

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

A Thesis

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Degree of Master in Fine Art

with a

Major in Art

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by

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## Authorization to Submit Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Many elements must come together in the creation of a successful art piece. There is discovery, process, and creation of the final piece. The catalysis that fuels this process is a search for understanding. It is an attempt to grapple with the topic of temporality, to understand the narrative in abandoned places, and to engage in further the appreciation of the esthetics of objects that are burnished by age. Layering in the artwork is a revelation of the process that leads to a fuller knowledge of the subject. The final artwork is the effort to share the emotion found in these places. The artwork is not a comprehensive statement but rather a pinpoint marking where I am at that moment in the path of comprehension. Like pentimento, the layering of changes in paintings, it is a layering of new knowledge building on old knowledge until the final piece is completed.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work to my family that has supported my artistic endeavors, especially to my daughter Ashley who is "almost" an artist herself.

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## Chapter 1: The Journey



Figure 1.1 Vine House Studies

*There was a layer of ice over the snow that crunched down suddenly when stepped on; breaking the illusion that it would support a person's weight. Three feet of powdery snow hid beneath it making the trudge that much harder. You could tell there had been a strong wind because around the abandoned house there was what looked like a mote. The wind had wiped around the building and pushed the snow away as if the house itself had heaved it to the side. The light was beginning to turn from a vibrant daytime blue to a warm yellow that echoed off the white surface.*

*I knew exactly where I wanted to be. I had been here before and yet it felt like a brand new place. The last time I had been to the house it was flanked by green grass. A vine ran up the house weaving inside and out, prying its fingers under every board in its reach. That was how the house got its nickname, the vine house. The back windows were like eyes on a wrinkled face, creating a determined expression, one of defiance. The house's attitude seemed aimed towards the elements that wore at its peeling skin.*

*Today the house had changed. I was at the same spot I had been at before, but the expression was different. I could now see weight of the snow pushing down on the porch roof forcing its break to the center. The vine that was vibrant just clung on withered, tired and cold. The green as gone, replaced by the white snow with sheen from the crust of ice. The sky was blue and the color reflected and bounced off of the white surface. The house was cold and detached; it said nothing except for an occasional groan. It was unnerving, like tapping on the shoulder of a friend only to realize it is someone else when they turn around.*

*The light from the setting sun changed from a yellow glow to a warmer orange color. One hour had passed since I arrived. I was resigned to photographing from one angle that left me buried in three feet in the snow. Cold and stiff my role changed from participant to observer as the light changed from orange to red. The light bounced off a wisp of clouds and reflected off of the white snow. The dark windows where in contrast to the outside absorbing the light rather than reflecting it. The darkness within seemed to consume the light from outside as if the building itself had developed a ravenous appetite.*

*The orange glow gave way to a bright red color that saturated the sky and permeated the clouds. The surfaces where no longer reflecting the light, instead they where inundated by it. The red was so strong it felt as if was soaked into every surface. You could scrape away the top layers and still find red beneath. The cold was*



*suspended for a minute as every shade of white was chased away. There was a minute of complete immersion where every sense is saturated and engaged in the present.*

*The red glow gave way to a dark purple signaling the exchange between day and night is nearing completion. With the retreating red came the cold, soaking through all the layers like water working its way through layers of clothes. The house faded into the darkness matching the skies hue until only the outline of the roof powdered with snow was visible. Its was like the curtain had closed and the performance was done. There was no applause, just a quiet end punctuated by the occasional gust of wind whistling softly.*



Figure 1.2 Memories

*Cut doors and windows to make a room. Where the room isn't, there's room for you. So the profit in what is, is in the use of what isn't. -Tao Te Ching*

My art is not simply observational. It has always been exploratory and experiential. Experiencing a place in order to understand it is something that has to be felt rather than just seen. It comes from a drive within for a deeper understanding of life around me. The more I try to pinpoint what motivates me the more I realize how futile it is. It is not the source of my motivation but the drive itself that propels my artistic endeavors. I find value both in the process, and in the final piece that results from the experience.

A dichotomy is created when I set out to write about something I do not fully understand. By making a statement about a space that has been vacated, I create art that highlights the idea of occupation. I not only describe what is present by revealing what is absent but also create emptiness where the viewer can employ their presence. The process of trying to understand the emptiness of a place is one that ends in filling it. When texture, color, and light are experienced meaning arises, and the space is no longer empty. I cannot study the lack of presence in a place without first creating my presence within that place. My art making explores the spaces rejected by people rather than the occupants themselves. Studying the space that is absent of occupants is a different way of examining the people themselves. The remnants people leave behind tell an absent part of the narrative. The abandoned homes continue the story where the occupants left it off. There is an uncontrived honesty hidden under the surface. The revealing of the layers that lie concealed happens continually in the present and disappears as it peels away. These layers peeling away continually activate the opposites; the wearing away reveals how things were built up, and the emptiness to highlight completeness that was once there. Dichotomies are revealed in these places, not as equations that need to be solved but as realities that need to be understood.

Exploration begins with a search, fueled by the desire to find meaning. The destination is typically not self evident, and instead discloses itself along my journey of discovery. My search most often leads me to an empty, abandoned space. I am drawn into these places because of the mysteries they contain and because of the intense feeling of emptiness they portray. There is also a rich esthetic quality that has evolved through the years. There are textures and colors that would not have been allowed to evolve if the place was still occupied. All of the elements present in abandoned buildings were created by people, yet reinvented through the passage of time. Temporality has a tangible presence in here that cannot be escaped. The illusion of immortality is broken and the appreciation for the fleeting becomes paramount. When I find a space that is vacated, I question if the place has an intrinsic meaning already present, or if the emptiness merely leaves room for my ideas to exist. I wonder if physical space creates intellectual room where thoughts can materialize outside the mind. Though intangible, absence has a presence, and has to be in a space in order for it to be experienced. There is a union formed by the coming together of place, presence, and absence that is fascinating. Presence and absence are inequitable qualities that somehow come together in these homes. Place is the host that gives these elements a tangible spot to come together. Often the space collaborates with me by providing the beginning of a narrative. The story becomes a collaboration between the subject, myself, and the observer. When scientists seek to study an element they try to keep it pure and uncontaminated. As an artist, I feel that my presence “contaminates” the atmosphere of an empty place and the interaction of the “contamination” and the space is what yields an informative piece of art. It is not purely the emptiness of a place that is important but how it collides with my own self that becomes interesting.

