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## Dislocation

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# DISLOCATION

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

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B.A, University of California San Diego, 2005

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## ABSTRACT

This photographic project, *Dislocation*, seeks to document the current state and decline of Cortana Mall in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The mall was built in 1976 during the height of shopping mall construction and was one of the largest shopping centers in the country with five anchor stores and 139 retail spaces. Now, just 48 stores and two anchor stores remain open. This high vacancy rate and deterioration of the mall is due to suburban flight, the building of new shopping centers in southern Baton Rouge, and changing consumer trends, which has led to malls closing across the country. My photographs represent the transitional nature of Cortana Mall. I am using this specific location to also acknowledge a trend of economic decline that is happening nationally.

## INTRODUCTION

My interest in slow economic decay and desolation stems from growing up in the border town of El Centro, California. Although my hometown is part of the Sonoran desert, it is surrounded by 500,000 acres of farmland with a yearly crop production of over \$1 billion that has changed the arid desert into one of the most fertile farming regions in California.<sup>1</sup> The city's motto is "Where the Sun spends the winter." With the riches of the agriculture business only going to a select few, the unemployment rate has ranged from 22-28% over the past two decades, three times the national average, while 24% of the population lived below poverty<sup>2</sup>. Similar to Baton Rouge, the economic divide between the wealthy and poor is evident; there is the "good and the bad" side of the city with the downtown area separating the two.

In 1980, the year after I was born, my parents opened The Party Store downtown. Their business sold party supplies, balloon bouquets, stuffed animals, greeting cards and an assortment of 1980's bric-a-brac. Throughout the eighties downtown El Centro flourished. Social gatherings like farmers markets, car shows, and ice cream socials brought the community together and locally owned businesses thrived. This all came to an abrupt halt when Wal-Mart and Costco opened in the early 1990's. Local stores were soon unable to compete with the low prices offered at these corporate big box stores and the once-prosperous downtown soon became vacant. In 1992 The Party Store was one of the several businesses to close its doors. Watching a place I spent so much of my youth rapidly decay and fall apart would later visually affect

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<sup>1</sup> Imperial County Farm Bureau, <http://www.icfb.net/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, [https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ca\\_elcentro\\_msa.html](https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ca_elcentro_msa.html).

my photography. I was unaware of this connection and how it shaped the way I see the world until I revisited downtown El Centro with my camera in 2004. Looking at these buildings through my viewfinder allowed me to record their present state and monumentalize them at the same time. This aesthetic and interest in these particular themes has followed me to Baton Rouge and seeped into my current work.

*Dislocation* began as an examination of Cortana Mall and how the space is being affected by current consumer trends and the economic climate of the mall's surrounding neighborhoods due to suburban flight. With past experience photographing the economically depressed downtown in where I grew up, the present state of Cortana Mall appealed to me thematically and aesthetically. When the mall was built in 1976, at the height of shopping mall construction, it was one of the largest shopping centers in the country. After forty years of fluctuating consumer trends and shifting populations of Baton Rouge, just 48 out of 140 stores and two out of five anchor stores remain open.

Wanting to document this particular economic decline, I have spent the past year photographing within Cortana Mall. Even in this short amount of time I have witnessed significant changes. With the rapid pace at which Cortana is changing, my photographs serve as a record of this transitional time while preserving a crucial point in the history of this space.

## RISE OF THE SHOPPING MALL

Wanting to further understand the history of shopping malls and their design, I researched Austrian architect Victor Gruen, who was credited with designing the first indoor shopping centers. His first attempt at a fully enclosed mall was the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, which opened in 1956.<sup>3</sup> Until Southdale opened, nearly all shopping centers had entrances and store windows facing the parking area and sidewalks. Gruen turned Southdale inside out: the exterior walls were blank with minimal advertising, and all the activity was focused on the interior of the building. The architect liked to call his style of mall “introverted”, as opposed to the “extroverted” commercial strips with their overly ornate window displays projecting outward to the world. Southdale’s colossal walls turned their backs to the street, enclosing not just the stores, but the community that Gruen wanted to create with restaurants, public art, pedestrian boulevards, a movie theatre, and a garden court with skylights illuminating a fishpond, manicured trees, and an aviary filled with exotic birds.<sup>4</sup> By successfully putting everything inside of one massive climate controlled building, Gruen introduced the formula for thousands of future shopping malls across the United States.

