Small Revelations

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SMALL REVELATIONS

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
Christopher Burns
B.A. University of Connecticut ‘09
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For my parents, Bill and Kathy.
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Abstract

Small Revelations is a photographic project that recontextualizes images of historic churches found in areas of the United States that have a colonial history. The images in this series subvert and critique the symbolic importance of these structures by interrupting the inherent power found in their architecture. They achieve this subversion through the careful use of color, composition and photographic imperfection. This project builds its argument with visual decisions inspired and validated by work within the art historical canon. Small Revelations is a thesis project produced as the final requirement of Louisiana State University’s Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art program.
Small Revelations: An Essay

INTRODUCTION

The little white church is a common trope throughout American storytelling. Within every state with a colonial history, certain historic structures have been preserved more than any other: white churches. When viewed through the relative lens of world history, the United States is a young country. Its cultural and architectural history goes back only 300 years. Nevertheless, 300 years is plenty of time for most of the country’s early structures to have been built, torn down and replaced by contemporary buildings and roads. In New England, I was able to travel within a 60-mile radius and find dozens of these buildings. It is significant that the little white church remains such a dominant feature of our landscape.

At a time when our collective sense of “Americanness” is under intense scrutiny, and the country’s sense of collectivity is fraught, there seems no more pressing work for the artist to do but examine the symbols that, for them, spoke so clearly of America. “Small Revelations” involves the re-contextualization of a dominant trope: The little white church. It is a photographic series focused on antique church structures in areas of the country with a colonial history. These photographs are placed among images made in the courtyards of those churches. Unlike common depictions of these buildings, my photographs are dark, blurred and tinged with a sense of the backward glance of history. My primary aesthetic focus while making photographs of the structures was to disrupt the architectural power of the locations.

I am drawn to the icons and symbols of the great American experiment because of the bold ways change is instituted and made within our culture. Change here is often the result of large-scale experiments, rather than premediation and risk assessment. My working process has always been similarly experimental. Rather than ideating projects from behind a desk and
making specific, predetermined images, I’ve always needed to work through ideas in the field with a camera. “Small Revelations” is an example of the fruits of this process.

The images included in this project were made in 2019 and 2020 in New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Louisiana. All images were made with a digital camera and were produced in physical form as archival inkjet prints. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in January 2020, the exhibition of this work was postponed indefinitely. As of publication, an exhibition is anticipated at Baton Rouge’s Glassell Gallery in Fall 2020.
BACKGROUND

When the experience of early colonists is taught in elementary school classrooms, history books focus on the importance of religious freedom and personal liberty in the new world. The structures that are the primary site of these liberties are small white churches located on main roads in former colonial towns. Such buildings are potent symbols within the mythology of the United States. As pure white structures marking the creation of new communities throughout the young country, they are a symbolic stand-in for religious freedom, political freedom, self-sufficiency, and community-oriented design. However, it is disingenuous to think about these sites as purely exceptional and holy. Early church structures in America can be read as both symbols of American exceptionalism and American exclusion. These structures represent the beauty of religious freedom and an expansion of civil liberty through democracy, but in the moment they were built these freedoms were only granted to a select group of people.

My interest in the structures comes from personal experience. Being born and educated in New England, I always revered the simple beauty of these structures and appreciated the way they connected me to the Americans who had come before me. My greater portfolio of artistic work is focused on symbols and icons of the American experience. In the recent past I have made work about volunteer firefighting, and high school football. This interest in symbology and contemporary iconography is a through-line that connects all of the projects within my larger practice.

After a difficult reckoning about my interests as an artist over the last two years, in early 2019 I was searching for a subject to explore. The most pressing concern I felt at that time was the feeling that I woefully misunderstood the history and character of my country. While considering this problem, it seemed obvious for me to return to the colonial church structures
which stood out in my life as pure symbols of the American experience. Working through a depiction of these buildings, I realized, could be an interesting way to understand my place within a greater, shared experiment of Americanness.