My process of physically making art is akin to groping in the darkness, feeling, touching, and assembling, to understand my surroundings. Through the combining and the stripping away of visual information, a conversation between the work and myself builds from a central point of inspiration and expands off of it in

various directions of awareness. The process creates tangible layers that get built up, and then sometimes scratched back. Cracks are created, and then sometimes become covered over. With each physical layer an emotive layer is added as well, expanding on my understanding of the subject. A connection is made that transcends pure intellectual comprehension; it becomes intimate and conjoined with its creator.

The act of making continues the process of understanding a subject. It reveals things about the object that could not be understood exclusively through observation. My art is not observational because observation is only a small part of what I consider an experiential approach. All the senses have to be engaged in the process, not just sight. There is a physical connection with art that comes through the corporal interaction with it. The connection seems to be even more direct when the work is at a similar scale to the body. Experiential knowledge trumps intellectual knowledge when it becomes bodily, experienced at a one to one ratio. It allows for me to have an unmediated experience, between the art and myself. We relate to the world around us based on our sense of the body, therefore a work that communicates at that same scale creates a connection with the viewer in a direct way. There is no translation of scale needed. A map shows you a great area of land and gives you a scale so you can picture the distances represented. However one cannot fully understand the place until you place yourself in that setting and experience the environment at a 1:1 ratio. Though this is not the only scale I use it is one I favor and find most directly effective. For example in figure 1.3, each piece is 36"x 80". The size is roughly the same as that of a doorway. At this scale I invite the viewer when standing in front of the image to relate to the space at its actual scale. There is no need for the viewer to translate the size depicted to dimensions that would be relatable to their own body, the size is made to scale and the person can be immersed in the experience at the size it is being presented. Each scale has an intrinsic presence that makes it felt at the scale it is shown.



Figure 1.3: Left to Right, Flutter, Diamond House Ceiling, Hand Hewn

The artistic process does not end at understanding the subject matter. The biggest challenge comes from knowing how to pass the experience to the viewer. I don't need them to experience the same thing I did when being in that place, instead I provide the absence for them to experience on their own terms. I transform the quality I find in empty places into images that will then solicit an emotive response from the observer. Each experience is the coming together of the absence created in the image and the reaction from the viewer. The materials I use each have their varied strengths and weaknesses, and have to be considered for them to communicate most effectively. Elements that reflect the light, colors and the right emotions have to be used to their strengths. Textures that translate the feel of the experienced are key to engaging with the viewer. An experience that both portrays what I feel in the moment and allows for the viewer to have their own interpretation has been a process of testing and discovery. Every piece I make brings me closer to the solution and gives me a better understanding of my materials and what they communicate.

## Chapter 2: Narrative



Figure 2.1 Sentence

Triggered by a curiosity to search for answers, I look for spaces to document that present themselves as mysteries in microcosms. Abandoned homes don't just represent decay but speak to much bigger issues of life like temporality and the relationship between the earth and our bodies. The abandoned spaces are relics of the environments we created. The same environments that cradle the most intimate moments of our lives. The places I seek out make me stop and confront ends as ends, something we don't do often in our modern lives. There is something significant and bittersweet in endings presented by forgotten places.

Hidden within each abandoned space I explore is a part of an unraveling story. The peeling layers reveal aspects of a place that may have been hidden to even the occupants. In order to address this type of narrative, I created a multi-paneled piece as shown in figure 2.3. I titled it *Sentence* with the idea that the collection of images could describe the moment in more depth than a single word, or single image. In order to create a perceived dialog with the viewer, a series of linked images taken from one site were shown sequentially. Like the structure of a sentence read from left to right, panels showcase a view of the house depicted through passageways and surfaces that connect in real space. Openings in the represented rooms connect to other rooms; ceilings from one space were shown in images from another. Therefore the story tells itself in the consciousness of the viewer as they travel visually through the spaces. The opportunity to walk through the space is there for those who are willing to take the metaphysical journey. The reward that awaits the participant in a fuller understanding of the place shown, and an invitation to consider how it relates to them. Aspects of a place reveal themselves as one spends time with them. With every revelation comes a fuller understanding of one's self and their surroundings.

There are many stories in history books about significant events that have occurred in the past. Those events often tell of struggle and of triumph. They have been chosen from a larger pool of human events. Someone deemed these places important. Who made these choices? Through my work I want to call attention to the uncelebrated stories. Places where meaningful events have occurred yet that have not been chosen to shine in history books. They are smaller in scale, more personal, intimate, which makes them even more relevant. These places, like those celebrated with monuments, have also had struggles and triumphs, yet are overlooked and forgotten. They hold in them an equally authentic narrative, one that is unfinished. It leaves us clues about the

story but asks the viewer to come up with the conclusions. Sometimes the value in a narrative is in its ability to point us to questions rather than present us with answers.

## Layering



Figure 2.2 Across the Road

*In the same way that water is not an imperfect mirror, but rather a live interpretation of its surroundings, so photography is not an imperfect record but a continual, conscious appraisal of all that passes before its surface. -Tom Ang*

As extension of my attempts to understand a subject, my artwork's layers are built one upon the other as an idea congeals. Through a systematic process of creating, questioning, and examining, these works act as evidence of developing further connections with a location. As in my work entitled *Across the Road*, the act of layering is not always the goal but the end result of the journey that leads me to a finished piece of work. As with a relationship built between two people my understanding of a place comes through spending time within a place. A lack of understanding can shine through the work when I do not spend the necessary time to know the place. In *Across the Road* I feel this incomplete understanding of the subject affects the outcome of the image. The creation of this art piece began with a photograph I took of an old grain silo along the road. In the creation of this piece I was not satisfied simply using the techniques familiar to me but instead sought to experiment with mediums that would better convey my ideas. To accomplish this I tried a new method of an encaustic image transfer. The results looked promising because of the way the wax captured and diffused the reflected light. It added both depth and softness to the image. I then tested a new system for adding color by using colored rice

paper rather than paint. Despite good results with the technical aspects of the work and exploration, the final product seemed to yield only mediocre results. I decided to step back and reevaluate.