As successful as Victor Gruen’s enclosed malls were, he did not like what they had become. He envisioned the concentrated shops would benefit the business owners as well as the shoppers, believing that these massive all-in-one structures would

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Elizabeth, “From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America.”

<sup>4</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm, “The Terrazzo Jungle.”



promote an American ideal and foster a sense of shared community. As malls began covering the suburban landscape and downtowns became more vacant, Gruen became painfully aware that his dream of overcoming social problems through architecture and commerce was slipping away, making America depend upon its shopping malls.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hardwick, M. Jeffrey, "Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream."

## **CORTANA MALL**

In 1976, twenty years after Southdale Center was designed, Cortana Mall opened in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Nestled on the northeast intersection of old Highway 61 (Airline Highway) and US Route 190 (Florida Boulevard), Cortana was one of the largest malls in the country with 1.4 million square feet of retail space. At its peak, the mall featured six anchor tenants, four of which were two-stories, and 138 retail spaces, making it the center for consumption in the state capital. Cortana has the classic L-shape design of many malls built during the 1970's (figure 1). With Sears and Dillard's on each end of the building and JC Penney in the crook of the L, when consumers enter the mall they are surrounded by a maze-like layout that creates an over stimulated experience. This strategic design leads consumers to become distracted and shop more impulsively. This combination of mall design and consumer behavior is often referred to as the Gruen Transfer. For twenty years Cortana Mall prospered and was the center of consumption in Baton Rouge. This began to change in 1997.

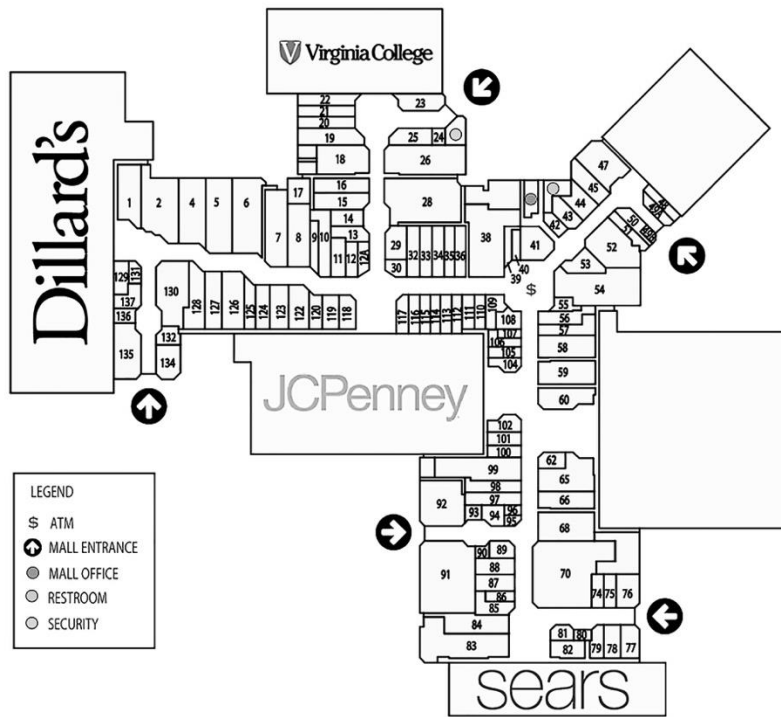


Figure 1: Cortana Mall Map

## DECLINE OF CORTANA MALL

Several factors have led to the fall of the once prosperous Cortana. The rise of e-commerce shopping through websites like Amazon has made a huge impact on malls across America. People are consuming goods in a different way and tend to prefer the ease and convenience of online shopping.

However, the most significant reason for the decline of Cortana Mall is the moving of families, specifically white families, out of North Baton Rouge into surrounding suburban parishes to the east and south. Florida Boulevard has become the physical dividing line segregating neighborhoods with high-density populations of African Americans versus whites. According to 2010 census data, neighborhoods north of Florida Boulevard surrounding the mall are 92% African American. This statistic has remained consistent since 2000. The neighborhoods directly east of the mall have seen a 20% increase of the black population with the white population decreasing by the same percentage since 2000<sup>6</sup>.