My interest in these buildings has always been secular and historical. Though these are ostensibly religious buildings, they are equally structures of a wider cultural importance. Our American court system is built on Judeo-Christian principles, our popular music has its roots in Christian Gospel music, and “In God We Trust” adorns our dollar bills. Although we may be a people who take pride in our religious freedom, every American’s experience is directly impacted by the Christian-oriented institutions that provided the bedrock of our country’s political and cultural systems, for better or worse. There is a reason little white churches are our nation’s most preserved and revered aspects of colonial architecture. What often goes unsaid, when these buildings are up for preservation, is that they were made possible by the secondhand benefit of slavery and colonial genocide, even in the north. As Wendy Warren illustrates in “New England Bound” — a seminal book on the slave economy in the north during colonial times — farming, merchant, and ship-building communities in the north were all tied directly to the slave trade. New England produce fed Carribean plantations, merchants moved both human chattel and slave-produced goods, and ship-builders fitted boats for the carriage of human property.¹ The early Americans that founded the churches that became the bedrock of colonial civil and religious society were as indicated in the slave economy as any southern planter. As such, these truly beautiful and symbolic buildings present a microcosm of the greater American question: Is it possible to appreciate an articulated belief in individual freedom while

acknowledging that freedom came upon the backs of the enslaved and conquered? This question is largely unanswerable, but worth considering.

Small Revelations is a project and process by which I attempt to answer this question for myself (as a proxy for the contemporary questions of Americanness I hold today, when the leader of our country wolf-whistles for white supremacists and openly condemns immigrants.) The images that result from it are documentation of my personal search, and a visual investigation of buildings that hold so much complicated history. I hope these images depict my longing for a sense of America, and a longing for an understanding of my place within it. I returned to photographing these buildings because they have always represented a place of sanctuary and quiet reflection to me. As I confronted the reality of a crumbling sense of my place in America, I returned to the buildings which had one represented it’s essence to me. Yet, within and around these places of sanctuary I was forced to confront that fact that even these powerful, symbolic structures carry a complicated history of subjugation, hierarchy and division quite similar to the problems which plague my country today. My artistic problem to solve became: How do you photograph a beautiful, ubiquitous trope while acknowledging the imperfection of the system it represents?

As I began to understand my relationship with these church structures was more complicated than pure reverence, it took me six months to articulate the process and aesthetic decisions I could make to visually represent this uncertainty. I returned to these buildings alone night after night, insisting that my experience with these buildings be solitary and isolated. If I wanted to understand the ways a beautiful symbol could carry difficult histories, I had to interact with the structures outside of their intended use as a place for the coming-together of a community. The gathering of people in pursuit of a shared goal is the scene that has allowed
colonial church structures to become symbolic of a pure American identity that does not exist outside of metaphor. Removing the buildings from this experience was the first step I took to isolate them.

My primary aesthetic focus while making photographs was to disrupt the architectural power of the locations. The buildings’ vertical size, stark white color and multitude of large windows make it predetermined that any depiction of them will be spiritually-elevated and sanctified. If I wanted to make complicated photographs of these buildings, I would have to disrupt the spiritual elevation and sanctity while not completely abandoning the uplifting architecture inherent to these structures.

Because our culture does not properly assign value to these locations as locations of white supremacy and colonial subjugation, they have been allowed to become symbols that mitigate the nuance of how and why they were built. Aesthetically, the buildings are larger, and whiter than any other contemporary building in the places where they were built. My photographs both acknowledge and undermine these facts.
VISUAL DECISIONS

Disruption

To disrupt the elevation and sanctity of these buildings I used multiple aesthetic tactics including: off-kilter and tight framing, blurring the image with lens movement, obscuring the buildings behind vegetation and bright artificial light, and photographing the buildings at night, when less detail can be captured in-camera. In terms of content, photographs facing the building are presented with photographs where the artist facing away from the building. All of these decisions and tactics were completed “in-camera,” the only post-facto digital processing involved basic color and exposure correction.

Within the history of art, the white clapboard meetinghouse is a potent symbol. Impressionist painter Childe Hassam is noted to have been inspired by Connecticut’s clapboard meeting houses as a symbol of America and the essence of New England.² Paul Strand’s Time in New England is another example of an artist using the architecture of colonial New England as a metaphor for the American spirit and identity.³ Like Strand’s work, my series is focused on a critical examination of the apparent purity of colonial churches as a symbol within American art and mythology. In both of our series, we frame our church structures with tightness and a lack of interest in presenting depictions of full buildings. Two such images are Strand’s “Clapboard Meetinghouse” from that book, and my image “Redding, CT,” from Small Revelations (Figure 1). This framing prevents the structures from being depicted with the verticality projected by tall church steeples.