I realized that despite the technical problems in the execution of the artwork, the lack of success stemmed from my lack of understanding of the place. Though technique is very important to creating an art piece, my skill as an artist is not in technical innovation but in the understanding of the subject being portrayed. I decided I had to go back one layer farther. I had to let go of the image and start over where the art piece was conceived. With this in mind I went back to the old grain silo, a place I had been many times before. I had at least 100 images of the place in all different times of day and in different times of year. However, none of them felt right. I studied the place one more time, crossed the road and began to photograph it. Finally I had an image I could use. The image ended up being from the angle of across the road, the dark road as a line in the foreground separating the viewer from the silo. The silo itself was dark against a stormy sky, concealing most of the detail in the building. I came back to the studio, and painted the background for the fourth time and completed the image transfer.

The process of understanding a place in order to be able to convey its essence in a work of art is not always a direct path. Often there is frustration and failure involved. However failure starts to become redefined when understood as a step to understanding. In dealing with perceived failure one of my main inspirations has been Andy Goldsworthy. Besides admiring his completed work I am moved by how he describes his process. For Goldsworthy, as with me, a large part of the art making process is searching, exploring, and understanding place. In *Rivers and Tides*, the documentary about Goldsworthy there is a moment where he is stacking stones and the construction collapses. Despite showing obvious frustration regarding this setback he says, "This is the fourth time the stone has fallen, and each time I have gotten to know the stone a little better." I can relate to this because there are many times when I go out searching for a subject to photograph and return finding nothing. However every time I feel I learn something, understand the places in a deeper way and am better prepared to capture the essence of the place the next time around. It's not to say the process is not frustrating at times, I wish every adventure resulted in a new work of art. However the fact that experiences only sometimes result in a work of art helps me appreciate the moments when an experience ends in a finished piece. It is remarkable to experience the unfolding of elements like light, space, and the presence of a place. The frustration and failure of my first attempts at translating the silo into an art piece ultimately led to a better understanding of the subject.

The final product was one that stood over layers and layers of failed attempts. Yet this last one felt like it finally worked, it was honest in that it revealed the separation between subject and artist. Nothing about this image matched with my initial goals. It took going all the way back to the first step to get on the right path. I wanted to communicate a connection that as the artist I simply did not have. Instead what was reflected in my image was a separation between the viewer and the object. The main character, the building, seemed to be concealed by the cast shadow and the dark skies. Despite the setbacks experienced I felt like this image was honest and successful in communicating my experience with the place. Upon reflection I realized I did not fully understand the place because I had not taken enough time to do so. My attempts to create works that convey an

understanding were not truthful in that they sought to portray an understanding that was not present. I did not have the intimate experience needed for what I had set out to do, therefore it could not be successfully communicated. In order for me to convey a complete understanding of a place I have to truly understand it. It's not an understanding that comes from factual knowledge but from allowing your senses to feel a place. It's the type of understanding that causes one to be drawn to a favorite place to sit, or a special place in the yard. Though perhaps it would be difficult to articulate why a place becomes a favorite to others or to myself, I believe it would be because we feel the place with our senses rather than analyze them intellectually.

The final image I had created depicts the abandoned silo with a sense of detachment and concealment. The piece was honest, and truly portrayed my understanding of the place at that moment in time. Furthermore, I grew very fond of the edges. They were a true record of the layering that had occurred in the birthing of the work. Even the surface showed the scraping back of other layers in the building up of the final layer. There were small areas of detail that showed through the predominately dark structure that showed the earnest interest in understanding the place more fully.



Figure 2.3 Grain Silo Studies

Pentimento is an interesting word that has caught my attention. It relates to the process of layering as shown in historical art pieces. Pentimento is used to describe paintings that have been modified during the process of creation. They show signs of deviating from their original design either through hidden layers or visibly in the final piece. Without the use of technology it has been difficult to determine how many layers and changes were made to historical works of art. On some pieces however, these changes start to become apparent to the naked eye. In many oil paintings the paint becomes semi translucent over time. Some examples of this phenomena are Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*, in which an under layer is easily visible. An example where the layering is not visible to the naked eye is Jan van Eyck's painting *The Arnolfini Portrait*. In this painting the additional layers were only discovered through infrared reflectograms. The origins of the word Pentimento are from the word *pentirsi*, which means to repent. In the case of a painting it means adding a new layer that is more truthful to the artist intentions. I've used this word as inspiration to me. While it does not describe the same process of layering that I use it helps me accept the idea that a work of art does not need to be perfect right at conception. It can be a process that while creating an expressive piece also informs the artist. It has helped me believe that the work itself can be a part of the process not just an end result.





Figure 2.4 Progression of Mirrored from Raw Camera Files to Scratched Mirror Layer

Creating art requires a constant reappraisal of my surroundings. My experience rarely leads to one grand epiphany but instead to an ongoing evolving understanding, as my understanding develops the work changes as well. The work gets changed in layers, because even the process of creating the work is also a record of the process of understanding the subject better. As a first layer is applied and completed my understanding of the concept grows and leads to another layer. Each layer builds upon the other. Sometimes the layer that is added contributes visually, and remains visible though other layers that are applied. Other times it just adds a layer of understanding and no part of the addition is visible. In my case, I choose to celebrate the process by letting the evidence remain visible. Because of the importance of transparency in process, the edges of the work become vitally important. They show how the image is built up by making evident how the layers overlap. I don't spend time erasing the evidence of the process; instead I let them reveal something more about the piece. I leave parts of each layer visible so that the structure can be apparent rather than concealed. I provide clues for the viewer that becomes evident on the edge of the work. It gives an opportunity for those that take a closer look to discover something more about the piece. This type of discovery is the same satisfaction I get when I examine the subject intently.

Each iteration in the process of art making contributes to the final piece. Looking at the pentimento as a comparison it can be related not only to my art making but also in the task of writing this thesis. Compiling a credo involves writing ideas, and then rewriting them. Combining my words with words from people before me who have contemplated the same issues. Though sometimes I would like to think that I am writing something new; it is really just a reiteration of my understanding at that moment in time. It is a snapshot of where I am in my comprehension of an idea.

## Temporality



Figure 2.5 Rainbow House

*All things are impermanent. The inclination toward nothingness is unrelenting and universal... The closer things get to nonexistence, the more exquisite and evocative they become.* - Leonard Koren

The idea that life is temporal is ever present in my work. The structures and objects I photograph are at the end of their life. Through their frailty and years of abandonment, the homes walk the thin line between existence and nonexistence. They sit at the intersection of presence and absence. The images I create highlight a contrast between the fleeting and the enduring. There is juxtaposition between a brilliant sunset that lasts for minutes and an aged patina on a weathered doorknob that has built up over generations. The patina on the doorknob shows signs from the many times hands turned it. Each one leaving a layer that built up over the years creates a new finish. The sunset on the other hand is a brand new composition, changing and fading by the second.