While families with higher incomes move away from neighborhoods surrounding Cortana Mall, any new retail development follows. In 1997, The Mall of Louisiana opened just off Interstate 10. With easier access, newer facilities, higher end stores, and wealthier consumers, the new mall had instant success. In 2007, Perkins Rowe, a mixed-use space that blends shopping, dining, living, and entertainment opened nearby. Attempting to recreate a flourishing downtown scene with narrow streets, cobblestone crosswalks, and open courtyard with greenery and a large fountain as the

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<sup>6</sup> City-Data.com.

centerpiece, the ultimate illusion has been created. This false reality that is even more extreme than the one at Cortana seems to appeal to people as the shopping center is thriving.

Because of these shifts, the future of Cortana Mall looks bleak. With the closing of Macy's in January 2016, the announcement of Sears and JC Penny closing in mid 2017 appears to be the final nail in the coffin for the mall. Out of the 139 retail spaces available, only 40 remain open with a majority of the existing stores located around the internal entrances of JC Penny. Those businesses will undoubtedly suffer the consequences from the lack of foot traffic caused by the closing of JC Penny. The only remaining anchor store, Dillard's Clearance Center, is surrounded by closed stores and has two external entrances that most shoppers seem to use, thus further reducing foot traffic through the mall.

With no central shopping district in the area, several of the remaining establishments in the mall are locally owned small businesses that cater to the community. The possible closure of the mall would force these tenants to seek out new space to rent, which they may not be able to afford in the more expensive retail spaces of Perkins Rowe or Mall Of Louisiana. What is happening to Cortana Mall happened in my hometown. When more convenient and newer options are available, the people follow, leaving huge voids in cities that are nearly impossible to sustain.

## DISLOCATION

My thesis work *Dislocation* attempts to show the decline and the current state of this sprawling space that was once the heart of consumption in Baton Rouge. The quietness that exists in the cavernous hallways of Cortana stands in contrast to what one would expect of a 1.4 million square foot shopping center. The numerous repurposed storefronts, the lonely chairs (figure 2), and the overall melancholy and irony that is present in this space is reflected in this body of work.

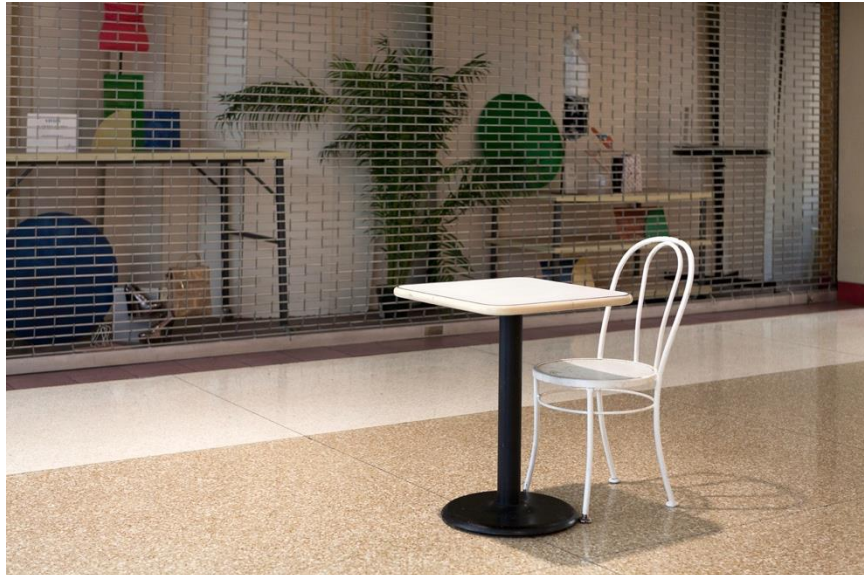


Figure 2: White Chair and Table, 2016.

While photographing Cortana Mall, I gravitated towards primarily empty spaces that are prevalent throughout the mall trying to find unique visual compositions. When making a photograph, I am looking for spaces that highlight the careless upkeep of the deteriorating architecture. Instead of properly fixing the water damaged ceiling, maintenance crews will place trashcans under the leak (figure 3) or put a tarp over the

damaged ceiling tiles. Once a favorable scene is found, I simplify and strip down the composition, focusing on the essential forms. This creates a minimal picture that draws attention to the failing infrastructure and lack of care. The color palette of the mall also plays an important roll in this body of work. The pinks and browns (figure 4) from the 1970's and the vivid reds and blues from the 1980's are still present throughout the mall. These hues from another era are reminders that this space has not been altered much over the past several decades. These dated color schemes are present in numerous outdated displays in vacant storefronts.



