

**UNIVERSITY OF DERBY**

**THE SPLENDOUR OF THE INSIGNIFICANT:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF SACRED AND MUNDANE  
LANDSCAPES AND THE ALCHEMY OF LIGHT**

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**THE SURFACE GLITTERED OUT OF HEART OF LIGHT: REFLECTIONS ON  
EXHIBITING THE VISUAL RESEARCH ELEMENT**

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PREFACE

The research, written thesis, and photographic images which form the practice based element of this study have been created by Rachel White. This study is not part of a wider research project involving other people. Because of the nature of the research ethical approval is not required.

The written thesis accounts for 20% of this study while the remaining 80% takes the form of practice-based visual research. The interlinked visual and textual elements have a symbiotic relationship with each element informing the development of the other.

The written research findings are presented within this thesis. Although some images are represented within the body of the text the main component of the practice based element of this study was disseminated by exhibition at the time of the *viva-voce*. This exhibition is documented in the final chapter of the thesis.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to contextualise my own photographic practice in relation to the interaction between mundane and sacred landscapes and the role that the transformative alchemy of light has on our perception of the ordinary. Reference will be made to the development of the genre of landscape photography, with particular reference to the selective aesthetic of pristine Wilderness, as embodied in the work of Ansel Adams, through the ‘man-altered’ landscapes of the *New Topographics* and Mark Klett’s rephotographic project, to discuss an aesthetic of the everyday. Reference will also be made to the benefits to health and wellbeing that can be achieved as a result of engaging in a state of mindfulness (Crane), also known as optimal experience or flow (Csikszentmihalyi) through photographic practice. Rather than narrowing the focus of the study by excluding relevant information to make the research less complex, the thesis comprises information from a diverse range of disciplines encompassing both the more obviously creative subjects of photography, aesthetics and poetry and areas such as health care.

Given the parameters of the PhD process in relation to the breadth of the research undertaken, the specific study of each diverse element is, of necessity, not as detailed as it may have been had a single, more specifically defined, area of research been the entire focus of the research. The inclusive nature of the research presented in this thesis offers unique insights by providing direct comparisons and establishing new relationships between the theoretical and methodological approaches of a range of differing disciplines.

While a written thesis forms part of the dissemination of the research findings the images that have emerged as a result of engagement with the study will be exhibited as an integral element of the outcome. The images that have been created as a result of the research process will take their place as objects within the world, offering viewers potential new ways of perceiving and experiencing what Rancière refers to as the 'splendour of the insignificant' within the landscape of their own everyday lives.

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INTRODUCTION



Rachel White, *M6 Toll Road*, 2007

‘This smoky winter morning –  
do not despise the green jewel shining among the twigs  
because it is a traffic light.’

Charles Reznikoff (Summerfield 1970: 48)

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

This thesis begins by briefly discussing my reasons for choosing to investigate this particular area of study. I have previously worked as a photographer and consultant Art Director for a design company, and also as a stock photographer, represented by The Garden Picture Library and Getty Images, specialising in landscape and horticultural images. In addition to the carefully manufactured view of the world that is required by commercial photographic practice within these areas, I have always created my own images even while actively engaged in commercial jobs. While I do not dismiss the sort of aesthetic that favours neatly packaged photographs of a pristine world, and I certainly appreciate the skills that are involved in creating such images, I am also very aware that pristine, undefiled, landscapes are far from the reality of most people's lives. Alongside the photographs I have created to meet the specific requirements of a client, or supplied for calendars, books and birthday cards through the stock libraries, I also create images of my ordinary everyday world, noticing and responding to things throughout my daily life. For example, while a commercially viable image of the landscape might involve framing a shot to exclude details of man's intervention, for example a parked car might be excluded from the frame in order to create the pretence of a 'sacred' pristine landscape in the manner of Ansel Adams, my personal work takes account of the parked car and might well focus directly on the light glinting off the bonnet of that car. Being 'open' to the alchemy of light moving through

the landscape can create a new awareness of the world as it animates familiar objects. Capturing that animation can lead to the creation of a 'sacred' image from the easily overlooked aesthetic of what might be perceived as a 'mundane' landscape. Photographs that connect with the animation of the familiar reflect that animation back into the world through the photograph, and the photograph holds the possibility of inspiring viewers of the image to re-view the familiar everyday in their own lives. As Robert Adams explains in relation to his own photographic practice,

What I'd tried to do ... was to include the objects we'd brought to the landscape and which by common consent are the most ugly, but also to suggest that light can transform even the most grotesque, inhuman things into mysteries worthy of attention. (Salvesen in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 76)

One of the purposes of this study is to investigate the aesthetic concept of 'sacred' and 'mundane' landscapes and the way in which we contextualise both the wider world, and our own daily lives, in relation to the values we attribute to each sort of landscape, and how that can influence our perception of our own environment.

However, engaging with the landscape of the ordinary by producing images that may not overtly display conventional photographic skills can expose practitioners, and images, to the potential of dismissal or ridicule. Britt Salvesen describes the reaction to the methodological approach of the *New Topographics*: 'In order to defy the monumental grandiosity of Ansel Adams and the mystical subjectivity of Minor White, they made pictures that some critics and viewers called "dull", "flat", "ugly, and "boring". (Salvesen in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 80) Toby Jurovics refers to a particularly significant comment made by New Topographer, Frank Gohlke, who states that:

Landscape work was being done by a lot of people that were influenced by Adams, Weston, Minor White, and Caponigro... They weren't responding to the world anymore: they were responding to an ideal of photographic excellence that came purely from other photographers. (Jurovics in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 6)

Gohlke asserts that landscape work wasn't 'responding to the *world* anymore' (my italics) but rather to 'an ideal of photographic excellence that came purely from other photographers', the reality of the landscape is no longer the concern of the prevailing aesthetic, images are accorded merit in terms of 'photographic excellence', that is the technical skills of the photographer. Most significant of all is Gohlke's comment that this 'ideal of photographic excellence that came *purely from other photographers*'. (my italics) The images themselves may be devoid of meaning, however they are defined, not by the information they give about the world, but in terms of the technical skills of the photographer in replicating the sort of pristine landscapes created *by other photographers*, such as Adams, Weston, Minor White, and Caponigro, as *judged by other photographers*. Unfortunately, producing the sort of pristine images that display only the skills of the photographer rather than offering any new information about the world remains the goal of countless camera club devotees of Ansel Adams. While the skill involved in creating such images are admirable, the images themselves are ultimately empty, devoid of meaning. These concerns will be addressed further both within the thesis and within my photographic practice.

## IDEAS CONCERNING THE BEAUTIFUL, PICTURESQUE, SUBLIME AND SACRED

While aesthetics form a central theme of this thesis this area of study is not new. A text written in the first century AD, which is attributed to Longinus,

has served as a basis for discussion that continues to the present day and which will undoubtedly continue into the future. This thesis will consider contemporary concerns regarding what might be considered to be beautiful, picturesque, sublime and sacred, with particular reference to photographic practice. This introduction will briefly refer to the concepts that will be investigated in greater depth within the main body of the text and through the images resulting from my engagement with creating photographic images in the context of this study.

## BEAUTY

While Plato believed that beauty is inherent within objects themselves Kant suggested that beauty is determined by the judgement of the viewer, and closely associated with the mind. Philip Shaw explains that for Kant the 'judgements of taste refer more to subjective conditions of perception than to qualities inherent in the sensuous world' (Shaw 2009: 79). However, for photographer Gregory Conniff, beauty 'resides in the world, not in the eye of the beholder', it is 'part of the information the world offers us about physical reality', and he stresses the importance of bearing 'witness to beauty in everyday life' (Conniff in Read 1993: 90).

In 'A Philosophical Enquiry' (1757) Burke describes beauty as inducing in us 'a sense of affection and tenderness' (Burke in Phillips 2008: 47), claiming that 'the beautiful is founded on mere positive pleasure, and excites in the soul that feeling, which is called love' (Burke in Phillips 2008: 145). This thesis will consider the 'tenderness' (Waldie 2005: 190) of my encounters with 'common place beauties' (Conniff in Read 1993: 90) and investigate the sort of 'love' which might be derived from engaging with the beautiful, suggesting that there is more significance to engaging with beauty than experiencing 'mere' positive pleasure.

Shaw writes:

Since Burke, the concept of the beautiful has been set against the concept of the sublime ...The sublime is greater than the beautiful; the sublime is dark, profound and overwhelming ...whereas the beautiful is light, fleeting, and charming ... Where the sublime is a divisive force, encouraging feelings of difference and deference, the beautiful encourages a spirit of unity and harmony. (Shaw 2009: 9)

Beauty is thus usually associated with softness and femininity, while the sublime is characterised as rugged and masculine. Shaw refers to recent attempts to 'reappraise the beautiful, to regard it not merely as a weaker sister figure but as a just counter-spirit to the violent encroaches of the sublime' (Shaw 2009: 9-10). This thesis contains reflections on the importance of appreciating beauty in the everyday, drawing attention to what Mark Klett describes as the 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes', (Klett 1990) whilst revealing the 'inherent splendor of the insignificant' (Rancière in Highmore 2001: 51). The thesis concludes with an investigation of Hillman's assertion that the most overlooked aspect of contemporary psychological culture is 'beauty', and his suggestion that repressing beauty and accepting 'ugliness costs more' (Hillman 1998: 263-264) than recognising the 'beauty in everyday life' (Conniff in Read 1993: 90)

## THE PICTURESQUE

In 1768 the Reverend William Gilpin suggested a new category of beauty which he called the picturesque, a term which he defined as 'expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture' (Gilpin: on line). He went on to produce books such as *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*, which describe the detail of journeys he made

around the country to discover beauty solely created by Nature. The books explain Gilpin's ideas about the ways in which the landscapes and scenes he encountered could be 'improved', or made more picturesque, that is, more fit to become a picture. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term 'picturesque' was applied to a landscape that looked as if it had come straight out of a painting, providing a source of physical and spiritual sustenance which was comforting and uplifting, but never frightening. It could also be associated with a scene which is charming and quaint, and therefore, would make a good picture. This thesis will engage with Gilpin's concept of the picturesque with particular reference to the work of Ansel Adams and his devotees, for whom creating images of scenes that are uplifting and which have been framed to make a good picture is central to their practice.

For Gilpin and Adams the concept of the picturesque involves a certain sort of uplifting beauty which is 'neatly packaged', perfected and confined within clearly defined limits of what is 'agreeable in a picture'. The sort of uplifting beauty that I investigate through my engagement with photographic practice is more open, considering subjects that may not conventionally be regarded as beautiful and which may not immediately conform to the conventional boundaries of what is 'agreeable in a picture'. Both my choice of subject matter and the way I choose to frame the world deliberately challenge the neatly packaged and ordered view of the world that is central to Gilpin's theory of the 'picturesque' and to the images created by Adams, and which still has a place within some aspects of my own commercial work. Challenging such conventions within my creative practice demonstrates that there are instances when being open to re-evaluating familiar ideas about the nature of beauty and the picturesque can generate images that reveal and celebrate a more contemporary definition of what might constitute that 'peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'. This is demonstrated in some of the images of the everyday that have been reproduced within the main body of the text and selected for exhibition during the *viva voce*.

## THE SUBLIME

If the picturesque is about imposing boundaries on reality, the sublime concerns subject matter that is too great to be contained showing Nature at its most fearsome with a distinct awe and reverence for the wild. Burke claimed that:

Greatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime' adding, 'another source of the sublime, is infinity ... Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with the sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and the truest test of the sublime.' He continues 'the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so ... the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them at pleasure. (Burke in Phillips 1990: 66-67)

This thesis will discuss the boundaries of things, with specific reference to the sort of decision making processes involved in framing the world, cropping reality to fit to the edges of a photographic image, and the devices employed to extend the imagination beyond the confines of the frame. Reference will be made to the way that 'the stories of what makes a life pulses at the edges of things' (Stewart 2007:44) Thus, the boundaries of Ansel Adams' neatly packaged 'picturesque' images contrast with Mark Klett's equally carefully considered positioning of the camera to offer a view of a world which continues beyond the confines of the frame, and the integral 'eye sockets' used as a framing device in Grazia Toderi's *Obrbite Rosse (Red Orbits)* (2009) which is reproduced within this thesis.

Kant suggested that in encountering the sublime, 'the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well' (Kant in Shaw 2009: 78), drawn by aesthetic pleasure, but challenged by reasoning, by imagined sensation, for example the physical fear of falling from a precipice. Shaw suggests that although 'the apprehension of beauty is straightforwardly

appealing, the sublime alternates between attraction and repulsion' (Shaw 2009: 79). The tension of this dichotomy is illustrated in images such as Paul Hill's, *Legs over High Tor, Matlock* 1975, which is reproduced within the thesis.