The image titled *Recede* is of a home that no longer exists. I photographed this structure for over a year then one day it was simply gone. Now this place only exists as memories and images. When a place such as this one moves from existing in reality to being a memory it changes. Our memories distort, sometimes idealize, and shift reality. The photograph used to create the final artwork was taken during an early morning permeated with a dense fog. It was no accident that I was there that day; I was waiting for a day like this. I wanted to see this home in a diffused light that obscured the home from its surroundings. The house was a grey color that only got more washed out with the heavy fog. The house seemed to be pulled from the familiar surroundings. It became decontextualized. The building stood alone, with everything fading to white except for a few trees that managed to be visible, like ghosted silhouettes. Despite the surreal like encounter with the place I was disappointed at the photographic images I ended up with because they were dull and lifeless lacking the intensity of the moment. I realized I captured the likeness of the place but not the experience. This was the last time I saw this house. The next time I went there it was gone.



Figure 2.6 Rainbow House Studies

Befuddled by the failure of the image to capture the experience I set the image aside for more than six months. I always thought about that home. One day I revisited this image and experienced it with fresh eyes. I decided to strip away the color and transform the image into a black and white print. I then constructed a large wood panel and painted the emotion of the experience, concentrating on what the moment felt like rather than what it looked like. I used very wet colors and let them move and bleed into each other adjusting the tilt of panel carefully to allow them to mix but not overtake one another. When the paint was dry, I combined the black and white print with the color painting on the wood panel as an image transfer. The result was a combination of the likeness of the place infused with the emotion of color that I felt at the time. The synthesis of the two revealed an image that better expressed the experience I wanted to share with the viewer.

## Objects

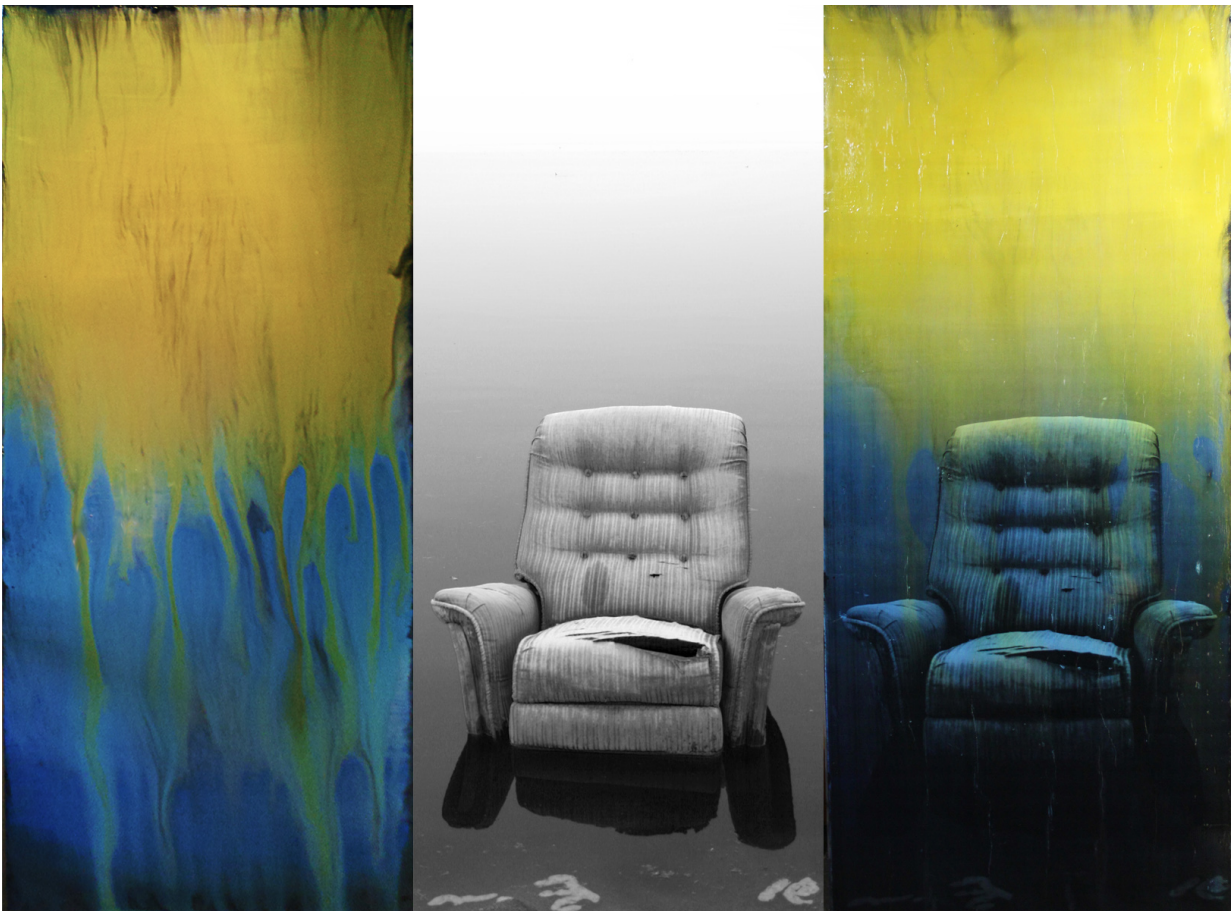


Figure 2.7 Blue Solitude

*The photographer projects himself into everything he sees, identifying himself with everything in order to know it and to feel it better-Minor White*

My piece entitled *Blue Solitude* is a result of the collaboration between planning and intuition. I planned an image of a chair sitting in a peaceful, almost surreal setting that would decontextualize the chair and focus all the attention on a sense of quietness. The chair had to be honest, transparent in showing all its flaws. I found these elements and put them together. The result was a discarded chair surrounded by fog sitting in water at the Salton Sea. Up to this point in the art piece everything had been planned drawn, conceptualized, then shot on camera. My plan was to do an image transfer of the photo on a large 36"x80" birch panel. The image, though evocative was missing the emotional weight of the moment. The scene had to display a balance between quietness and excitement, authenticity and the contrived. To add these elements I set out to paint thinned acrylic paint on the birch panel. I used two colors and I wet the medium to a point that they started to run and mix. There was a beautiful push and pull between the yellow seeping down into the deep blue, the visual weight of it

pushing the blue further down. At the same time the blue was a stronger value and would overwhelm the yellow and change it if it advanced too far. It was a wonderful moment and I let the paint interact without intervening. After the paint dried I transferred the chair image over it and the elements combined to speak with a voice both of its own and that of mine. This combination of exercising control in part of the art process then relinquishing control and letting the materials act creates a piece that reflects that dialog between artist and materials. A dialog that is analogous to the one between our surroundings and us.