Figure 3: Seven Trash Cans, 2017



Figure 4: Old Mervyn's Entrance, 2016

With twice as many stores closed as open, it is hard not to notice the empty storefronts scattered throughout the mall. To make the vacant retail spaces appear more appealing, they have been dressed up with random décor or advertisements for other stores. It seems like whatever is on hand is placed between the roll down cage and curtains, creating an unusual scene that has nothing to do with the past tenant (figure 5). By photographing these oddly-placed items, I am encouraging viewers to make possible connections between the items and their place in the mall. The flatness of the confined space that is present in these images creates a stage-like appearance that gives these photographs a surreal quality.



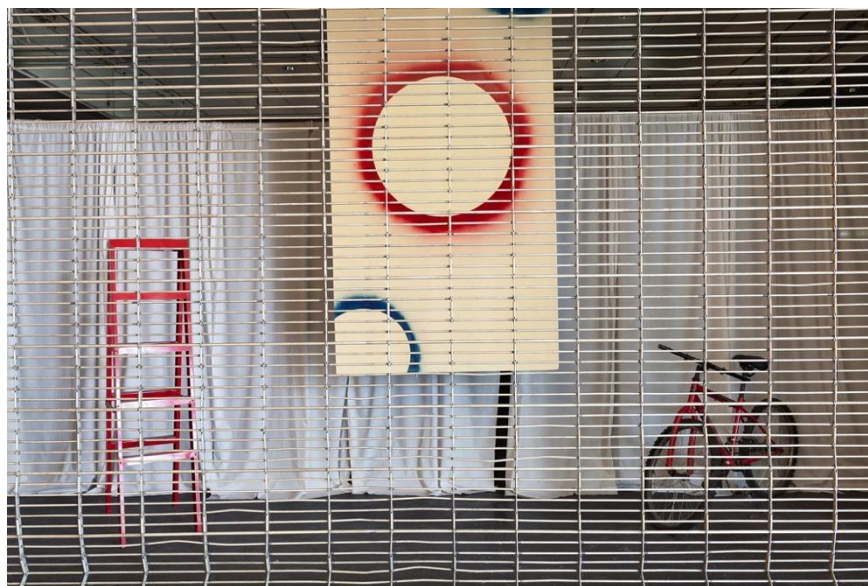


Figure 5: Bike and Ladder, 2016.

The dilapidation of the building is contrasted by a sense of hope that is depicted in the for lease signs that hang in some unoccupied storefronts. These signs show optimistic, smiling young people with titles like “Be your own Boss! Open your business today.” Photographing these conflicting messages, I am showing the irony that exists in this space (figure 6).

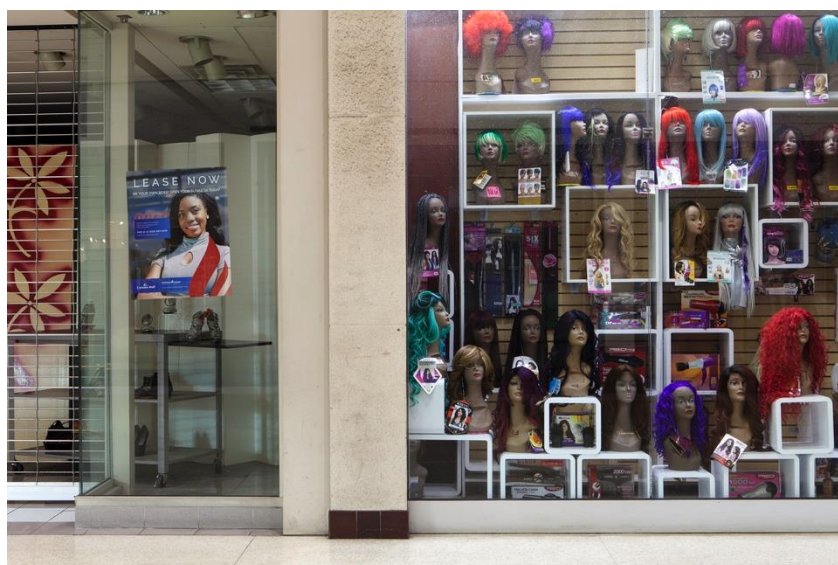


Figure 6: Lease Now, Wigs, 2017

With several retail stores moving out over the years, unconventional renters have filled some of the vacant space. The for-profit Virginia College took over one of the anchor stores. Army and Navy recruiting centers have offices across the hall from each other (figure 7). During the floods in August of 2016, the old Mervyn's was converted into a makeshift donation center for flood victims. This repurposing of retail space shows how this mall is attempting to hold on.