While for followers of the Romantic movement experiencing the sublime had been a means of considering the nature of the 'self' and exploring the self in relation to the external world, Kant shifted the emphasis towards the concept of the sublime as a 'mode of consciousness' (Shaw 2009: 6). By engaging with what Shaw refers to as the struggle between 'the evidence of the senses ... and the supersensible power of reason', Kant suggested that 'the sublime affirms ultimately the ascendancy of the rational over the real', that the human mind is 'greater than anything that might be discovered in nature' (Shaw 2009: 6). Kant believed that human ability to rationalise the feelings evoked by experiencing the sublime is more powerful than the sublime itself.

Shaw suggests that the concept of the sublime has been employed 'most recently, as a signifier of that which exceeds the grasp of reason' (Shaw 2009: 4). This contemporary view of the sublime parallels the suggestions made by Longinus centuries previously. Shaw suggests that for Longinus, 'the sublime is beyond definition', that it is 'something that the elevated individual instinctively knows: one does not learn the sublime; one catches it, like a divine contagion' (Shaw 2009: 13), adding that 'essential to the sublime is a state of feeling, which may be loosely described as wonder, awe, rapture, astonishment, ecstasy or elevation' (Shaw 2009:14). He writes that 'for Longinus the electric shock of sublimity is all' (Shaw 2009:15).

The idea of the sublime creating an 'electric shock' relates to Morley's reference in the introduction to 'The Sublime Documents of Contemporary Art', of the sublime as 'a force field' (Morley 2010: 18). The sense of the sublime as an engulfing force relates to my own experiences of encountering the sublime which parallel Stewart's description of 'a force field in which people find themselves' (Stewart 2011: 452).

These ideas relate to Burke's description of the sublime: 'It's highest degree I call *astonishment*; the subordinate degrees are awe, reverence and respect' (Burke's italics) (Burke in Phillips 2008: 123). Writing about the what he perceives to be the differences between beauty and the sublime Burke suggests: 'the sublime and beautiful are built on principles very different, and that their affections are as different: the great has terror for its basis; which, when modified, causes that emotion in the mind, which I have called *astonishment*; the beautiful is founded on mere positive pleasure, and excites in the soul that feeling, which is called love' (Burke in Phillips 2008: 145).

Shaw suggests: 'Perhaps the sublime is ... a promise of transcendence leading to the edge of an abyss.' (Shaw 2009: 10), by fully engaging with the sublime in order to achieve a state of transcendence one is ultimately reminded of the physicality of the edge of the abyss which the mind may enter into and return from un-scathed, in a way that the physical body is not able to do. Through experiencing the powerful force of the sublime the mind is able to transcend the physical limits of the body. Shaw suggests that 'In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then we resort to the feeling of the sublime*' (Shaw's italics) (Shaw 2009: 2).

The intensity of such experience can be overwhelming, both mentally and physically. Burke writes:

Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness. After looking for some time at the sun, two black spots, the impression which it leaves, seem to dance before our eyes. Thus are two ideas as opposite as can be imagined reconciled in the extremes of both; and both in spite of their opposite nature brought to concur in producing the sublime. And this is not the only instance wherein the opposite extremes operate equally in favour of the sublime, which in all things abhors mediocrity. (Burke in Phillips 1990: 74)

Light is the basis for all photography and this thesis will explore how photographers utilise its many possibilities, such as Robert Adams who describes it as a light of ‘incontrovertible brilliance ... far too intense to examine directly’ (Adams 1996: 25). The thesis will discuss some of the differences between incontrovertibly brilliant light and mediocre light, both as part of our experience of the everyday and in connection with the creation of photographic images, referring to the fact that such ‘extreme’ and ‘brilliant’ light can neither be looked at, nor photographed, directly because it overcomes ‘the organs’ of human sight and it is beyond the technical ability of the camera to record such intensity. The thesis will explore the way that incontrovertibly brilliant light falling on a mediocre subject can transform that subject, as if by some form of alchemy, elevating the mediocre of the ordinary to become something extraordinary, transforming the mundane into the sacred, revealing the ‘inherent splendor of the insignificant’ (Rancière in Highmore 2001: 51)

## THE SACRED

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of achieving a state of optimal experience or flow through deep engagement parallels Morley’s assertion that ‘the sublime defines the moment when thought comes to an end and we encounter that which is ‘other’’. He refers to the

force-field of the sublime, the ‘subjective ‘moment’ of heightened experience, a heightened time during which the self is radically altered by something that presses on us from beyond our normal reality, challenging the assumptions upon which such reality is base.’ (Morley 2010: 18)

Discussing Frances Reynolds discourse ‘Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste’ (1785), Philip Shaw suggests that

For Reynolds, true sublimity occurs at ‘the point’ where the distinctions between categories ... begin to break down. The moment is religious because it also marks the limits of human conception, the point at which reason gives way to madness, certainty to uncertainty, and security to destruction. (Shaw 2009:46)

By connecting with ‘the charged rhythms of the ordinary’ (Stewart 2011: 446) and drawing attention to the moments of ‘lacerating emphasis’ (Barthes 200: 96) that exist within the world, the sublime experience enables us to step beyond the ordinary. As Waldie describes in *‘Holy Land A Suburban Memoir*, ‘the pedestrian and the sacred are both there’ (Waldie 2005: 186).

Experiencing the sublime enables us to inhabit what T.S. Eliot refers to as ‘the still point of the turning world’ (Eliot 1982: 175). The intensity of the experience obliterates all other concerns enabling the participant to become completely immersed within the moment. This description equates to my experience of engaging with photographic practice, and to Morley’s description of ‘heightened experience, a heightened time during which the self is radically altered by something that presses on us from beyond our normal reality, challenging the assumptions upon which such reality is based’ (Morley 2010: 18). Experiencing such intensity, or ‘madness’ can create a new awareness that may result in the participant questioning previously held views, which may ultimately lead to new knowledge about the world. Because this sort of connection falls outside ‘normal’ experience it might be described as being a sort of ‘madness’ or mania, generated by an the intensity of an experience that pulls ‘the senses into alert’ (Stewart 2011: 445), and which ultimately ‘stirs the heart’ (Hillman 1998: 274).

Shaw suggests that for American abstract painter Barnett Newman the sublime ‘emerges only as an instant of creative intensity, derived not from God, nature, or indeed from mind, but rather from the event of artistic creation’ (Shaw 2009: 7), which parallels Longinus’ assertion that the sublime ‘inspires and

possess our words with a kind of madness and divine spirit' (Longinus in Shaw 2009: 13). Newman writes:

Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history. (Newman's italics) (Newman in Shaw 2009: 27)

Newman is suggesting that the intensity of the sublime experience is not about religion, or even about life or nature. The sacred element that lies at the very heart of the experience, is the creativity and expression of the practitioner. That the sense of connection and creative impulse of the practitioner, which is brought about by an event or thing, is the expression of the sublime, that the sense of 'revelation' within a work of art makes the practitioners experience of the sublime 'real and concrete', and accessible to anyone who is open to engaging unconditionally with the work of art that has been created.

The concepts of creative mania or 'madness', the 'sacred' nature of the creative experience, and the idea that a practitioner lends their experience of the world to the viewer of an artwork, particularly when the viewer is 'open' and receptive to engaging fully with that artwork, are themes which I will explore further within this thesis.

The thesis will also explore the role of consciously engaging with the world in order to promote experiences of both the beautiful and the sublime in order to enrich the quality of life. With reference to the eighteenth century writings of Shaftesbury, Shaw suggests that 'the sublime is not opposed to the beautiful ... but rather works in concert with it to assist the mind in its ascent from corporeal distraction to visionary perception' (Shaw 2009: 40), while Morley refers to Schiller's 1801 notion of the sublime 'as ecstatic experience' (Morley 2010: 19). This idea also has links with the suggestion made by ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus regarding the importance of the conscious self. Plotinus

suggested that true human happiness lies outside the realms of the physical, and beyond material acquisitions, but is based in identifying with that which is best within the universe. Plotinus suggested, as Csikszentmihalyi has done more recently, that happiness is potentially available to all who consciously choose to become open to contemplating the world and that such engagement can overcome the constraints of the physical body in relation to discomfort and pain. This parallels Csikszentmihalyi's suggestion that by achieving a state of deep engagement, which he refers to as optimal experience or flow, a person is able to overcome the limits of adversity.

In the essay 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'(1988) Lyotard speaks of the 'joy obtained by the intensification of being that the event brings with it' (Lyotard in Morley 2010: 29). As Green puts it, 'it is our state of consciousness, the way we look at the world, that determines the experience we have of it' (Green 1987: 144). This thesis will consider the relationship between my experience of intensity while creating photographic images of moments that may be described as sublime, and the role of 'joy' within my photographic practice and everyday life, and in relation to my experience of living with a chronic health condition. The thesis will refer to the practice of mindfulness and the benefits of achieving happiness, with particular reference to the work of Csikszentmihalyi and the achievement of personal growth and new understanding through engaging in a state of 'flow' or 'optimal experience'. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that 'People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can become to being happy' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 2).

## JOY

Another element of this interdisciplinary study takes the form of an exploration of the benefits to wellbeing that can be achieved through engagement with photographic practice. My particular interest in this area of study has

developed as a result of my personal experience of living with the chronic health condition of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. Put simply, this condition, which has dominated my life for more than twenty-five years, is characterised by a fluctuating pattern of relapse and remission involving debilitating exhaustion and varying levels of pain. While my photographic practice is not defined by health issues they have a significant role in my perception of the world, and thus my photographic practice. To explain further, while I have not been able to pursue a career in a more conventional sense, living with the consequences of this condition for so long has forced me to re-evaluate my priorities. What I have come to value most is 'joy'. One aspect of this study has to do with the way in which joy and happiness might be linked to photographic practice and the effects that the joy resulting from engagement with photographic practice can have on health and wellbeing. However, this element of the study is not confined to the benefits that such engagement might have to wellbeing, but how, in turn, the 'joy' resulting from engagement with photographic practice, can resonate within the resulting image and how the depth of the experience can be reflected back into the world through the image to offer viewers insights that may cause them to re-evaluate their own perception of the world.

The interdisciplinary study will take the form of a thesis which reflects on these issues, and a body of photographic work, exploring the images I create of the ordinary, within my everyday world. The images will be contextualised by the written thesis.

## TO BEGIN

As Robert Frank put it in his Guggenheim application, 'the project I have in mind is one that will shape itself as it proceeds, and is essentially elastic.' Dorothea Lange also believed that 'to know ahead of time what you're looking for means that you're then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting. (Dyer 2005: 4-5)

Rather than setting out with a clearly defined research question that requires a resounding conclusion, this study began by engaging with the sort of flexible approach that is described above by Dyer. The study aims to contextualise my own photographic practice in relation to the interaction between mundane and sacred landscapes and the role that the transformative alchemy of light has on our perception of the ordinary. Reference will be made to the development of the genre of landscape photography, with particular reference to the selective aesthetic of pristine Wilderness, as embodied in the work of Ansel Adams, through the 'man-altered' landscapes of the *New Topographics* and Mark Klett's rephotographic project, to discuss an aesthetic of the everyday. Reference will also be made to the benefits to health and wellbeing that can be achieved as a result of engaging in a state of mindfulness (Crane), also known as optimal experience or flow (Csikszentmihalyi) through photographic practice.

As Shaun McNiff suggests,

Artistic inquiry, whether it is in the context of research or an individual person's creative expression, typically starts with the realization that you cannot define the final outcome when you are planning to do the work. As contrasted to scientific methods, you generally know little about the end of an artistic experiment when you are at the beginning. In the creative process the most meaningful insights often come by surprise, unexpectedly, and even against the will of the creator. (McNiff in Knowles and Cole 2008: 40)

During the course of the research that forms the basis for this thesis I have discovered echoes of my own areas of interest and personal experiences across a diverse range of disciplines. Rather than narrowing the focus of the study by excluding relevant information to make the research less complex, the

thesis comprises of information from an eclectic range of sources encompassing both the more obviously creative subjects of photography, aesthetics and poetry, and areas such as health care.

Given the parameters of the PhD process in relation to the breadth of the research undertaken, the specific study of each diverse element is, of necessity, not as detailed as it may have been had a single, more specifically defined, area of research been the entire focus of the research. The inclusive nature of the research presented in this thesis offers unique insights by providing direct comparisons and establishing new relationships between the theoretical and methodological approaches of a range of differing disciplines. In order to highlight these comparisons references will be made, and examples given, as appropriate to the discussion rather than adhering to strict chronological order.

The following publications have been particularly insightful while developing this study in respect of landscape photography; Michael Read, *Ansel Adams: New Light: essays on his legacy and legend*; Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph and Beauty in Photography*; William L. Fox, *View Finder: Mark Klett, photography, and the reinvention of landscape*; Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams Divine Performance*; Liz Wells, *The Photography Reader, and Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*; Andrew Light and Jonathan M Smith, *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*; Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, *Reframing The New Topographics*. Reference will also be made to essays by Deborah Bright, Ian Walker, Mark Klett, Renee Haip, Rebecca Solnit and Kelly Dennis.