The strength of images often relies on the embellished aspects of the environment to inform the viewer about the objects left behind. In *Blue Solitude* I wanted to create a portrait of the object itself, devoid of its typical surrounding. In doing so it causes the viewer to observe the object more closely, and to note the lines and imperfections on it more distinctly. When noting the imperfections I want the viewer to understand that I see them, and I want them to see them as well. There is a beauty in each tear and each stain, as they come together to reveal the character of the chair. . My goal is not to document the objective condition of what I see but to create an emotional expression of it. To create an emotive portrait I imagined what it would have been like to sit in that chair, how it would have felt to experience moments experienced by others that sat in this chair and finally how the residue of those experiences could be transformed into a work of art. There is an interaction that must between the abstract emotions associated with an object and its visual appearance. I feel both have to be present in a work in order to communicate the essence of the object. How the two aspects interact can be the success or death of the piece. In the case of *Blue Solitude*, each element worked to enhance the other and created a successful piece.

## Subject Matter



Figure 2.8 Abandoned Homes

One of the questions that arise concerning my work is “why choose abandoned spaces as your subject matter? How does your interest differ from the general interest show by people who go to antique shops or watch programs that feature old objects?” There are many reasons people are drawn to old objects. Sometimes its nostalgia, a wishing for something in the past, or other times it's the good memories people have imprinted onto old objects.

My interrogation of these old places is not based on nostalgia or memory, though many viewers look for it in my work. I am interested in the esthetics and the revelatory aspects of these artifacts. I am intrigued by

what I learn about these homes and how it relates to our human existence. The type of temporality shown in these homes causes me to evaluate my own temporality against the scale it creates. The subtle beauty characterized by Wabi-Sabi makes me see rather than just look at my surroundings. Most of all I learn to question the relationships between presence and absence that I see in other aspects of my life. It is much like studying a leaf by the impression it has made on a fossilized rock. While the leaf may be long gone you can still study the mark it made on its surroundings. It relates directly to the impression we will leave once we are gone. Some may say that these old places are irrelevant, but to me they offer a glimpse into my future, a future that shows me how I might affect this world in a time beyond my lifespan. The house serves as a metaphor for my body; the bones are the structures that are left after my life has left my corporal self.

As far as esthetics I am intrigued by the accidental beauty I find in these decayed objects. This esthetic fascination is not unique to me and has been best coined by the Japanese words Wabi-Sabi. This term is used to describe something that is old and in degradation. Daisuke Utagiave explains it well with her words: “Wabi suggests freshness and simplicity. Sabi describes a beauty that is burnished by age.” I find Wabi most prevalent in my imagery of the skies. They are fresh, beautiful yet immediately fleeting. It’s a composition that lasts for a few moments as the colors change, and then fades. The old homes offer a different sort of temporality. Though also fleeting they show the burnishing of age and move slowly through time compared to the skies. The sky and the homes give us two types of temporality, but the later has a layering of time that shows on its surfaces, giving it the sense of age. Wabi-Sabi is a good starting point for describing the beauty found in decay, but it does not describe the full complex flavor of elements that come together in abandoned places. The intersection of beauty and decay creates a rich and complex mixture of elements in my work.

There are those that view Wabi-Sabi as the attempt to put a good spin on things that are old and unattractive. However, I find in Wabi an inherent beauty that is irreproducible without the patina of time. More so, it is a beauty that is easily overlooked to the unobservant eye.

## Chapter 3: Process



Figure 3.1 Reconnected

I don't consider myself to only be a photographer, though it is easiest to refer to myself as one. Photography comes from the Greek words “photos” meaning light, and “graphos” meaning drawing. I like this definition because it asks us to think of the camera as a tool for drawing, just the same as any other brush or pencil. The camera has been one of many tools, like a brush to paint with light for the use of expressing my thoughts. Therefore my shift from matted prints to mixed media image transfers felt like an extension of the process that was already serving me rather than a full deviation into a new media. The colors I highlighted in Photoshop on printed images, I moved to emphasize with paint on my mixed media projects. In my current work I move back and forth between creating computer edited images and mixed media works. Each process has its strengths and is chosen depending on what the art piece needs. I like to think I am not in service of the media; instead it is in service to the needs of the artistic endeavor. I don't seek to replicate what I see, I seek to replicate what I feel, and to accomplish this I use the most efficient tool at my disposal. Sometimes that ends up being a photograph, sometimes its paint, but most often it is a layering of the two that convey the meaning in the art piece.

In figures 3.12 I have two interpretations of one place. The first shows the photograph with the colors controlled through Photoshop and in camera settings. The second shows the same image as a black and white image transfer over acrylic colors. The more muted tones and less distinct outlines evoke the feel of uncertainty reflected by how the house sits on the edge of nonexistence. The brilliance and crispness of the photograph did not convey the weight and solemnness of the moment. The creases, viscosity, and yellowing of the image transfer begin to hint at aging and degradation, the middle ground between existence and extinction.



Figure 3.2 Purple Sky Image Mixed Media (above) Purple Sky Photograph (below)

Getting to the point where an art piece comes together is a process that happens after a lot of experimentation. When it comes to making a piece of art, there are things I have to learn by doing. My search for a process and medium that would speak with a unique voice that represented me was difficult at first. I have always loved photography and it has been a consistent basis for my work. However, the matted framed print alone lacked the power to convey all the aspects of the subjects I was photographing. The ability to physically make an indexical mark on the work itself was not present in these prints. The search for this missing element in my work led me through a journey of discovery, which included explorations in painting, silkscreen, image projection, encaustic, and image transfer, as well as some others. This led me to seek out an art form that engaged me both digitally and physically. Having a tactile interaction incorporated into my art process was important because it engaged one more of my senses. This desire to engage the work both intellectually and physically led me to mixed media.