Figure 7: Recruiters, 2016.

While photographing the stark exterior of the mall, I was drawn to the ornamental holly trees that surround the facade of the structure. The imposing fortress-like beige walls feel cold and uninviting, but the inclusion of the well-manicured holly trees creates an illusion of a welcoming, warmer space. The upkeep of the trees is contrasted by the deteriorating parking lot that remains mostly empty throughout the day. While the holly

trees are pruned into teardrop shapes, the parking lot is consistently littered with trash left behind by shoppers (figure 8).



Figure 8: Holly Trees Puddle, 2017

Having consistently visited Cortana over the past year, I have noticed a rapidly changing landscape both within the mall and outside of it over a relatively short period of time (figure 9, figure 10). Two anchor stores and several other national companies have closed their doors within the time I have been photographing. Documenting such a sharp decline in a year shows the economic hardship that this shopping center faces.





Figure 9: JC Penny Mannequin, 2017



Figure 10: Store Closing, 2017

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Several photographers influenced my work while documenting this mall. In particular, Brian Ulrich's project *Copia*, consists of two parts. The *Retail* series documents peak consumerism, while the *Dark Stores* series reveals the fallout of it (figure 9). While our images are dealing with similar topics, my photographs fall somewhere between his *Retail* and *Dark Stores* series. Cortana Mall is not prosperous by any means, yet it is not dead. When viewing my series, one might feel that the mall has been shut down, but with further investigation one might notice the glimmering floors, lights, odd placements of safety cones and trashcans, the occasional open storefront, signs that hint at something coming soon, and retail spaces available for rent (figure 10).



Figure 9: Brian Ulrich, Cloverleaf Mall, 2001.



Figure 10: Another Great, 2016.

I was also inspired by Bernd and Hilla Becher, artists who created photographic typologies of outmoded industrial buildings in Germany. I decided to photograph every manicured tree outside of Cortana Mall in a deadpan manner, similar to their photographic style. I photographed from the same distance, with uniform compositions, and under similar lighting situations (figure 11). By using this technique, I allow viewers to pick up on the subtle differences of the trees while hoping that they notice the time and effort still taken to keep up the appearance of the this declining mall.

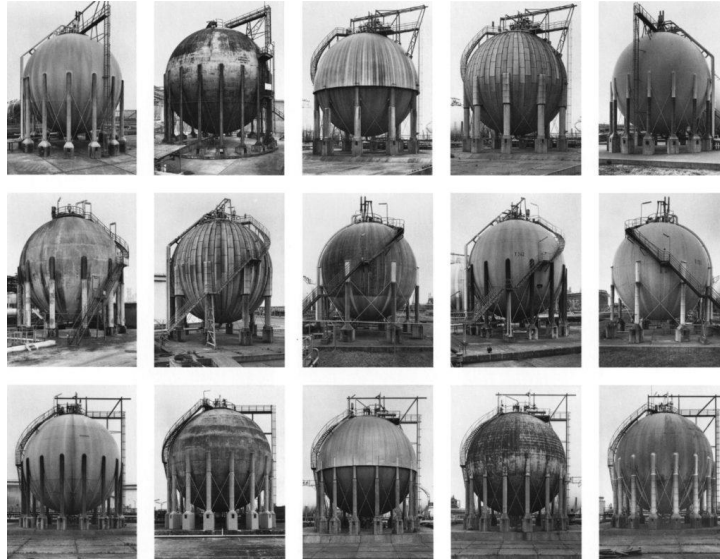


Figure 11: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Blast Furnaces, 1980-88.