While the following texts do not refer directly to photography they can be applied to photographic practice in productive ways to generate a better understanding of the everyday. Bill Beckley, *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics*; Donald J. Waldie, *Holy Land A Suburban Memoir*; Kathleen

Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* and Ben Highmore *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*. Stewart's work, for example, often focuses on attention to detail and the development of an 'attunement' which recognizes 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (Stewart 2011: 446). In the conclusion of his book Waldie describes his daily life: 'I can't think of anything more ordinary. It's exactly as described in *Holy Land*. The pedestrian and the sacred are both there.' (Waldie 2005: 186) He continues, '*Holy Land* is, in part, a meditation on the fate of the things we touch and the corresponding effects of their touch on us', suggesting that 'What we hope for, I think, is tenderness in this encounter' (Waldie 2005: 190).

Stewart has described the 'ordinary' world as a place 'always already abuzz with something pressing' (Stewart 2011: 448) referring to the way in which atmospheres, and things, can 'pull the senses into alert' (ibid.: 445). Unlike those photographers who actively seek to create a specific image my methodological approach relates closely to what Stewart describes as a 'state of attention that is also impassivity - a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place' (ibid.: 446). My images are about a sense that 'things hanging in the air are worth describing.' (ibid.: 447), connecting with what Waldie describes as the 'tenderness' of the 'encounter' (Waldie 2005: 190). My aim, both through the concerns of this thesis and within my own practice, is to develop an attunement which recognises the 'pedestrian and the sacred' within the everyday, addressing Waldie's suggestion that 'the things we touch', or connect with, also have a 'corresponding ... touch on us', that leads to a deeper understanding of the close at hand, which relates directly to the concerns of these writers.

## CREATIVE PRACTICE: DISCOVERING WHAT WE DIDN'T KNOW WE KNEW

Writing in relation to the importance of creative practice Weber suggests,

Art makes us look; it engages us. The reason we need and create art has to do with its ability to discover what we didn't know we knew, or to see what we never noticed before, even when it was right in front of our noses. Artistic images can make the ordinary seem extraordinary – breaking through common resistance, forcing us to consider new ways of seeing or doing things. (Weber, in Knowles and Cole 2008: 44)

Or as Highmore puts it, art ‘... gives new significance to the ordinary, as well as fundamentally transforming our experience of the ordinary’ (Highmore 2011: 50-51). Csikszentmihalyi also refers to the importance of ‘creating a new way to describe reality’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:127). Photographs that highlight the ‘splendour of the insignificant’ (Rancière in Highmore 2011: 51), or which ‘make the ordinary seem extraordinary’, have the power to engage the viewer and suggest ‘new ways of seeing’ the ordinary everyday landscape. This can in turn lead to a ‘fundamental’ transformation of ‘our experience of the ordinary’ by alerting the viewer to the ‘splendour of the insignificant’ within the ordinary landscape their everyday life, ‘creating a new way of *looking at* reality’. As Weber puts it, ‘Images literally help us to adopt someone else’s gaze, see someone else’s point of view, and borrow their experience for a moment’ (Weber, in Knowles and Cole 2008: 45). If that ‘gaze’ is able to create a ‘new way to describe reality’ by valuing the easily overlooked aspects of everyday life, the resulting artwork can promote a fresh way of seeing the world by calling attention to previously unnoticed aspects of the ordinary.

As Leggo asserts, ‘We need imagination to break out of stereotypes and to create other possibilities’ (Leggo, in Knowles and Cole 2008: 168). Paying attention to ‘our experience of the ordinary’ through connecting with images that trace man’s interaction with the land does not necessarily diminish the skill, or beauty, involved in the sort of images created by Adams. However, images of the ‘ordinary’ landscape of the everyday, where humankind has a

place, 'create(s) other possibilities'. Such images are the antithesis of the 'stereotypical' remote, wilderness landscapes depicted by Adams and his derivatives, they are the 'quiet, less monumental landscapes' referred to by Klett, more human in scale and concern. Such images confirm that 'we have a place on the land', and that beauty is not always 'elsewhere'. They set up a dialogue about co-existence and balance, suggesting that we have a responsibility about how we choose to live within the landscape.

The thesis begins by looking specifically at the selective aesthetic of the landscapes created by Ansel Adams and refers to the development of the genre with particular reference to the work of the New Topographers, Klett's rephotographic project, and images by photographers such as Olaf Otto Becker, John Pfahl, Richard Misrach, Joel Meyerowitz, and Chloe Dewe Mathews, all of whom refer to human interaction within the landscape.

In the book, *Reframing The New Topographics*, Finis Dunaway comments that the work of the New Topographers 'broke from the tradition of defining landscape as wilderness and instead depicted nature as a backdrop to the built environment' (Dunaway in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 16). While Rohrbach suggests that their photographs

offer a low-key alternative to the grandiose visions of their immediate photographic predecessors: Ansel Adams and Minor White' which allowed 'viewers to draw their own conclusions, to become active interpreters of what they could see, and acknowledge their own responsibility...

(Rohrbach in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: XVIII)

The man-altered landscapes depicted by the New Topographers confirm that 'we have a place on the land', but question how we engage with the land, how we might balance human intervention with the wider landscape. The work sets out to involve the viewer in a dialogue with the concerns of the images rather

than as a passive observer or consumer of the work. Rohrbach explains how

...by carefully crafting their images, they were also creating a new definition of beauty... Quite simply they were calling on people to stop, look, and think about the activities that were occurring on the land and, like other activists of the day, to engage with it rather than focus only on pristine landscapes as the sites to savor. (Rohrbach in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: XXI)

As Dennis asserts, the images are about

the aesthetic discourse of landscape photography, and about a “man-made wilderness”: that is, they are *about* the American myths of the West, suburban expansion, the American dream, and the exploitation and destruction of natural resources. (Dennis 2005:3)

Dunaway discusses Shore’s attempts to ‘reconcile viewers to a half-wilderness, to muster affection for everyday environments by beautifying and embracing commonplace landscapes’ (Dunaway in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 42). Shore directs attention towards, rather than away from, ‘the commonplace beauties that let us know we’re home’ (Conniff in Read 1993: 90).

The thesis also discusses the 1970s rephotographic project co-founded by Manchester and Klett. By rephotographing landscapes that had previously been detailed by the US Geological survey the project referred to both man’s interaction within the land and the passage of time. Solnit notes that Klett’s

images are not assaults on the tradition of virgin wilderness photography nor elegies for a raped landscape. Instead he often photographs majestic ‘wilderness’ landscapes with a foreground of civilized appurtenances that are not intrusions. The West, his work suggests, is not the less sublime for

its banal and kitsch additions; instead the two cohabit a landscape without simple moral or visual resolutions. (Solnit, in Brittain 1999: 229)

Although Klett's images refer to the wider landscape they do not reject the reality of the 'banal and kitsch additions' that man has imposed on the land. Unlike Adams, and some of the work of the New Topographers, his images are not 'elegies' for a landscape that has been defiled by man. Solnitt suggests that in Klett's work the details of man's intervention do not detract from the sublime, but instead these two seeming opposites 'cohabit a landscape'. Klett's work goes beyond detailing the interaction of other people within the landscape. When William Fox expresses surprise that Klett's meticulously composed image of a view previously photographed by O'Sullivan, contains a pile of photographic equipment, Klett replies '...that's the view. We're in the picture' (Fox 2001:15). While Klett's images do not offer 'simple moral or visual resolutions', his acceptance of 'human presence' confirms that 'we have a place on the land'. (Klett: 1990) This thesis will proceed to explore these conflicting approaches to photographing the landscape in more detail.

While the New Topographers and the rephotographic project detailed aspects of the ordinary within the landscape, practitioners such as Haas, Power and Tillmans engage with the detail of the ordinary landscapes of everyday life, creating images that draw attention to what Rancière calls the 'splendour of the insignificant' (Rancière in Highmore 2011: 51). Hillman asserts that

... we take ordinary things for granted ... they are "ordinary" precisely because we do not examine them carefully enough in detail, which does not allow the power of their aesthetic smile to appear. The artist, of course, does indeed reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. (Hillman 1998: 267-268)

By paying attention to what Stewart describes as 'the charged rhythms of the

ordinary' (Stewart 2011: 446) and valuing unexpected juxtapositions and unfamiliar fragments which reveal 'not only the clarity but obscurity of things' (Szarkowski 2009:126) my own work explores the aesthetic potential of spaces between the obvious. For me, the 'aesthetic smile' of an image is often connected with the transformative power of light. Much of my work documents collisions between the mundane and the sacred, investigating moments of alchemy when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, capturing the moment when dramatic or strange light creates a dynamic aesthetic which stimulates a new awareness of the familiar.

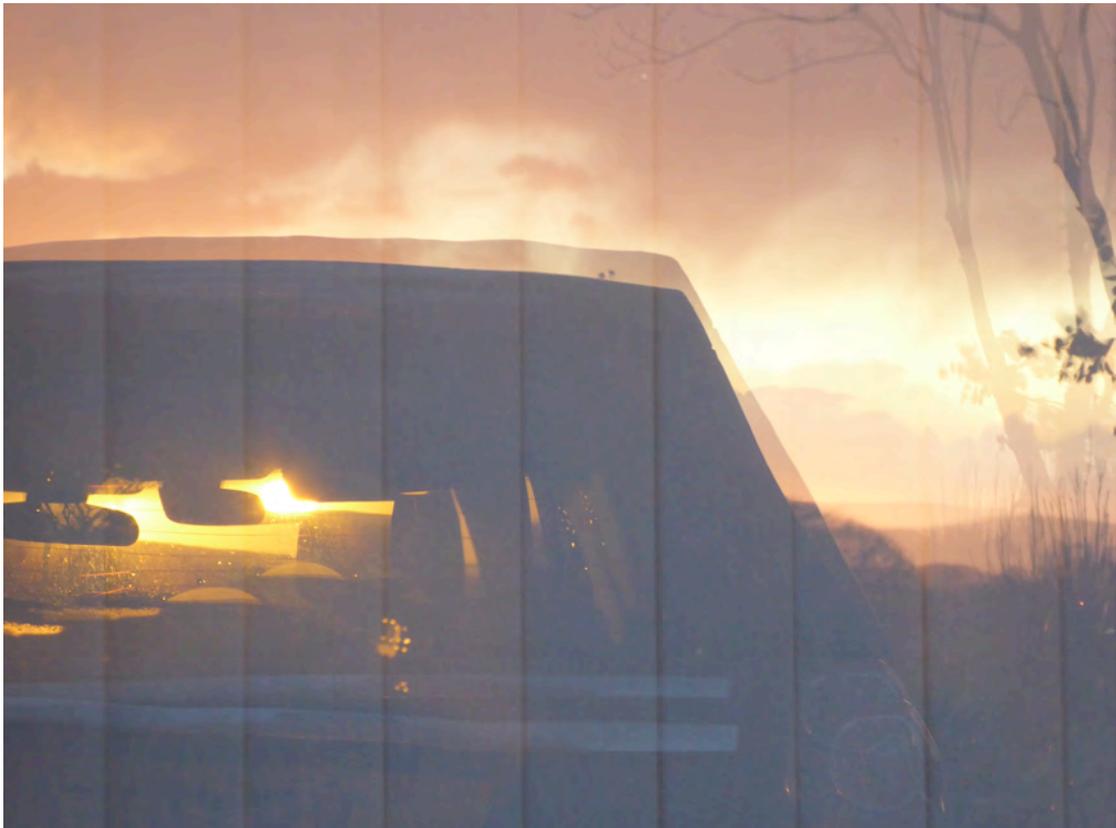
Graham Higgs notes that

Because using the arts in research provides new ways of knowing that cannot be articulated through traditional practices or methods of reporting – the results potentially provide a richer context and practice-dependent understanding of the experience of the subject being investigated. Subjective and intersubjective knowing emerge in the act of making art and also later in observers who engage with the presentation of the work. (Higgs in Knowles and Cole 2008: 549)

As Higgs suggests, this sort of interconnected research provides a 'richer context and practice-dependent understanding of the experience of the subject being investigated' and also allows the images that have been created as a result of the research process to take their place as objects within the world, offering viewers potential new ways of perceiving and experiencing the landscape of their own everyday world.

While the thesis forms part of the dissemination of the research findings the images that have emerged as a result of engagement with the study will be exhibited as an integral element of the outcome. To quote Robert Adams, 'Critical writing about a successful picture is a calculated and in some respects

doomed redundancy, repeating in words what it means, duplicating it in other than the optimum mode, which, if the picture works, is obviously the visual mode' (Adams1996: 59). Because this is an academic study an element of written work is vital in order to contextualize the practice-based aspect of the study; however the images resulting from my engagement with photographic practice will be disseminated separately from the thesis in order to form a conclusion to the visual element of the research process.