My first insightful deviation from the matted photo print was a mixed media piece that had screen-printing on a painted surface. The goal was to build up layers that would create physical texture. The composition was aimed at making the space between the natural and manmade be the focal point. The two main objects in the image were spatially distant but connected through a flock of flying birds that traversed the open space between the objects. Therefore I set up the canvas with a panoramic orientation and put an abandoned burnt out adobe house at one end and a leafless tree with a swing on the other. Birds arched through the sky making an implied connection between the two places. Multiple elements were added at different stages and layered over one another. The result was that some layers got concealed and layered back into the painting.



However, the empty space between the two objects, tree and house, remained at the center of the painting, both literally and metaphorically. I wanted to highlight the empty space by using objects to highlight the empty space's contour. The house and tree were silkscreened onto the canvas, then highlighted with pastels. Layers of blues were added in the sky as well as reds on the ground. The final product had more of an emotional impact than a print on paper did. Depth was created through the layering and the indexical marks of my paints, oils, pastels and silkscreen created an authentic portrait of the space I sought to depict. The success of this image prompted me to explore further. The process of silkscreen limited the amount of detail and the fine shades of grey that I could use, but it allowed me to get a crisp image. I learned that I valued surface texture and the ability to have a dialog with my piece by working in layers, responding to aspects of the piece as it evolved. The art making interaction becomes a dialog between artist and materials rather than simply the imposition of the artist's will on it.

The next step in my exploration came from physically incorporating textured objects into the work. I decided to try combining and adhering the traditional paper print and the texture of the objects. For example my images entitled "Green Stairs" had the print glued onto textured wood boards. The edges were painted with acrylics then the entire surface was treated with layers of clear finish, much in the way the last image had been done. Bringing actual texture from the source, in this case the boards added another layer to the composition. It brought a deeper sense of authenticity to the project. This experiment raised the question; did the texture compete with the image or add to it? Where were the textures most and least effective? Did the print and the texture meld together or stand in contrast to each other? These questions prompted me to explore further.



Figure 3.3 Blue Green Stairs

After exploring texture, I decided to tackle the question on how to make the work even more immersive. I wanted to avoid the feeling of disconnection from the piece that I had felt when working exclusively in matted prints. I postulated that a sensory experience that fully engages the viewer would be the most effective to convey the impact of these vacated spaces. I also sought to find what medium best conveyed the quality of light present at the site. The presence of light is one of the most difficult aspects to translate from reality to prints. To accomplish this I used a projector and organza fabric. The organza fabric was dense enough to pick up the light yet open enough to let light pass through to another surface. This allowed me to work in layers, just as I had done with the mixed media pieces. For my first piece I dipped strips of fabric in a light dye wash. On the fabric I projected a panoramic image. The image appeared one color at a time until at the end the full image appeared. The fabric was layered and you could see through one to another. However it was still relatively flat and intended to be viewed from a distance like a painting on the wall. The project added a transmitted light, which was a closer replica to the light I sought to capture in the place. Despite its successes the piece still felt flat and lacked dimension, which I thought, was vital to fully engage the viewer.

To resolve this dilemma I tried another piece by sewing tubes of organza fabric, creating a ceiling scaffold structure that would space the tubes apart so one could walk through them. Thus the person could be truly immersed as they physically interact with the fabric and image streaming through. There was a new element of dimension added to the piece because the light passed through the tubes and created the illusion of a 3 dimensional image. In the dark room where I displayed the work the quality of light was intense and vivid. The

limitations were the need for a large space and low light. It made the piece hard to share and limited the audience size that could view it. This project also raised a new question; was the technology being used a distraction to the voice of the work? The technical success of the vivid lights and the three-dimensional feel of the image started taking center stage rather than the imagery of the places themselves. I have always felt that technology is at its best when it is invisible. In this case I questioned if the technology was adding in highlighting the subject or instead taking its place. In the end I decided the rich dialog between the medium and myself was missing with the light project. With the projection too much was left to my control and the rich dialog I had with other mediums was not present with the light and tubes.

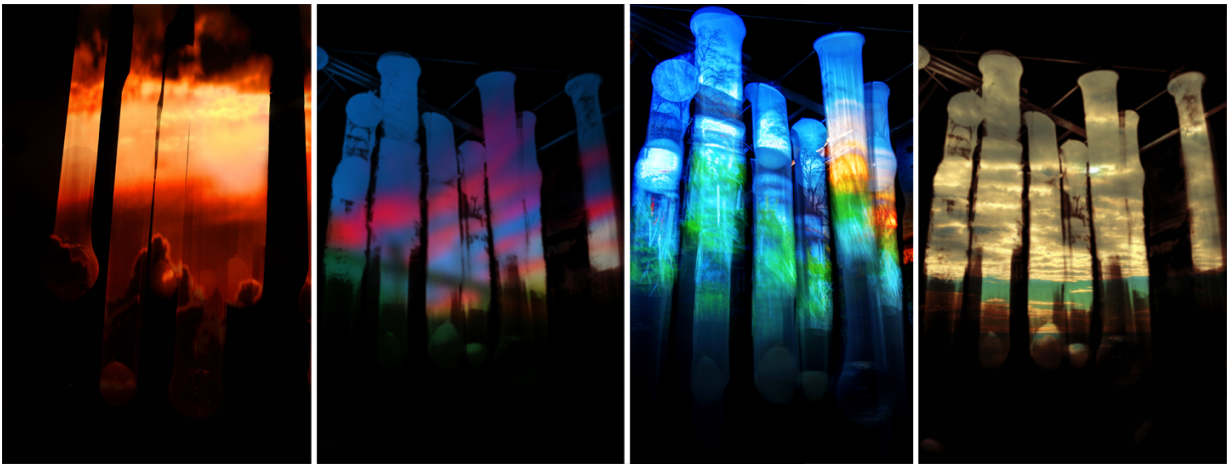


Figure 3.4 Projection on Organza Studies

Looking at the soft sensual qualities of the organza fabric I began to think about other surfaces that would have those same luminous qualities. I decided to experiment with encaustic. I wondered if rather than projecting light I would be able to give it a better presence by altering the surface and how light passed through the medium that was reflected. Wax has a soft diffusing quality to light that I thought could be interesting. Melted wax also has a tendency to fight control and as a result had the potential to create a stronger dialog between itself and me. To experiment with this I printed an image on velum and worked it into layers of wax. The velum reacted by bubbling, which at first made me feel the project was ruined. However I kept layering and scraping the wax until a wonderful surface started to emerge. The wax seemed to accept the velum and the bubbles and curls in the paper rose and disappeared into the wax layers like ripples in a lake.