In thinking about how to display the photograph of trees, I looked to Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). In this project, the artist photographed each building along both sides of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. He presented his work in a 24-foot long accordion book (figure 12) so that the pages could be viewed individually or open to reveal the whole street. I chose to take the same approach to the final presentation of *37 Holly Trees*. The accordion book displayed in the gallery has a sculptural quality that enhances the sheer number of the trees (figure 13). Viewers follow the 26-foot book as the trees change in shape while the texture of the wall the trees stand in front of changes depending on the location of the tree.

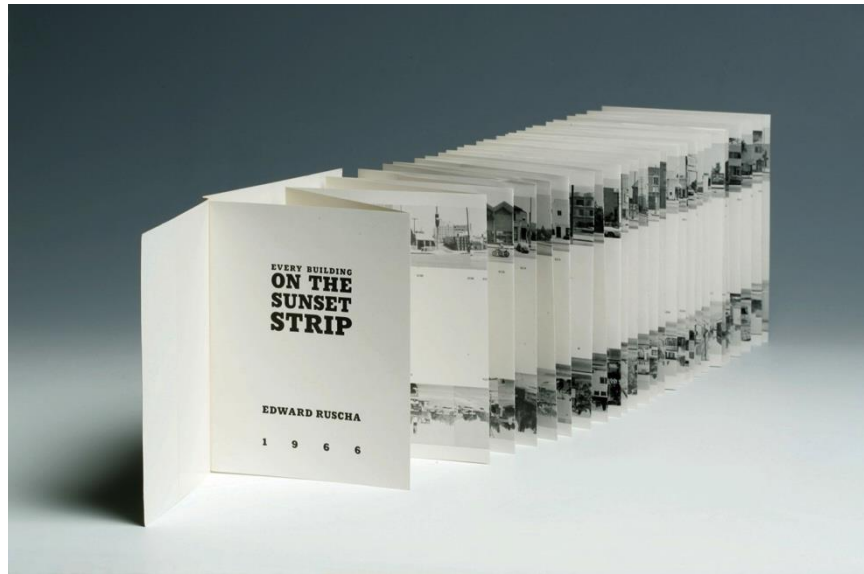


Figure 12: Ed Ruscha, Every Building on the Sunset Strip, 1966, Self-Published book, offset lithograph, 1966 (second printing 1971).



Figure 13: Brian Deppe, 37 Holly Trees, 2017, Self-Published book.



## CONCLUSION

After spending a year photographing Cortana Mall, fifteen images were selected from a much larger body of work to be included in my thesis show *Dislocation* (figure 14). While choosing and installing photographs for my exhibition, I paired images that had similar colors or visual clues that played off each other. As viewers walked through the gallery, they would pick up on signs in the photographs that give hints to the current state of the mall. I also installed my accordion book *37 Holly Trees* on a shelf that wrapped around a corner in the gallery, guiding viewers to a dead end in the gallery, similar to the halls in Cortana that lead shoppers into the dead wings of the mall.

With up to 25% of shopping malls closing across the country within the next five years,<sup>7</sup> my photographs in *Dislocation* stand as a record not only of what is happening in Baton Rouge, but also of larger shifting economic patterns. Enclosed shopping centers that were part of Victor Gruen's vision will soon be something of the past. Moonbeam Reality, who bought Cortana Mall in 2013 for \$6 million, has a history of purchasing declining malls and luring healthcare, office and education tenants.<sup>8</sup> Hopefully this is the case and Cortana can be repurposed to help the shifting needs of the community of Baton Rouge.

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<sup>7</sup> Easter, Makeda. "Up to 25% of U.S. shopping malls may close in the next five years."

<sup>8</sup>Boone, Timothy, "As anchor stores close, Cortana Mall tenant says he's seen it before and the future looks bleak."



Figure 14: Installation View of Dislocation.

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## VITA

Born and raised in the isolated border town of El Centro, California, where the economy is focused on large scale agribusiness, Brian Deppe's photographic eye developed watching the beautifully barren desert turn to farmland, then to tract homes, then back to desert. This idea of the transitional landscape has been a constant theme in his work. Upon moving to San Diego, he attended Grossmont Community College where he refined his craft in image making before transferring to UC San Diego where he graduated in 2005 with a B.A. in Visual Arts. In the years following graduation, Brian worked at various non-profits and as a freelance photographer. In 2014, he moved to Baton Rouge to attend Louisiana State University where he is currently an M.F.A. candidate in The School of Art.