Rachel White, *Car*, 2015

A WORN-OUT AESTHETIC OF PURITY



Rachel White, *Moon*, 2016

## A WORN-OUT AESTHETIC OF PURITY

As part of an ongoing reflexive process contextualising my photographic practice this chapter will visually trace some aspects of the development of landscape photography. The accompanying text will refer broadly to the aesthetic traditions of the picturesque, with particular reference to the impact of the work of landscape photographer Ansel Adams. Reference will be made to the development of the genre through the work of rephotographer Mark Klett and other contemporary practitioners.

## LANDSCAPE: TRADITIONS OF THE PICTURESQUE

Our relationship with the landscape is shaped by the way we interact physically, and emotionally, with the ‘the countryside’. It is useful to begin this chapter by briefly considering this relationship, real or imagined, not least because of the implications it has for the decisions we make when choosing whether, or not, to create photographic representations of the landscape, and the way we react to, and interact with, images that others have created of the land.

In her introduction to *Viewfindings Women Photographers: Landscape and Environment*, Liz Wells draws attention to the ‘mythologisation of the rural’ (Wells 1994: 5). That is, the way we have developed a perception of the countryside as a place of tranquillity, home to a benevolent Mother Nature, rather than accepting the dirty, gritty, reality of the rural as a working environment. This point of view has been established as a result of what is often our distance, both physical and emotional, from the rural landscape. Wells’ essay ‘Reframing Landscape’ (Wells 1994: 43-51) discusses the way that the industrial revolution ‘interrupted the direct relation between labour and land’ which has led to a dissociation from the land for many people. Wells

suggests that as a result of the industrial revolution ‘Country and ‘city’ gradually came to be viewed – and mythologised – in opposition to one another.’ She discusses how this divide has distanced people from the ‘feelings and effects associated with climate, weather and seasonal change’ (ibid.: 45). Those living in the city can move from one internal space to another with comparatively little inconvenience from nature, while the lives of those who inhabit the countryside or who work the land are continually dominated by the seasons and ever changing weather.

In terms of creative practice Wells draws attention to the fact that art movements such as Romanticism and Pictorialism often ignored the ways in which industrialisation impacted on the land, preferring instead to create a vision of ‘nature as idyll’ (ibid.: 48). Certain aspects of the landscape were emphasised while others, which were perceived to have less value, were not accorded status and not considered worthy of depiction. Generally the impact of humans or any traces showing the reality of the countryside as a working environment were rejected in favour of a romanticised construct of the countryside as a place of beneficent beauty, peaceful and picturesque. Employing such a selective aesthetic offers an idealised version of reality where benign nature is tamed by human hand. With specific reference to photographic practice Wells describes this kind of selective aesthetic, which emphasises or excludes information at will, as ‘a system of visual editing’ (ibid.: 48). The concept of ‘nature as idyll’, and in particular the significance of employing a system of ‘visual editing’ in order to sustain this vision, are considered in more detail throughout this chapter.

## **THE SELECTIVE AESTHETIC OF ANSEL ADAMS**

Because photographer Ansel Adams has created many iconic images that embody the romantic tradition of the sublime it is useful to refer to some of

the things that have been written specifically about his work in order to gain a broader insight into the genre of landscape photography. As the majority of Adams' images adhere so strictly to a clearly defined selective aesthetic in order to construct and sustain a vision of 'nature as idyll' it is particularly significant to consider has been written about his work in relation to Wells' concept of 'visual editing'.



Ansel Adams, *Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, 1942*

An essay by Robert Dawson and Ellen Manchester published in Michael Read's book, *Ansel Adams: New Light: Essays on his Legacy and Legend* asserts that 'Much of Adams' photography was about an ideal of nature and an abstraction called "nature"' (Dawson and Manchester in Read 1993: 85). That is, Adams' work employs a selective aesthetic, or system of 'visual editing', in order to construct an idealised myth around an abstract concept of 'nature' that does not exist in reality. In making this suggestion Dawson and Manchester relate Adams' work directly to Wells' concept of 'nature as idyll' (Wells 1994: 48). More recently, a pamphlet written by an unknown author to accompany an exhibition of Adams' work at Walsall Art Gallery in 2008 refers to the construct

of 'nature as idyll' in relation to his work. The pamphlet states that 'For Adams, the purpose of his art was to reveal beauty to others and to inspire. ... Nature ...is revealed and revered.' Although it is unclear whether the opinions expressed in the pamphlet are those of the author or whether they belong to Adams himself, the text indicates that Adams deliberately selected scenes to be elevated as examples of 'nature as idyll' in an instructive capacity. There is a presumption that the viewer needs to be instructed, to be inspired by Adams, or have the scene 'revealed' by Adams; that the purpose of Adams' work was for the benefit of others. Robert Silberman has suggested that 'the traditionalism of his taste, and in particular his adherence to the conventions of the sublime and the beautiful, help explain why his pictures have enjoyed enormous popularity' (Silberman in Read1993: 39). Silberman also echoes Wells' comments regarding the fact that the impact of industry on the land has largely been ignored by Adams in favour of the romantic construct of 'nature as idyll', adding that 'Arguably, most people still hold essentially nineteenth-century notions when it comes to depictions of the landscape.' (ibid.)



Ansel Adams, *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite Valley*, 1927

## CONVENTIONS OF THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Such 'adherence to the conventions of the sublime and the beautiful' is by no means confined to Adams, nor to the past. While many of Adams' contemporaries, such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Minor White, Paul Strand, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange were exploring other ideas and pushing forward boundaries, many of our contemporaries, such as Charlie Waite and Joe Cornish currently pursue the construct of the 'rural idyll', generating images that continue to be commercially viable.

In an interview in *The Royal Photographic Society Journal* (2009) popular National Trust photographer, Joe Cornish claims that '... as a society, we are disconnected from natural cycles, from experiences with nature. I see it as at least part of my job to encourage reconnection and re-engagement with it' (Land 2009: 397-400). Cornish's opinion of his task echoes the suggestion that Adams may have seen his role as instructive or educational. The statement also relates directly to Wells' idea that people are 'distanced' from seasonal cycles, and illustrates the similarities of approach between Adams and Cornish. While many of their contemporaries explore more complex areas within their practice, both Adams and Cornish work hard to present a commercially viable romantic view of the landscape while apparently taking on a self-appointed instructive role. It is informative to compare the following contemporary image from Joe Cornish with the 1942 image by Ansel Adams, *Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton National Park* reproduced previously. While both images have similar compositions and both are certainly technically accomplished, each image specifically excludes all traces of man in order to present a mythologised view of the 'wilderness', or 'the rural idyll'. Joe Cornish follows closely the in the footsteps of Adams.



Content removed for copyright reasons

Joe Cornish, *Buachaille Etive Mor, Winter, Scotland*, (Date unspecified)

In her essay, 'Unsettling the West: Contemporary American landscape photography', Rebecca Solnit explains that 'Ansel Adams grew from ....the epic landscape images of the nineteenth century into the great Oedipal Father of American Landscape Photography: he is an obstacle nearly every western photographer has to find a way past' (Solnit in Brittain 1999: 227). Adams' vision of the vast wilderness, of 'nature as idyll', grew directly from a tradition of landscape painting and the influence of Adams' methodology, his way of depicting the landscape, has become almost like a form of shorthand for a certain kind of image, for what an image of a landscape 'should be' like. The mass appeal and reverence reserved for Adams' images is so complete that his work seems to form a sealed package that cannot be developed further. While other photographers may respect Adams' work there is also a need to grow beyond, or 'find a way past' the concerns of his images. Oedipus-like, other practitioners may grow beyond what they once aspired to emulate.

While it is beyond the remit of this study to explore the tradition of landscape painting which was the precursor to Adams' work in any great detail, it is interesting to refer briefly to the concerns of Thomas Cole's painting of 1836,

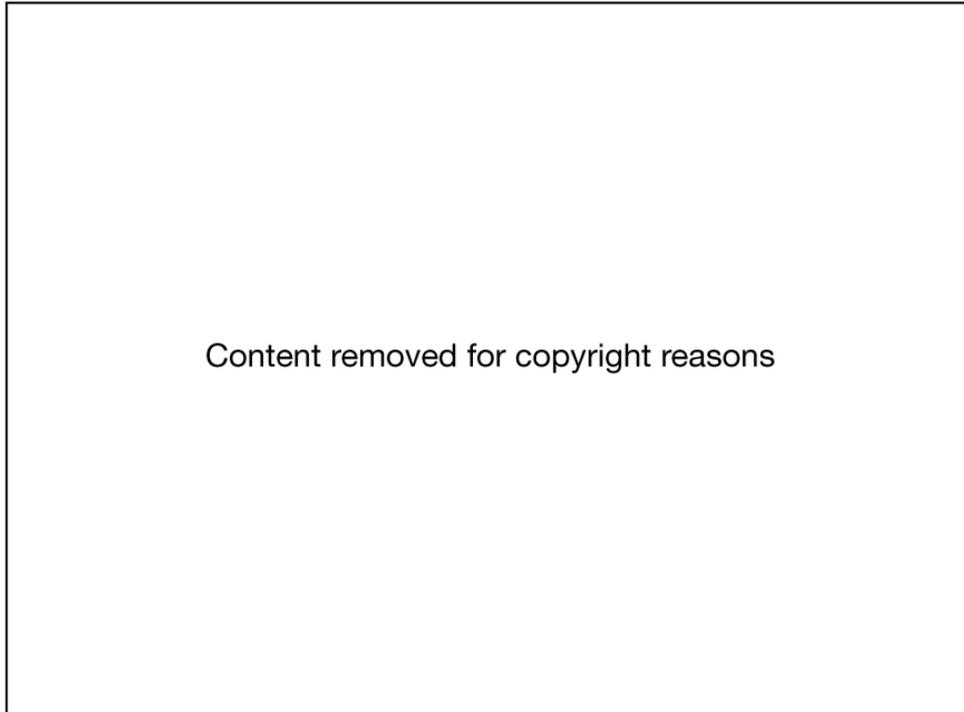
*'The Oxbow, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm.'* in this context. The basic composition of the painting is not dissimilar from either Adams', *Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton National Park*, or Cornish's *Buachaille Etive Mor, Winter, Scotland*, reproduced previously, however although the painting substantially predates either image, Cole's painting depicts not only a vast sweeping 'natural' vista, but also man's intervention in the landscape. The central section of the work features the impact of 'human nature', working with 'Mother Nature' to claim and cultivate the fertile valley floor. Further off into the distance the mountainsides are scarred with the effects of logging, while in the foreground a tree is devastated, presumably as a result of 'Mother Nature' in the form of the passing storm. The foreground also features a collection of manmade articles, and the painter himself at his easel. The painting, which at first glance appears to be an image of 'nature as idyll', depicts opposing aspects of nature; nature as a dark and destructive storm force, while man works to harness benign nature to create an harmonious world of abundant harvests in a sunlit valley below the precipice. Further study reveals that Cole's painting engages in a dialogue between Nature and the man-altered landscape on a number of different levels including a semi-hidden message written in an area of deforestation deep within the heart of the painting. In focusing attention beyond the initial impact of the painting it becomes clear that, unlike the images created by Adams and Cornish, rather than simply creating a picturesque depiction of the landscape which omits human interaction with the land, by addressing concerns similar to those referred to in the work of Robert Adams and Mark Klett, which are discussed later in this chapter, Cole's work forms a forerunner to a different sort of depiction of the landscape. While Cole depicts man and man's impact within the landscape Adams images are remote, fixed and still, set apart from humankind. The landscape Adams photographs is distanced from human intervention and activity, the landscape, and his representation of that landscape, is to be viewed rather than interacted with.