Figure 3.5 Dwelling

Wax had a wonderful and soft way of absorbing the light and diffusing it but for some images with intense light, like a sunset, the wax was not effective in transmitting that quality. I thought about trying a surface that would reflect the light out at the viewer rather than just absorb it. To do this I decided to do an image transfer on sheet metal. The technique for transferring the image had some inherent flaws where not all the image transferred perfectly. This unexpectedly added a wonderful sense of texture, age, and uniqueness to the image that I had not realized was important to me. It was different that the matted print because each transfer came out different, like a fingerprint or a snowflake. My inability to control the flaws gave the material that independent voice, that lack of control that adds an irreplaceable element to the work of art. The reflective quality of the metal added a new dimension to the work but there was a loss of contrast in the image due to the grey metal background that took some of the impact of the image away. There was also a size limitation due to the maximum laser color print capabilities at my disposable. To push the size issue farther, I experimented with tiling an image onto many tin plates and using magnets to arrange them on a metal strip behind them. The effect seemed to work well and the image came together as a whole when completed. The flexibility of the metal caused the print to crackle in a few places and was reminiscent to the metal-based daguerreotype prints popular in the 1860's. Though this was a wonderful and unexpected result, the direction this took my photo was not in line with my goals of engaging my viewer fully and conveying the full presence of absent space. It brought out a sense of nostalgia that was not bad but was misdirecting from the focus of my artistic investigation.

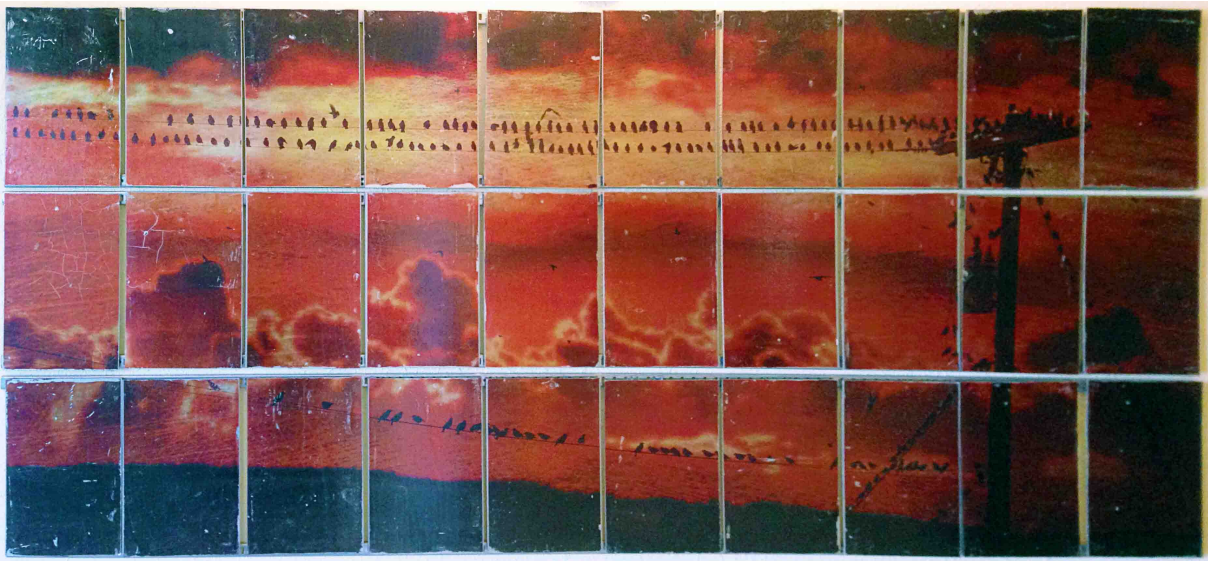


Figure 3.6 Flicker

After experimenting with more than twenty image transfers on metal I decided to reevaluate how these pieces aligned with my desire to convey the feel of a place. There was something beautiful about how the surface of the metal let the light come through the image then reflected it back adding another level of dynamic range to the colors. The only challenge was that the distressing of the image and imperfections that were created through the process were hard to control and not always desirable. I wanted to be able to choose when to have a clean image and when to let the surface break down. The hard cracking and coldness, and reflectiveness of the metal was in stark contrast to the wax I had been using just before. The wax was soft and warm and diffused the light rather than reflected it. The way encaustic medium moved when heated and mixed with other colors was a beautiful and unpredictable process. I decided this process was more in line with my goals and turned my attention away from the metal prints and back to the results from the encaustic images. I began to wonder what other process could create similar results.



Figure 3.7 Chemical Distortion Studies

Rather than distort the wax, I wanted a way where the image itself could be distorted and allowed to blend with the pieces around it. I wanted a way to “free” the pigment from the paper and let it interact loosely with the elements around it. To find a way to facilitate this process I researched chemical distortion. There are a variety of chemicals that will “lift” ink pigment and allow it to be moved around on a page. Each one acts differently depending on the ink and surface that the image is printed on. Shown in figure 3.6 are three experiments I tried. The first being alcohol sprayed on an inkjet transparency, the second, water on inkjet printed on watercolor paper, and the last nail polish remover on an inkjet velum. Each chemical and substrate reacted differently creating some intriguing effects. I liked some of the effects but did not like the process of using these chemicals so I kept on searching for a better way to interact with the images.