The white buildings that make up the church structures are the subject of both photographs, but the clear decision to crop out a large amount of the building’s identity is equally deserving of identification as the subject. The horizon line, or straightness, of my structures are obscured using particular framing devices. In my images, the buildings themselves appear to be falling over slowly or reaching towards collapse. Inserting movement into the depiction of a building allows the structures to feel as if they are living, breathing symbols of a living, breathing American system.

To insert a different, subtle level of unexpected alteration within my images, I used manual lens movement and lens blur to disrupt the clear, straight lines expected of a well-kept historic structure. In my depictions of church structures, the first ~90% (25 to 50 seconds) of the exposure is made with the focal plane centered on the buildings. During the last ~10% of the
exposure (3 to 10 seconds), however, I manually adjust the focal plane. An example of such an image is “Bethel, CT” (Figure 2).

This tactic creates a slight blur and movement around the outside of all straight edges within the photograph. While the detail of the buildings remains largely intact, the buildings take on a ghostly, living quality. This decision implies an attempt to invoke the backwards glance of a human looking at memory, where the critical details remain intact but some level of specificity is inevitably lost and changed and constantly moving. The movement of vegetation in the wind, made blurry by the long-exposure nature of these images, also introduces a feeling of inconsistency and movement within the frame; a difficult task when photographing large architectural structures.

Figure 2 – “Bethel, CT” and detail of “Bethel, CT”. 2019. Christopher Burns.
My decision to photograph these structures at night and use ready-to-hand artificial (colored) light to illuminate the structures was intentional. Colonial structures are generally seen as pure, white structures depicting the beginning of a new era in American history. Photographers like Strand, Robert Adams, and William Cristenberry have all depicted white churches as just that: white. Strand and Adams used black & white film and Cristenberry using color.\(^4\) None of these artists attempted to obscure the whiteness of the structures. From my perspective, the purity of whiteness within these structures can be seen as an assertion of the superiority of whiteness within the new nation. An example of this can be found in my image “South Britain, CT” (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – “South Britain, CT”. 2019. Christopher Burns.

Photographing at night gives me the ability to subvert this feeling of purity by lighting the churches with colored light. None of the structures in my series can be described as white — all of them carry the color of the lights surrounding them, and the light of car headlights passing by. Such a decision allows these buildings to become pink, blue, yellow, orange, and red, but never purely white. Photographing at night also removes the impact of sunlight on the buildings, which were constructed to emphasize the power of sunrise and sunset light entering through its windows.\(^5\)

Reverence

My intention in this project, however, was never to abandon the original reason I was drawn to photograph these buildings: Reverence. As noted above, I first photographed these buildings because they served as a place of personal sanctuary. I used a meditative process, photographing the movement of light and reflection inside and outside the building. While photographing with this process, I was thinking about the structures from a place of pure reverence. I followed the way that sunlight moved in these buildings from sunrise to sunset, thinking of the images I created as a contemplative reflection on the beauty of early American architecture. These structures were built before the advent of electricity, and were clearly designed to benefit from the illuminating power of the sun. I appreciated the symbolism of such an architectural decision; the use of sunlight as a cleansing, purifying, pious element of design. However, as much as these long periods of meditation reinforced my reverence for early American church structures, they also led me to challenge such an uncritical reverence. It is true that pious, hardworking people spent years of their lives constructing buildings that doubled as municipal and political gathering spaces and places of worship. Yet, it is undeniable that the construction of these buildings was possible due only to the secondhand benefit of slavery and colonial genocide.

I spent many days in these buildings making photographs and attempting to understand how I could feel both reverence and disenchantment at the same time. The images below represent the meditative images I was making as recently as 2019. They are created by placing the camera on a tripod in a single location and making images at the beginning of sequenced five-minute meditation cycles. As clouds roll in, they are reflected and depicted in different panes of glass. An example of these images can be found in Figure 4 below.
Smooth panes of glass are recently replaced, and oddly reflective glass is much older. Over the course of a few months, it became obvious to me that following the movement of the sun was simply a photographic excuse to reside within the buildings for extended periods of time. However beautiful and refined the images became, there was little connection between the photographs I was making and the way that I felt about these structures. If I wanted to make a body of work about colonial structures, I realized I would need to more fully embrace the ability and power of art to hold two antithetical ideas at the same time. This realization created the need for the critical aesthetic decisions explained above. But, in the final product, reverence would also remain important.