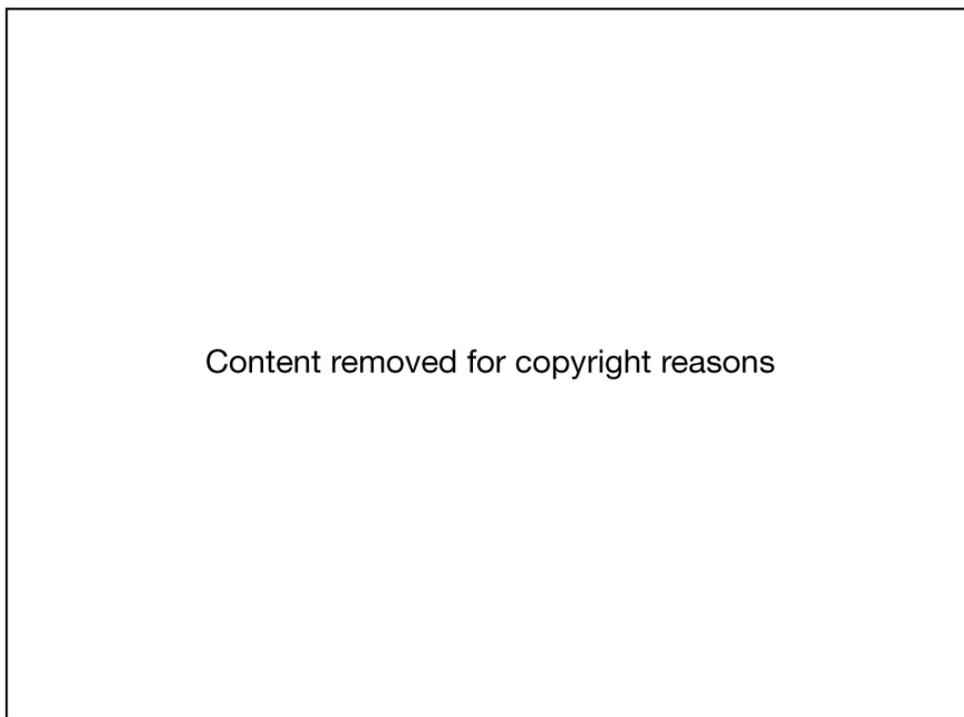
Thomas Cole, *'The Oxbow, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm, 1836*

Solnit's description of Ansel Adams as 'an obstacle nearly every western photographer has to find a way past.' (Solnit in Brittain 1999: 227) also contextualises the title of an essay written by rephotographer Mark Klett, 'The Legacy of Ansel Adams: Debts and Burdens', which was published in the 1990 *Beyond Wilderness* issue of *Aperture*, an edition dedicated to male landscape photography. While there is certainly a 'debt' owed to Adams for the quality of his work which has inspired many followers, the idea that his vision of the Wilderness is an 'obstacle' or 'burden' is also entirely appropriate. On some level we all have a connection with land and it is difficult to either look at, or to photograph, the landscape without reference to the romanticised vision perpetuated by the continuing popularity of Adams' work. Even those unfamiliar with Adams' images directly may have their view of the landscape indirectly influenced by the tradition of an idealised Arcadian vision of untainted wilderness, of 'nature as idyll', which percolates through popular culture; a vision which is perpetuated by photographers such as Cornish. This idealised vision of a simple pastoral Arcadian existence is illustrated in images

such as Adams' *Aspens, Northern New Mexico*, and Cornish's *Bluebells & Oakwood, Newton-under-Roseberry*, as shown below.



Ansel Adams, *Aspens, Northern New Mexico*, 1958



Joe Cornish, *Bluebells & Oakwood, Newton-under-Roseberry* (undated)

It seems that Adams may sometimes have found his own myth something of a burden too. Pierre Bourdieu asserts that 'The admiration of one's peers constitutes a partial legitimacy which is at least enough to establish the photographer as an artist' (Bourdieu 1996: 147). The admiration and status accorded to Adams' images of wilderness may have prevented him from fully developing his other ideas. In her book, *Divine Performance*, Anne Hammond discusses Adams' struggles and disappointment with what he perceived as his failure to fully capture the spirit of how he felt about the places he photographed. She suggests that '... his ultimate aim had been to produce, like Stieglitz, photographs so fine that they vibrated with a higher degree of emotional consciousness' (Hammond 2002: 52). Although Adams did produce other sorts of work, as Solnit asserts, he is 'defined by the purer images alone'. She adds that 'This lineal tradition has dwindled into calendar pictures and coffee-table books, which are often important as fund raisers for environmental organizations but themselves seem paralysed by a worn-out aesthetic of purity' (Solnit in Brittain 1999: 227).



Ansel Adams, *Sunrise, Mt. McKinley [Mount McKinley and Wonder Lake, Denali National Park, Alaska]* 1948

## A WORN-OUT AESTHETIC OF PURITY

Solnit's suggestion that Adams' images 'seem paralysed' also relates to the stillness and remoteness of the images themselves. Even the landscape appears paralysed and there is no activity to animate the environment. This approach to the landscape and our place within it contrasts sharply with the work of other photographers such as the 'New Topographers', rephotographer Mark Klett and other practitioners who I will discuss later in the thesis. The remote stillness of Adams' images is also at odds with what Kathleen Stewart, has described as a world 'always already abuzz with something pressing' (Stewart 2011: 448). For, as Stewart suggests 'The ordinary is a moving target' (Stewart 2007: 93), the stillness of Adams' images removes them from 'the ordinary' placing them out of reach.

Photographer Arnold Newman has stated that 'In all art forms there are many who repeat a single idea time and time again until it hardens into a rigid formula, as opposed to a natural, ever developing style.' He adds: 'Tragic is the over-influenced photographer who rigorously holds true to unyielding principles or ideas, limiting his or her horizons' (Campbell 1981: 33). It may be that Adams had to contend with the 'rigid formula' of his own limited definition of what nature and landscape can be. In his book *The Illuminating Mind in American Photography: Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Adams*, David Peeler states that although Adams 'remained enormously productive' his photography 'continued so repetitiously that it became clichéd' (Peeler 2001:347). The burden of seeing beyond the surface gloss, beyond the creation of copies or parodies of Adams' work, of avoiding 'cliché' and 'repetition', of not expressing anything new is a burden that has been passed on to each photographer and, indeed, viewer, of landscape since Adams. This has created a constant tension between Adams' view of pristine wilderness and a need to recognise and represent the multifaceted diversity of nature and landscape; to see, and photograph, beyond the cliché.

It is worth comparing Keith Arnatt's constructed 'sunset', reproduced below, with images such as Adams' *Sunrise, Mt. McKinley [Mount McKinley and Wonder Lake, Denali National Park, Alaska]*, reproduced previously, in this context. Arnatt's image takes a very recognisable man-made object to 'construct' a natural phenomena and thus helps to demonstrate the ways more recent photographers have sought to challenge and question Adams remote, pristine sense of the natural environment. Photographing the sunset has become such a cliché that images of the sunset may appear to have nothing new to offer to the viewer. Arnatt's image draws attention to both the potential for beauty in the tin can and the out of focus 'clouds', presumably of rubbish, which form the backdrop. These items are used in such a way to reference all 'other' images of sunsets, challenging the viewer to consider what is different about this image and to question the value of conventional images of sunset, or indeed, of untainted wilderness and 'nature as idyll'.



Keith Arnatt, from *Canned Sunsets, 1990-1991*

## A LONG WAY FROM EDEN: THE REALITY OF THE PLACE

Adhering to an exclusively romanticised view of either sunset or landscape can problematise anywhere that is perceived as tainted. Human's impact on the land could be viewed as impinging into the purity of Nature, thus leading to revulsion and rejection of the places we live in. This situation has developed as a direct result of what Wells calls the 'selective aesthetic' of photography (Wells 1994: 48). The 'city dwellers' referred to by Wells who are unable to achieve the Arcadian 'rural idyll', may perceive their own urban landscape as a blight on Nature. And, conversely, as the notion of the 'rural idyll' is a construct, 'country folk' may equally share a rejection of the familiar in respect of the silage clamps and mobile phone masts that now dominate the landscape. As Robert Adams puts it,

I am not questioning the value of photographs by Ansel Adams (two of whose prints hang in my home) or Eliot Porter. Their pictures of uninhabited nature are important exactly because they reveal the absolute purity of wilderness, a purity we need to know. Attention only to perfection, however, invites eventually for urban viewers – which means most of us – a crippling disgust; our world is in most places, far from clean. (Adams 1996:104)

Robert Adams later refers to the places where most of us live as being, 'a long way from Eden' (ibid.:108). Adams is suggesting that, while it is also important to recognise and value the absolute purity of 'uninhabited nature', we also need to overcome our 'crippling disgust', to accept, and learn to value, the reality of the world we live in, even if, at times it may seem 'a long way from Eden'.

One of the concerns of my own photographic practice is to embrace the effects of man within the environment. This is particularly challenging as I live in an area of outstanding natural beauty, a sort of Eden, where it is quite usual for people to take notice of the potential for beauty in the sea, the mountains

and the sunset and to create images which deliberately exclude traces of man's impact in the landscape. While the tourists jostle for the 'best' view, in order to create images of how the landscape 'should' look, I pay attention to the reality of the environment, the 'Eden' I call home. One of the central concerns of my work is to trace human impact in a celebratory way. By noticing and recording the way that light alters and shifts, and highlights aspects of the familiar that are more usually overlooked or rejected, I aim to draw attention to, rather than away from, the things that impinge on the 'rural idyll'. Conversely, the body of work I have created also contains images with a more conventional aesthetic which sit along side the images which draw attention to the obviously 'man altered' landscape. By giving equal weight to both I reject neither the traces of man within the landscape nor the beauty of the natural world. Such juxtaposition offers a new perspective on value of each aspect of the landscape, which is a concept I will discuss in more detail later in the thesis. This image below illustrates that the light falling on the caravan roofs can be at least as stimulating as the light falling on the sea.



Rachel White *Caravans, Criccieth, 2016*

In a paper presented at the Forum UNESCO University and Heritage 10<sup>th</sup> International Seminar 'Cultural Landscapes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' in 2005, Kelly Dennis notes that,

...landscape conceits utilized by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston included a point of view chosen to occlude any presence of humans, including the photographer himself, in order to maintain the fantasy of a wilderness untouched by man. (Dennis 2005: 3-4)

Dennis goes on to compare this practice with Robert Adams' *On Lookout Mountain, next to Buffalo Bill's Grave, Jefferson County, Colorado (1970)*, where she notes that 'the photographer's perspective from far-flung cliffs includes graffiti, demonstrating that there are few places, regardless of how remote, where humans have not been or not marked their presence.' (Dennis 2005: 3-4) Dennis's comments, and Robert Adams' image, which is reproduced below, make an informative comparison with Thomas Cole's painting *The Oxbow, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm. 1836*, reproduced previously. Despite the apparent differences between the images, not least the historical context, there are a striking number of similarities. Although Nature, in the form of the weather, in the Robert Adams image is not so dramatic or apparently destructive, both images are of a similar composition offering views that stretch far off into the distance, and, unlike the images of Ansel Adams, both depict the hand of humans in the foreground and the valley floor below.

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Robert Adams, *On Lookout Mountain, next to Buffalo Bill's Grave, Jefferson County, Colorado, 1970*

Photographer Mark Klett has also written about Ansel Adams' 'depopulated scenes' drawing attention to the fact that 'anyone who has visited the site of one of Adams' photographs knows that the romance of his landscapes is often best experienced in the photographs themselves. The reality of the place is quite different' (Klett: 1990). By carefully framing the view and focusing on areas without traces of man Adams has constructed images of an idealised world, of places that do not quite exist that way in reality. The images are as much to do with what he leaves out of the frame as what is included.

In her essay, 'Ansel Adams: Forgoing the Wilderness Idea' Renee Haip states that 'People assume that the Yosemite Adams photographed was undefiled nature; they fail to realize that powerlines, crowds, and litter were part of the Yosemite Valley of the 1920s and 30s. Adams chose to edit out these undesirable elements' (Haip in Read 1993: 75). The romanticised vision of Nature associated with Yosemite as a direct result of Adams' images is a misrepresentation constructed by Adams himself. Yet it is surprising to

discover that Adams never experienced Yosemite as undeveloped wilderness.

David Peeler notes that even when he first visited Yosemite as a child Adams

... never knew an undeveloped Yosemite: by the time he arrived it was at best a well-worn, well-known portal to wilderness. As early as 1902 there were phones, a school, a power plant and a complement of photographers' and painters' studios; ... young Adams's accommodations included bus transportation, a dining hall, and maid service. (Peeler 2001: 277)

Haip confirms the influence of Adams' romanticised representation of Nature, stating that 'Adams' images present an ideal; they build expectations within us. Our concept of what wilderness is and how it looks has, in part, been shaped by Ansel Adams' (Haip in Read 1993: 75). In choosing to 'edit out' the 'undesirable elements' Adams is engaging in the selective aesthetic that Wells refers to as a 'system of visual editing' (Wells 1994: 48). It is this form of 'editing' that has shaped our view of the elements that are desirable within the landscape.

