Edwin Church, which inspired the intensely colored and clouded skies in my photographs.

This work is also influenced by movies of rather unconventional directors such as: Alfred Hitchcock (The Birds, 1963), Terry Gilliam (Twelve Monkeys, 1995) and David Lynch (The Elephant Man, 1980 and Lost Highway, 1997). This influence is evident in the lighting techniques that I applied to the images, for example; in Sunset Through Mary’s Window, the sun is setting in the background, yet the house is brilliantly illuminated, revealing the all the details on the façade and porch (Figure 1).
CONCLUSION

This body of work and subsequent thesis has afforded me the opportunity to explore my perceptions of home. It has also forced me to face (and come to terms with) the loss of my woodland paradise. While meditating on this series of images, I considered the extreme traumas that others faced during childhood, such as physical and psychological abuse. I am especially grateful that my childhood was void of those types of experiences. I also acknowledge being raised by two of the world’s most loving parents whom nurtured me adequately and disciplined me justly. Yet, the trauma that I faced as a child, and the emotions that I am still dealing with as an adult are very real.

The imagery in *Recollections of Paradise Lost* is both eerie and otherworldly. Though the structures appear to be foreboding at first, they are also glorified and beautified in the way that they are represented. Homes that have been abandoned or destroyed are brought back to life (if only for a brief period of time) by my interaction with them. Likewise, by inviting the viewer into this space, it is my goal to bridge the gap between the viewer and the lowly building being viewed. The viewer, now isolated in a melancholic landscape, occupies the austere settings. However, this work is not simply saturated with despair. It is also full of hope and reflection. That one-day the scars of our pasts may fully heal and we will find our own way back home to paradise.
REFERENCES

Crewdson, Gregory. *In a Lonely Place*, Aperture Magazine Issue 190, pages 78-89, Spring 2008


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Figure 2: Untitled (1813)

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Figure 16: Gregory Crewdson, Plate 14, *Twilight*
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Figure 18: William Christenberry,
Red Building In Forest, Hale County, AL, 1983

Figure 19: William Christenberry,
Palmist Building (Summer), Havana Junction, AL, 1980
VITA

Japheth A. Storlie was born and raised just outside of the small, mid-western town of Maquoketa, Iowa. He expressed a strong interest in art at an early age. By high school Japheth was entering his artwork in contests, selling commissioned portraits and even showing in a few local venues. In the summer of 2001, Japheth packed his belongings into the back of his Jeep and headed off to school at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. It was there that he took his first photography class. The first time that he experienced what he calls, the magic moment; the moment when an image develops on a piece of white photo paper, slowly and magically rising to the surface, he knew he was hooked. Japheth realized that although he would always have a love for drawing and painting, he was going to spend the rest of his life studying photography and drawing with light. Japheth graduated from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, with a Bachelor in Fine Arts (BFA) degree in 2005. He is currently living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he is exhibiting his photography and working towards his Master in Fine Arts (MFA) degree at Louisiana State University.