In terms of process for the images that eventually made up Small Revelations, using only imagery made with long-exposures forced me to be in the presence of my subject for extended periods of time. In opposition to the common view of photography as a quick, run-and-gun process, I forced my images to become slow and refined. Slow exposures made with a tripod force careful compositional thought, and requires the photographer return to the subject over-and-over again. Visiting these structures repeatedly instilled a relationship between author and
subject that is difficult to qualify. Both my appreciation and distrust of the buildings was reinforced by this slow and deliberate process.

Reverential treatment is also found in the material presentation of the work and the images themselves. Materially, I imply the feeling of large, colonial windows by presenting the vast majority of this series in a vertical format. Unlike most landscape and architectural photography in which wide-angle images are used, my vertical images capture narrow strips of focused information. This allowed me to tightly control the expanse of the scene that was depicted in each image while emulating a fundamental architectural aspect of colonial church buildings: The windows. Figure 5, “Near Massachusetts”, is an example of this idea.

Figure 5 – “Near Massachusetts”. 2019. Christopher Burns

This decision makes the images tightly focused on the church structures as portrait-like subjects while replicating the windows which feature prominently in the work itself.
Ensuring beauty, technical and subjective, in the series of images that make up Small Revelations was another tactic to imply reverence. Each image was made with technically correct exposure, using the slowest “film” speed possible (ISO 100). This eliminates digital noise within the photograph, creating an image with fine detail at large scale. It also allows for the camera sensor to correctly read, understand and process the relationship between the color of illuminating light, and the color of structures themselves. Viewers of these images can therefore decode that they are looking at a photograph of a white building being affected by the illumination of colored, artificial light. This factor is meant to be quickly read and understood within the images as an intentional decision, rather than a mistake in the printing process.

Many of the images in Small Revelations rely on unusual compositions and crops to reduce the power of the architecture depicted. But, this is not to say the images are without beauty and careful composition. Although this view of colonial churches is intentionally off-kilter, and the horizon lines of the photographs are often obscured, the compositions themselves are tightly controlled for aesthetic pleasure. In this series, criticality is not overpowered by beauty. The beauty of the images is intended to entice the viewer to take a closer look before realizing small details of the image appear just a bit imperfect. Striking a balance between formal beauty and slight imperfection was one of the most difficult lines to walk while producing Small Revelations.
Views from the church

Another aspect of “Small Revelations” is secondary imagery collected from the property around colonial church structures. Starscape images introduce the viewer to the exhibition, damaged and leaning tombstones give a sense of the human figure, and trees empty of leaves imply a subtle darkness residing over the series. The images of church structures in this series tend to be colorful, bright and large, while supplemental imagery is dark and minimal.

A series of starscape photographs will create an entrance to the exhibition of church structure photographs. These images are made at colonial church sites by pointing the camera directly at the sky. The photographs are of pitch-black night skies filled with points of light from stars. They are meant to invoke a sense of time, movement of time, and history. When we look at the night sky, we are seeing years-old light. In many ways, looking into the night sky is the closest we can come to “time-travel.” Introducing this exhibit with a sequence of abstract, dark, and beautiful night skies is a way to introduce the audience to a sense of time and history before they engage with the primary imagery. Figure 6, “Starscape #3,” is an example of my starscapes.
These night sky images are not only devoid of any mention of the church structures they look down upon, but devoid of any kind of human interaction. They are made at the site of a colonial church structure, but include no mention of those buildings. In this sense, they represent the universality of the locations I am photographing in both time and space.

Another aspect of “Small Revelations” includes images of the graveyards which often surround antique churches in colonial areas. The inclusion of this content served two purposes: As stand-ins for human presence within the photographs, and as a counterpoint to the well-preserved architecture of the buildings they surround. This project is devoid of human form, a departure from most of my previous work. The emptiness of the church spaces is important to this project, but some suggestion of human involvement was needed. The tombstones both represent a metaphor for the human figure — vertically oriented like a body — and literally
represent a life clearly affected by the presence of the church structure nearby. One example of this can be found in Figure 7, “Woodbury, CT”.