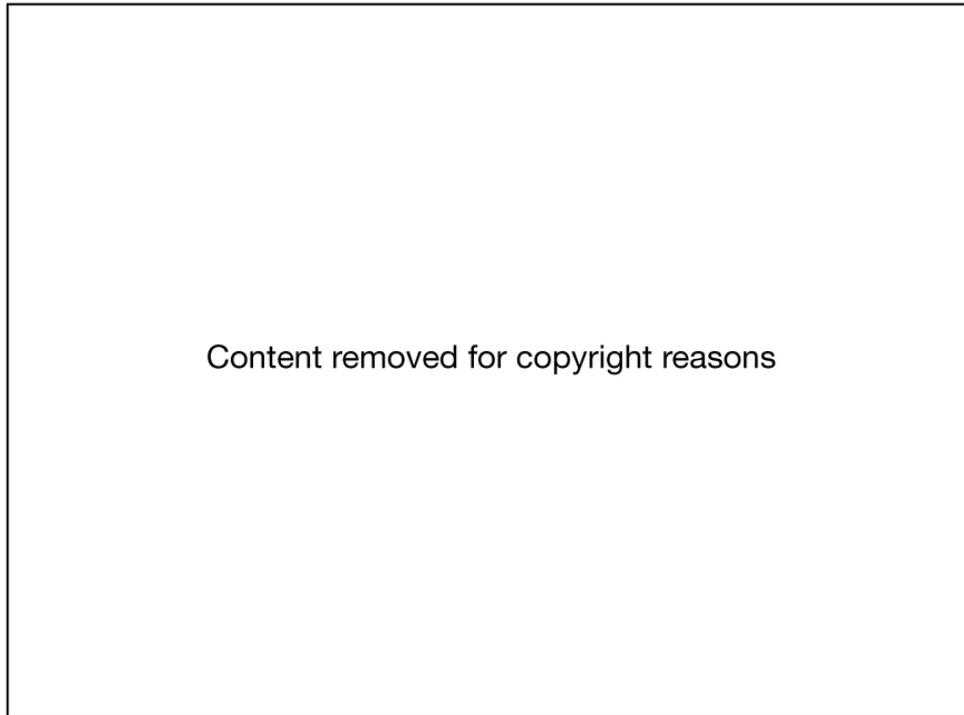
Adams depopulated images of Yosemite contrast sharply with the more contemporary view of a British 'well-worn, well-known portal to wilderness' (Peeler 2001: 277) reproduced below. In the following image photographer Martin Parr rejects neither people, nor their belongings, choosing to 'edit' them 'into' rather than 'out of' the landscape. In selecting a low camera angle Parr employs his wry sense of humour by emphasising the jostling bodies crushed together, presumably all in search of the tranquillity promised by retreat to an Arcadian rural idyll. Unlike many of Adams' landscapes, rather than describing an immaculate, de-populated remote world of stillness which is removed from 'the ordinary' and placed out of reach, Parr's highly populated image is immediate and full of life, describing an ordinary world that is easy to identify with; a world that is 'abuzz with something pressing' (Stewart 2011: 448).



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Martin Parr, *Dovedale, Peak District*, 1989

Human presence in the landscape is something that Adams himself had planned to explore. In a letter to David McAlpin dated January 1943, he writes, 'Nature for me, is alive – just as alive as people. But my next phase will be *people in relation to Nature*' (Street Alinder and Gray Stillman 2001: 145 – Adams' italics). Possibly due to the 'burden' of his own success in creating iconic images of depopulated Wilderness, Adams never fully achieved this goal. It is telling to compare the following image, which Adams created in 1960, with his 1927 image *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite Valley*, reproduced previously. The images are so similar that they could have been created at the same time rather than thirty-three years apart. Although they are technically accomplished they are repetitive; the later image does not offer any different insights to the previous one, Adams' ideas do not seem to have developed during the intervening years.



Ansel Adams, *Moon and Half Dome*, 1960

## A SENSE OF PLACE

The impact of Adams' work is explored by Robert Dawson as he recalls:

I can remember the first time I saw an Ansel Adams photograph. As a nine-year-old child, I was thrilled by his photographs of a spectacular place called Yosemite. Years later, when I finally visited Yosemite, I found the landscape disappointing compared to these first Adams' images. (Dawson and Manchester in Read 1993: 91)

Dawson's experience mirrors that of Klett, and his comments echo Klett's statement that 'anyone who has visited the site of one of Adams' photographs knows that the romance of his landscapes is often best experienced in the photographs themselves. The reality of the place is quite different' (Klett in Aperture: 1990). Similarly, Ian Walker comments:

I remember going to Wells Cathedral, walking through a tiny door and

there before me was Fredrick Evans' photograph of the 'sea of steps' leading up to the chapter house. Memory framed the scene before me and I climbed the steps into the photograph. ... Standing there, one is aware of how much the experience of a place the photograph leaves out. (Walker in Brittian 1999:127-128)

Walker refers, not simply to the actuality of some steps in Wells Cathedral that Fredrick Evans had once photographed, but 'there before me was Fredrick Evans' photograph of the 'sea of steps'. The photograph, and Walker's memory of the photograph, is stronger than the reality of the steps before him. Walker does not climb the steps; he climbs INTO the photograph. However, like Dawson and Klett, in actuality Walker is confronted with the reality that exists outside the view that has been framed by Evans' photograph. The real place is not the place that exists only within the confines of the image and the memory of that image, just as the reality of Yosemite extends beyond the visually edited framing of Adams' images.



Fredrick Evans, *Sea of Steps*, 1903

Walker adds that ‘...once one is away from the real situation, the power of the image swells to occupy memory’ (ibid.:127-128). This can also be the experience of the photographer as well as the viewer of an image. Minor White has commented that, ‘When I look at pictures I have made, I have forgotten what I saw in front of the camera and respond only to what I am seeing in the photographs.’ (Mulligan and Wooters 1999: 640), which echoes Barthes’ assertion that a photograph ‘actually blocks memory, quickly becoming a counter-memory’ (Barthes 2000: 91). Barthes statement also relates to a suggestion made during a lecture about Phototherapy by Mark Wheeler concerning the physicality and neurological processes involved in looking at an image. Wheeler explained that creating or looking at a photograph generates a stronger memory than looking at the subject of the image directly because in order to register the information framed by the viewfinder or contained within a picture frame the eyes are required to physically scan the image. This process triggers neurological pathways in the brain which are then stored and can be recalled and repeated at will. Creating and reactivating these neurological pathways creates a strong memory, which is why it is apparently good practice to write something down in order to remember it, even if the paper that has been written on is subsequently discarded.

Nadine Barth seems to make a similar point in her introduction to *Vanishing Landscapes*, when she suggests that ‘Certain images can trigger a flash of recognition’. However, it is unclear whether she is referring to a neurological process, a subjective flash of re-cognition, or to the prick, or flash, of recognition which Roland Barthes refers to as the ‘punctum’. She also suggests, with reference to John Berger, that ‘Landscape becomes the window of our relationship with reality, images of landscape become a reflection on [sic] ourselves’ (Barth 2008: no page numbers given). In a phrase more usually associated with conflict, Klett suggests that Adams’ images hold ‘a sense of remorse for the land’s passage from wilderness to occupied territory’ (Klett: 1990). While Adams’ work selectively edits out man’s intrusions into Nature to

regain a sense of untouched wilderness it is ironic that in one respect the popularity of Adams' work has compounded this loss of wilderness. Vistas made famous by his images have become tourist attractions: places of pilgrimage. Inevitably the landscape is compromised as a result of increasing footfall, the wilderness further put at risk by visitors such as Robert Dawson.

In respect of the commodification of specific viewpoints Klett asserts that 'some photographers protect themselves by not allowing the viewpoint to be known' (Fox 2001: 253). Here, Klett is not suggesting that the photographers are attempting to protect the *landscape* by withholding details about where an image was created, but rather, that they are attempting to protect *themselves*, presumably from other photographers and the possibility that a 'better' image than their own could be created in a place that they have discovered and a space where they have a sense of personal ownership. Although I have a strong sense of 'ownership' of places that I've photographed, I am not interested in giving details about where an image has been created simply because it seems irrelevant to the purpose of my work. If such details are given without a specific reason for doing so the viewer may become involved in reading the text rather than reading the image, as if the text were more significant than the image, or as if it will somehow unlock the meaning of the image. The following images by Elliott Erwitt, observed with his usual humour, appear to demonstrate just this; although it is possible that the viewers may simply be briefly reading or recording the information after having spent time considering the art works.



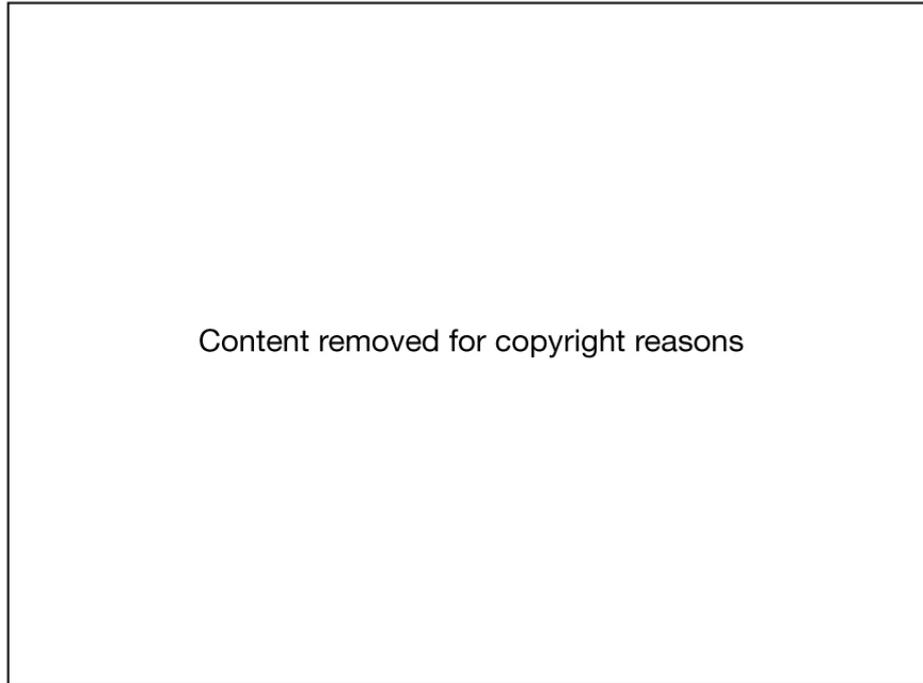
Elliott Erwitt, *Versailles, France*, 1975



Elliott Erwitt, *Personal*, 1996

While Klett asserts that ‘some photographers protect themselves by not allowing the viewpoint to be known’ (Fox 2001: 253) some contemporary practitioners give consideration to whether or not it is appropriate to add text to their images. Discussing the lack of text to accompany his ‘Destroy this Memory’ series of images which document the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005, Richard Misrach comments, “I thought it should be the people's words, their voices, with as little a footprint as I could have.” Where the work

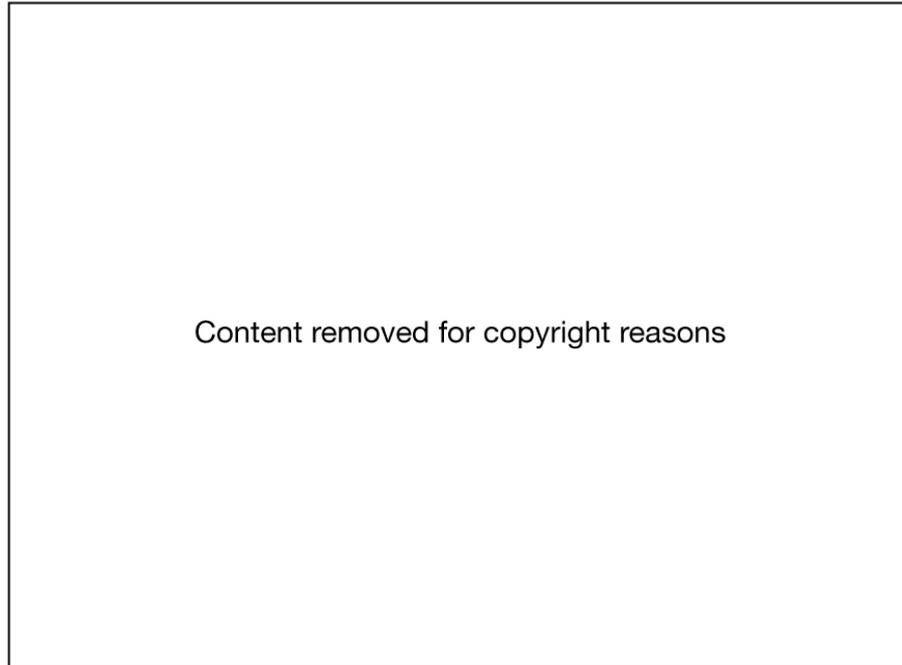
has been exhibited 'The ... exhibits are therefore devoid of any additional written mediation or explanation by the curators or the artist. There is no introduction to the works and there are no titles. There are no page numbers in the book, and the museums who were bequeathed the photographs were forced to name their respective exhibits themselves' (Misrach 2010: on line).