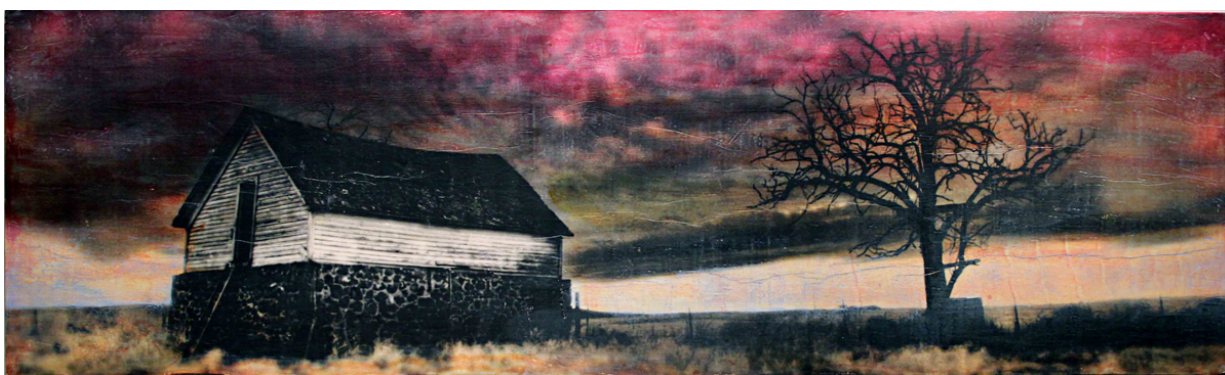


Figure 3.8 Footing

I had learned several valuable lessons in my experimentation to this point. From each experiment I found an element I valued in a work or ruled out one that I had previously thought important. One element that remained important to me through all my attempts was the need to create viewer immersion. I realized that my most effective tool to accomplish this had been through using scale or multiples that could be viewed as related or joined. I decided to try to push the limit of larger scale image transfers. Beyond scale I also learned that being able to deal with color as a separate element from the photograph allowed me finer control over the emotion infused into the image. Black and white image transfers let me separate the color from the image and deal with each on their own terms. With the color I decided to use acrylic paint, often wet on wet, to allow for the interaction and mixing of colors. It also took away some control for me and gave it to the piece and the medium. When the painting was done I would add a new layer, the black and white image transfer that would then merge with the color underneath to convey both for the place and the emotion I sought to convey. This process merged what I valued most from my other attempts. It allowed me to create images at a larger scale and it allowed me to have some control over the color while at the same time leaving some control to the medium. I was able to use the photograph as an overlay so that it stayed as an important presence in the work. The outline of the subject was created by the photograph, where as the emotion was added by the acrylic paint. The scale was determined by the size of the large birch panel used as the substrate.

This process of layering a black and white photographic image over painted color led me to the methodology used to create the body of work for my MFA show. Separating the color from the photograph allowed me to deal with each element independently, combining them later through layering. The emotive qualities of color could be expressed outside of the formal structure of a place. The final work contained a total of 12 pieces, each measuring 12"x40". Each has an image of a house that has been influential to my artwork in the past three years. All of the homes depicted carried a sense of presence and absence that I sought to understand. The top part of the image depicts a more literal version of the house where as the bottom area I allowed the layers to separate and distort a “reflected” image of the house. With the two views of the house, the literal and the abstracted, I highlighted the dichotomy between a representation depiction and the emotive representation. I titled the series *Dodecaphony*, which is a word that describes a twelve note musical composition where each note sounds as often as the other thus preventing any one note being over emphasized. This was a direct progression from my work *Sentence* that was composed to create a narrative about one place through a series of images. This arrangement of the semi-literal layered over the abstract emotive rendition allowed me to set up the dichotomy I find fascinating in these homes. Each panel is a different note and together they form the song. As with music, though we can hear one note at a time, it only creates a song when these notes relate to each other and are played in a progression.



Figure 3.9 Dodecaphony

The orientation of *Dodecaphony* was a shift from my other panoramic type of layout. A strong vertical composition allowed for a lot of space under the image of the home. This space under the home allowed me to leverage the separation between the expressive color treatment of the paint and the black and white photograph layered on top. In my piece *Footings* shown in figure 3.17 the process of separating the color and the photo is layered throughout the entire image. In *Dodecaphony* the lower portion of the picture plane allowed me to show the separation of layers, until at the bottom only the paint layer is visible. By making each layer visible I am inviting the viewer to see how the image is built up by showing how each layer separates out. The color choices evoke the emotive experience felt at each place. Some of the panels have a complementary color scheme, reflecting the contrasting emotions created by the place, others follow an analogous scheme that speak to the sense of harmony that these structures communicate to me. Still other panels do not follow an organized scheme

and speak more to the sense of chaos. While each panel is its own distinct note, no one panels is intended to be independent of the whole. Instead the twelve are created to express the range in sentiment discovered in each site. They come together to inform my understanding of presence and absence.



Figure 3.10 Dodecaphony Panel details



In figure 3.10 two panels from the piece *Dodecaphony* are shown. They are the first and the last piece I created in the series. The first panel shows an old farmhouse that is no longer standing. The colors follow a complementary color scheme. I choose the colors not only because of the complementary relationships, but because they were the two most influential colors present at that time. The two main colors I used were the blue of the sky and the warm tones from the harvested wheat field. I increased the saturation of each color to convey the intensity I felt at the moment. The two elements, the sky and the harvest seemed to pass so quickly when compared to the slow decay of the home. It shows me how the dichotomy created in the landscape is so relative to the presence of the objects around it. Temporality itself is only obvious when it is seen in contrast, just like the colors in the panel.

The second panel shows a schoolhouse as photographed through the broken window of a school bus. In this panel I predominately used analogous colors. For the schoolhouse itself I used some warmer brown tones to draw the eye to the building as the focal point. The viewpoint of looking through broken glass reminds me of the barrier between places and myself. Though I want to understand each place intimately I am still just an onlooker, I am not part of the history of the building. There is a layer of time that has passed that separates me from the evolution of this structure.



Figure 3.11 Self

## Conclusion

There are many elements that have to come together in the creation of a successful art piece. There is discovery, process, and creation of the final piece. The catalysis that fuels this endeavor is the search for understanding. It is an attempt to grapple with the topic of temporality, to understand the narrative in abandoned places, and the appreciation of the esthetics of objects that are burnished by age. Layering in the artwork is a revelation of the methodology that leads to a fuller knowledge of the subject. The final artwork is the effort to share the emotion found in these places. The artwork is not an all encompassing statement but rather a pinpoint marking where I am at that moment in the path of understanding. Like *Pentimento*, the layering of changes in paintings, it is a layering of new knowledge building on old knowledge until the understanding of the place is

created. The point where the layering ends is not the completion of a thought, expressed through art, but simply a pause before the thought next begins.

*There was a pure darkness that had settled in filling every empty space. The absence of light seems to remove context as well. Time seems to wander in the darkness, moving at its own pace rather than in measured increments. These are the moments where ends become beginnings, and beginnings become ends. It's that moment where the two mix and stop being separate,, presence and absence, being and nothingness. There is only one moment when you can feel both. The moment only happens in a place where presence and absence mingle. It's a feeling of weightlessness as the two contradictions balance each other out before shifting. The moment is silent. The shift creates movement and a line starts to appear as light pencils in the first few marks on the backdrop of a dark sky. Dawn appears in a purple haze.*



Figure 3.12 Crossing Light

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