![Image of tombstones in Woodbury, CT](image)

Figure 7 – “Woodbury, CT”. 2019. Christopher Burns.

The tombstones pictured are decaying, tilted, and broken. Unlike the church building, a symbol that remains well-preserved, individual tombstones are destroyed and seemingly forgotten. In this case, the memory of the individual is sublimated by the memory and power of the church symbol. Each individual gravestone acts more as an appendage of a larger space, than as a memory of an individual largely forgotten to time. Such sublimation suggests that the site of colonial churches are more important as contemporary symbols of Americanness than as historical markers that allow for any true understanding of the nuance of the stories which reside within them.

Images of leafless trees are another motif included in Small Revelations. They replicate the abstract minimalism of the introductory starscapes, but include hints of life and growth. While the trees are alive and impacted by light from the church structures, they are leafless and bare.
Presentation

There will be two aspects to this exhibition after the COVID-19 Pandemic subsides. The first is an exterior space dominated by large (60 inch) starscapes that the audience interacts with at the beginning of the exhibition. These images will surround on the left and right the entranceway to a primary exhibition space. The central space will be filled with images of church structures and secondary motifs printed at the same size (44 inches). In all, a combination of images of colonial church structures and the secondary motifs noted will create a presentation of the ‘little white church’ that is surrounded by dark, broken, minimal imagery.

Having an interior and exterior space for this exhibition asks the audience to enter and exit the space where they will interact with the photographs. There is both an external, and internal understanding to the space and exhibition. This presentation speaks to two ideas: The solitary, nighttime ritual I developed around photographing these buildings, and a oppositional or anti-traditional critique of the white church as a place of American purity and total acceptance. There is an ability to view the exhibit as having an external presentation and a different internal presentation.

Photographs of churches will be presented on the walls either as triptychs with two surrounding secondary images, or as solitary images on smaller walls. The interaction between the brightly lit church structures and the dim and dark secondary photographs is intentional and seeks to, yet again, undermine the architectural power inherent in images of beautiful buildings. All photographs will be printed on archival matte paper and framed without glass. Matte paper is used to ensure a great amount of detail in the darkest sections of the photographs. Such a presentation allows the audience a clear view of the details which make up the visual decisions
made in this project. The photographs will be framed in simple black wood with no border or matting. They will hang at standard gallery height.
CONCLUSION

Small Revelations is the product of a year of photographic work, and intense scrutiny of my own perspective and propensity for photographing the dominant symbols of the American experience. My hope is that these images effectively undermine the aesthetic conventions expected of the little white church, and provide a document of my political concerns and historical perspective at this particular period of time. I believe photography is most effective as a form of artistic expression when the photographer considers his work a piece of personal and historical documentation. I have always found my practice to exist in a longer plane of time than that moment in which it was created. As American political and artistic culture moves forward my personal understanding, and an audience’s understanding, of this work is bound to shift and move as well. The meaning of the work to me and my audience can shift infinitely, but the way this project is articulated here will stand as a record of my initial intentions for making the work.

The colonial white church will forever remain to me a place of personal refuge that connects me to the Americans that came before me. By processing this symbol through an artistic process, however, I have expanded my sense of connection to these buildings and uncovered one of many blindspots I reside in as an American. I hope this project inspires other artists to move within their own blindspots to discover a new perspective. Even a slight shift of focus can create a whole new conception of your political and personal situation.

I am still unsure how one can reckon with the stated American belief in personal freedom while acknowledging that sense of freedom did and does exclude so many. But the power of art is that it is the only form of expression not reliant on basic, provable fact and division. It can hold, at once, two ideas of equal and opposite meaning and importance. While remaining concerned
about my place in the world and the ways I am blind to my own privilege, I take solace in the attempt to reconcile apparently irreconcilable aspects of my existence as an American.
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Vita

Christopher Burns is an artist born and raised in Connecticut, where he attended Bethel High School and the University of Connecticut. Following his undergraduate schooling, he worked as a newspaper reporter and editor before coming to Louisiana State University as a studio art graduate student in Fall 2017. He anticipates completing his degree in August, 2020.

Burns recently attended the Saas-Fee School of Art residency in Manhattan, and the Wassaic Project residency, where he was the education fellow for November and December 2019. His work was recently featured by Cumulus Photo and McNeese State University. He plans to continue teaching and pursuing a career as a studio artist.