Richard Misrach, *Destroy this Memory*, 2005

In the 2008 environmental publication, *Vanishing Landscapes*, Olaf Otto Becker deliberately gives the GPS (Global Positioning System) co-ordinates as part of the title of each of his images as an invitation to the viewer, and to future viewers of the works, to see how the places he has photographed change over time. While the red sled may have been included in the image below for practical reasons, or maybe to give a sense of scale, Becker includes traces of man in a truly wilderness environment while Adams' work excludes traces of man in what is no longer wilderness. Although there are picturesque qualities to Becker's ostensibly environmental image Becker's image has been created as a piece of visual information, which seems to bear little resemblance to the sort of images created by Adams and with little regard for the 'burden' set out by Adams' vision of landscape. However both Becker and Adams have created

images that are about the idea of wilderness and the fragility of wilderness, both sorts of images ask the viewer to value, and protect, threatened wilderness environments.



Olaf Otto Becker, *Ice Sheet 1, Greenland 07/2007, 69°47'18"N, 050°05'48"W, 429 metres high.*

Context is key in some instances. The following image by Chloe Dewe Mathews is taken from a series commissioned by the University of Oxford as part of the WW1 Centenary Art Commissions. Dewe Mathews has created a series of nondescript, seemingly 'emotionally neutral' landscapes. However, the accompanying text reveals these landscapes to be the scenes of executions for cowardice or desertion during the First World War. Dewe Mathews has created images of what *The Guardian* refers to as 'emotionally loaded places' that have, until photographed by Dewe Mathews, 'been lost to history'. While it is beyond the scope of this study to do justice to this immensely powerful body of work, the power the images hold only becomes clear once the context is known to the viewer. This is an instance where the caption of the image is crucial to an understanding of the image. Dewe Mathews comments that in speaking to locals she learned that the shootings 'cast a shadow over the land

and the family [*who owned the land*] for many years afterwards' (italics, my words). Dewe Mathews photographs each site, at dawn, at the same time of year when each execution took place. Almost unbearably poignantly she comments that she began to realise that she 'was placing my tripod around the same spot where the firing squad had stood' (Dewe-Mathews 2014: on line).



Chloe Dewe Mathews, *Six Farm, Loker, West Vlaanderen, Joseph Byers, Andrew Evans 6.2.1915, George E Collins 15.2.1915. From Shot at Dawn*, 2013

As Barth suggests, the way we use images of landscape has 'become a reflection on ourselves' (Barth 2008: no page numbers given), or of our society. Becker's images can be used as a means of cataloguing environmental concerns, while Dewe Mathews documents elements of war which were previously hidden. The continuing success of work featuring the sort of 'visual editing' popularised by Adams suggests that we would like to conserve what Silberman has referred to as our 'nineteenth-century notions' (Silberman in Read 1993: 39) regarding landscape, a point which also emphasises the fact that even the vision of 'undefiled' landscape has become commercialised. It is interesting to contextualise expeditions to visit and capture/ recapture/ consume famous landmarks, with the wry suggestion made by William L. Fox in *View Finder: Mark Klett, Photography, and the Reinvention of Landscape*, that 'More often than not, landscape photography is just a background against

which sport utility vehicles are sold' (Fox 2001: 268-269). It is not without irony that by utilising the romanticised associations of the 'wild' landscape to advertise items from cars through to Ernst Haas' famous images for Marlboro cigarettes, the landscape and images of the landscape have been reduced to 'products' reflecting the commodification of our culture. This is exemplified by the advertising campaign reproduced below, which, although not quite wilderness, also employs not just images of the landscape, but images of images of the landscape which refer specifically to David Hockney's series of 'joiner' photographs as a backdrop in an advertising campaign to sell 'sport utility vehicles' (September 2009).



In closing his essay, Klett remarks that it is difficult to view Adams' seemingly anachronistic images without cynicism. He discusses the importance of finding

significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes, and to appreciate them in spite of our human presence, to see we have a place on the land, and that the land is not a commodity separate from ourselves; or simply to experience the basic connection with place, and to realise that this feeling is not the result of a cultural construct. (Klett: 1990)

The following image represents my understanding of the sort of ‘significance of quiet, less monumental landscapes’ that Klett is referring to. While, like Ansel Adams, my images are often de-populated, unlike Adams, my work concerns developing an acceptance and appreciation of the ‘landscape’ ‘in spite of’, or perhaps because of, ‘human presence’.



Rachel White, *Criccieth, Out of Season*, 2015

## **SIGNIFICANT, LESS MONUMENTAL, LANDSCAPES**

The following section considers Klett’s suggestion regarding the importance of finding ‘significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes’ in respect of three practitioners whose work I particularly admire, Elliott Erwitt, Ernst Haas and Mark Power. While this grouping may initially appear contradictory because their work embodies a differing aesthetic, I am drawn to the fact that these practitioners engage with the act of seeing and recording their ‘sideways glance’ at life, acknowledging, as I do, the significance of everyday details, the

'quiet, less monumental landscapes' which often pass unnoticed. I particularly appreciate the rich colours and detail captured by Haas and the subtle humour of Er Witt's work.

One of the aspects of Haas' photography that I find particularly striking is the aesthetic appeal of his images. Drenched in luminous colour, often perplexing, filled with odd reflections or seemingly abstract shapes, strange in a way that captures attention and makes the viewer engage and attempt to work out what the images are about. By drawing attention to often overlooked details of the everyday they offer new ways of looking at the world. Although we have, culturally, become more visually sophisticated as a result of our constant exposure to visual stimulation, through electronic media in particular, since Haas created his images, they still have a freshness and vibrancy. Because of his attunement to the everyday, to beauty that is often unseen because it is unconventional, the images continue to offer new ways of seeing. The image below, from 1976, is about the way the light filters through the voile curtain, how it falls along the carpet colouring it, and reflects, distorted in the front of the television screen. This sort of everyday beauty is easy to overlook, but Haas notices it and considers it worth recording.



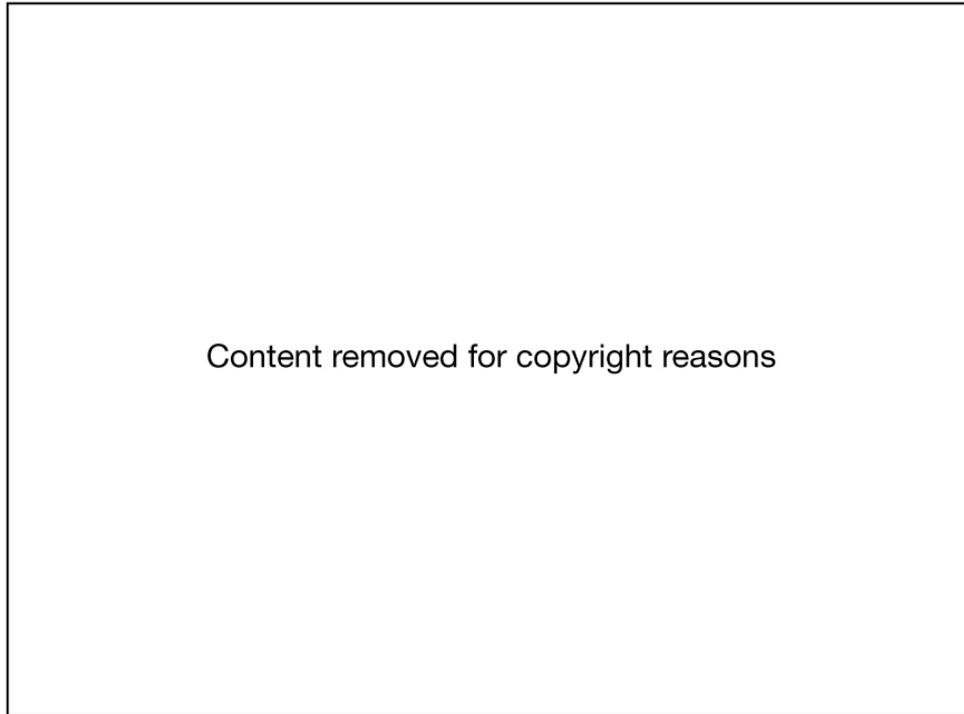
Ernst Haas, *California, USA*, 1976

I also identify very strongly with Erwitte's constant drive to create images, as illustrated by the following comment from his book 'On The Beach':

I get in a lousy mood if I make the mistake of going to the beach without a camera and then see a picture happen. When I do take a camera, I have to remember to moderate myself. Girlfriends or my kids can get pissy, because I'm not really at the beach with them. I'm there alone with my camera. (Erwitte 1991: 8)

I understand the motivation to have a camera available at all times and the sort of intense engagement with looking that is attuned to 'see a picture happen', to acknowledge the 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes' rather than setting something up, either in a studio, or by waiting at the 'right place' in the landscape for the 'right' light. Sontag refers to the motivation to create images as part of daily life, 'It would not be wrong to speak of people having a *compulsion* to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing. Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it' (Sontag 1979: 24). Unlike the images created by Ansel Adams, rather than

attempting to modify either the landscape or my experience of it my images reflect my experience of the place or moment. Such images are not remote or still, for, as Stewart suggests ‘The ordinary is a moving target’ (Stewart 2007: 93). This is an aspect of engagement with photographic practice that I will go on to discuss in greater detail in the following chapters.



Elliott Erwitt, *Florida Keys*, 1968

If, as Stewart suggests, ‘The ordinary is a moving target’ (Stewart 2007: 93), when I am engaged in creating images for a commercial job, in order not to miss anything happening within the constantly moving, ever changing, ordinary things that are happening all around, I usually create images for myself alongside those I am producing for a commercial purpose. This methodological approach relates directly to Henri Cartier Bresson’s comments about Erwitt in an article in *The Guardian* in 2003: ‘ “Elliott has to my mind achieved a miracle, ... working on a chain-gang of commercial campaigns and still offering a bouquet of stolen photos with a flavour, a smile from his deeper self ” (Cartier Bresson 2003: on line). Like Erwitt, I am motivated to capture what is happening beyond the confines of what is framed by commercial activity, or as Klett puts it, ‘simply to experience the basic connection with place’ (Klett:

1990). In suggesting likening such images to a 'bouquet', Cartier Bresson is suggesting that these sort of images are a beautiful gift. I particularly relate to the suggestion that these images are a 'smile from a deeper self'; this is a concept that I will return to and explore in more detail later in this thesis.

In the same article John Szarkowski writes of Erwit:

He's not only talented but extremely intelligent ... and, as we know, in our world intelligence often passes for wit – if you tell the truth people think you are being funny, and in consequence he is one of the few photographers whose work is identified by extraordinary wit. (Szarkowski 2003: on line)

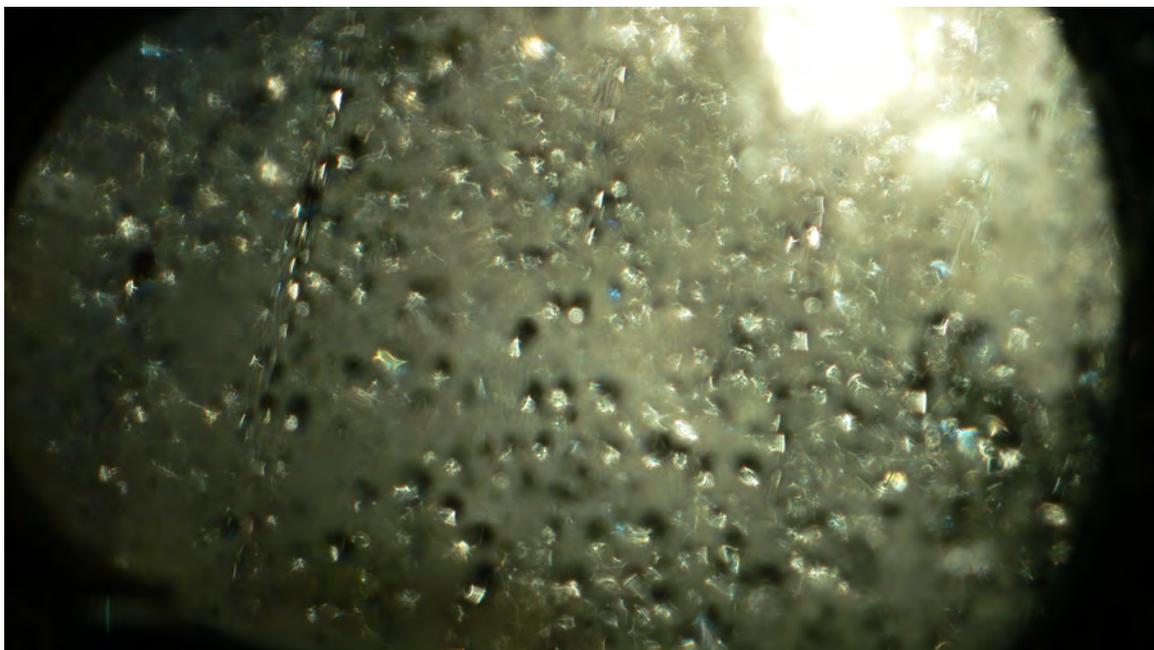
Below are reproductions of images which include car wing mirrors that have been created by Erwit, (1955) Haas (1977) and myself (2010). These three images of the same subject matter are visually very different. The images by Erwit and Haas include the landscape while in my image the surface of the wing mirror becomes the landscape. Erwit's image, which is the most straightforward, was created as part of a commercial enterprise. The image by Haas is more thought provoking, requiring the viewer to look closely in order to work out the juxtaposition of dark landscape, power lines, neon sign, and a lighter sky, reflected in a car wing mirror, which appears to float disconnected, in the deep black space at the centre of the image. My image is about the way that the light glistens and refracts on the dew on the surface of my wing mirror. The fact that it is a car wing mirror is difficult to tell and relevant only in so much as it draws attention to the riches that can be found by paying attention to the things that can be observed in 'quiet, less monumental landscapes'. In this respect my image has more in common with the one made by Haas, because both images are about light and both suggest a different way of looking at the world.



Ernst Haas, *Western Skies Motel, Colorado, 1977*



Elliott Erwitt, *Santa Monica, California, 1955*



Rachel White, *Glisten: Wing Mirror*, 2010

While it is easy to share an affinity with Er Witt and Haas, because both practitioners produce work that is relatively easy to understand and to connect with, I also have a strong sense of connection with the work of Mark Power. I find a particular resonance with his way of seeing and recording the world. This is especially true of the 2011 commissioned work that forms part of the ongoing 'Black Country Stories' project, which involves a number of different practitioners. When I first became aware of Power's contribution to this body of work I experienced an unexpected jolt of recognition, rather like Barthes' concept of the punctum. It seemed to me that the images he had created for 'Black Country Stories' could have been made by me, and conversely, some of the images I have made could have been created by him. Power seems to share my sensibilities, seeming to see the world the way that I do, being affected by the same things, noticing and responding to similar details, employing similar combinations of colour and humour to draw attention to what has been described in an article about Power in the Royal Photographic Society Journal as the 'things that go unnoticed' (Land 2012: 328). A publication funded by Multistory, the Arts Council and The New Art Gallery Walsall, which details Power's contribution to Black Country Stories states that 'Power's work has sought to reveal the beauty of the everyday and the overlooked' (back cover.)

Although similarly focusing on details of the everyday, Power's contribution to Black Country Stories has been created with a very different approach to that of either Erwitt, Haas or myself. In an article in the Royal Photographic Society Journal Power discussed his use of 5x4 film stating that he enjoys the discipline that working with film brings to his practice, 'I quite enjoy the frugality imposed by the sheer expense of it ... currently it costs about £10 every time I press the button, to get to the contact sheet stage' which 'certainly concentrates the mind' (Land 2012: 332). Power suggests that due to the expense involved he usually only exposes one sheet of film in each situation. This is the complete antithesis of my way of working; I have made a conscious decision to sacrifice image quality in order to have a camera available at all times as a tool to record the fleeting detail of everyday life, finding the 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes'. It has often been said that the best camera is the one that you have with you, meaning that no matter how good your equipment, if you do not have it with you, you cannot capture the moment. Like Erwitt, I am constantly engaged with looking, waiting for a picture to 'happen'. While I am currently, ostensibly, creating images for my PhD research, prior to, and post PhD, I will continue to document life, developing the methodological approach I have engaged with throughout this research project. Conversely, Mark Power is working to a specific commission and therefore deliberately seeking to create images to tell a story rather than waiting until pictures present themselves randomly juxtaposed throughout his daily routine. While Power may make only one image in a given situation, in his contribution to Black Country Stories, the light is usually flat and neutral, while I can create any number in order to document the affect of ever changing light. I do not deliberately go out to seek images, however I am ready to react and respond as situations reveal themselves and therefore I need to have a camera with me at all times. Although my images do not hold the same level of detail as those created with a large format camera I hope that, like the images created by Haas and Erwitt, my subject matter and the way it has been photographed will offer the viewer a chance to consider

the possibilities of a new way of looking, and thinking about, the ordinary things that are familiar to them.

Although both Power and I create images that concern developing an appreciation of the aesthetic potential which is readily available throughout the course of daily life, finding ‘significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes’ it is important to me that my work is as it appeared at the moment of capture, and not ‘enhanced’ by post production techniques. This is the antithesis of many images that take advantage of ‘post production techniques’, such as the use of Photoshop, to ‘improve’ the world that has been photographed by making adjustments to the reality of the world within the image. This approach is nothing new, Ansel Adams famous image, *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico*, from 1941, which is reproduced in the following chapter, results from Adams’ printing techniques. By employing his ‘zone system’ of printing Adams was able to create contrast within the image that draws out the light of the moon and the crosses in the foreground, giving an intensity, and suggesting a meaning, that neither the world, nor the original image had until it was printed in this way.

By contrast, the frontispiece to Elliott Erwitt’s book, *On The Beach* clearly states that ‘None of the photographs in this book have been electronically altered or manipulated’, and when a member of the audience asked Erwitt for his thoughts on digital technology at a talk I attended several years ago, Erwitt replied that it was the content of an image and not the means by which it was recorded that make an image memorable. This suggestion from Erwitt is echoed by Richard Misrach in his approach to the 2005 project ‘Destroy this Memory’. Misrach, who, like Power, is more usually associated with achieving high quality results using large format photographic capture, or what Claire O’Donall refers to as the ‘invasive view-camera’, (O’Donall 2010: on line) employed a 4 megapixel ‘point and shoot’ digital camera to capture the images which subsequently resulted in his book *Destroy this Memory*. Central to the

images, which document the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina, is the particular poignancy of the graffiti that appeared throughout what remained of New Orleans after the hurricane. Misrach observes that while he originally intended to use the point and shoot camera as a tool for 'note taking', he suggests that 'The smaller camera allowed me to do things I could not do with the bigger camera... and one of them was the sort of artless... raw communication that does parallel that actual writing on the walls" (Misrach 2010: on line). In this instance Misrach foregoes the crisp clean qualities and the considered approach of large format photography in order to capture the immediacy and rawness of his experience. One compromise I have made in my own work is to compromise the quality of the images by using variety of 'point and shoot' cameras in order to have a camera with me at all times, for, as Erwitt says, 'I get in a lousy mood if I make the mistake of going to the beach without a camera and then see a picture happen.' (Erwitt1991: 8) In my case, I get in a lousy mood if I make the mistake of going *anywhere* without a camera and then see a picture happen. Like Erwitt I have problems 'moderating myself'. Moderation is an issue which I will return to later in the thesis to discuss in more depth.



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The aim of my work links closely to Power's observations in relation to his role in the 'Black Country Stories' project. Power suggests that ' I'm hoping to produce a series of prints which will encourage viewers - the majority of whom will be local - to stop and think about the things they pass by every day unnoticed - and get them thinking about a different notion of beauty' (Land 2012: 332). This idea relates to the instructive role referred to previously in relation to both Ansel Adams and Joe Cornish. Power suggests that this is a concept which has interested him since his time in Poland while engaged in the 'Sound of Two Songs' body of work, which he developed as a 'reaction to the kind of tourist books you could buy there - always of pretty castles and lakes, shot in bright sunshine - which was the antithesis of what I was seeing myself' (ibid.: 332). Again this relates to my own experience of the reality living in an area of outstanding natural beauty. The tourist postcards operate within the framework laid down by Ansel Adams rather than embracing the mobile phone masts and wind turbines which populate the landscape, and which are referred to by my images. The sea and the mountains are still there, but the impact of man within the landscape is a reality which co-exists within the aesthetic of that world.

Successful images of the landscape draw attention to both human impact within the landscape and also the landscape itself. Sometimes the sort of 'tourist book' images that Power refers to can be the reality of the place, and juxtaposing images with a more traditional aesthetic alongside those that detail other sorts of realities, such as human intervention within the landscape, offers a more complex and complete view of the world. Valuing only the 'ordinary' landscapes of everyday life while rejecting the sort of pristine, remote, aesthetic of Ansel Adams, offers only a partial view of reality. It is important to acknowledge that the sort of wilderness depicted by Adams does exist, but it is not the only sort of landscape worth photographing. Although Adams employed a 'system of visual editing' to 'manipulate' the landscape by leaving

what he considered to be undesirable elements beyond the confines of the frame, such 'editing' is a fact of any photograph or painting. Whether an image is of the landscape or a portrait, or an abstract image, 'visual editing', that is, deciding what to include within the picture frame and what to exclude from the viewer, gives meaning to an image. It is a significant tool that is employed by all creative practitioners. While it is important to recognise that beauty is not always about perfection and it is not always confined to wilderness, it is equally important not to reject the beauty that can be found there. Repeating the cliché of images of sunset may offer nothing new, however, it does not diminish the beauty of the sunset. Successful images of the landscape seek to reconcile these two seemingly opposite views and present a more complete and complex view of the world. As Jurovics states, 'It must be acknowledged that the formal elegance and lyricism that has been a hallmark of more traditional American landscape photography is not mutually exclusive with a contemporary practice; nor should the affection and concern that stands behind these photographs be dismissed for fear of sentimentality' (Jurovics in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 12).

## **THE SENSE OF SOMETHING COMING INTO EXISTENCE**

In a paper entitled 'Atmospheric Attunements', Kathleen Stewart refers to the way in which atmospheres, and things, can 'pull the senses into alert' (Stewart 2011: 445), which is an apt description of my methodological approach to creating photographs. Unlike Power I do not actively search out images, but rather react to my own 'lived sensory moments' (ibid.: 445). Like Er Witt and Haas I am developing a process of 'atmospheric attunement', keeping constantly alert and vigilant, becoming 'attuned to the sense of something coming into existence' (ibid.: 445); engaging with what Stewart describes as 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (ibid.: 446). She describes the experience thus: 'There's a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the

sense that something is coming into existence' (ibid.: 445). This parallels Dorothea Lange's experience when creating the image, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco*. Lange describes her experience: 'You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you' (Haworth-Booth 1983: 124).

This description relates directly to the creation of photographic imagery, the ability of the photographer to recognize things coming together to form a 'decisive moment' and the ability of a photograph to freeze, or 'suspend' slices of time. Primarily the act of photography concerns suspending the temporal because of a sense that 'something is coming into existence'. Like Lange's image, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco*, the strongest photographic images, those which hold the greatest 'charge', are 'animated' by their ability to capture this sense of connection and anticipation. This sort of animation and sense of connection is the antithesis of the stillness and remoteness of many images by Adams.

Although the nature of a photograph as an object is a stationary, two dimensional, representation of the world, a photograph has the power to 'move', both on an emotional and political level, and also through the power to capture movement through freeze frame or motion blur, defining differing lengths, or widths, of the 'slices of time' embodied within a single frame. From Cartier Bresson's concept of the single 'decisive moment', to the anticipation employed by Susan Derges in creating unseen images taken at night, using a brief instant of flash to illuminate the unseen eddies of water flowing around the bed of a stream, embodying suspended time 'animated by the sense that something is coming into existence'. Or the temporal suspension of Eadweard Muybridge's 'freeze frame' studies of movement, or Ori Gersht's 'Blow Up' and 'Time After Time' series of flower arrangements at the moment of their explosive destruction or the long exposures employed by Richard Misrach in his Sky series in order to detail the traces of the stars moving across the sky.

Images which anticipate 'something is coming into existence', capturing what the eye cannot see.

Unlike those photographers who actively seek to create a specific image my methodological approach relates closely to what Stewart describes as a 'state of attention that is also impassivity - a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place' (Stewart 2011: 446) within the landscape of the everyday. My images are about a sense that 'things hanging in the air are worth describing' (ibid.: 447). Stewart refers to what Lauren Berlant describes as 'a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects the material that might help to ... maintain one's sea legs ...' (Berlant 2010:5) That is, for me, through a process of constant vigilance I am able to create images, as things 'snap into place', as part of my everyday life, which help me to maintain my equilibrium, create my own sense of place, establish my 'sea legs' within a shifting world. Szarkowski notes that 'An artist is a man who seeks new structures in which to order and simplify his sense of the reality of his life' (Szarkowski 2007: no page numbers indicated). For, as Stewart puts it, the landscape in my world is 'always already abuzz with something pressing' (Stewart 2011: 448).

Mark Power refers to the controlled, measured, approach of his 'Black Country Stories body of work; the fact that 'There is nothing surreptitious in this body of work, nothing stolen' (Land 2012: 332). Again, this is the opposite of my own methodology, particularly when shooting from a moving car, when there is a sense that my images are tantalising fleeting possibilities, 'stolen' glimpses of other lives, as things 'snap into place' in a world that is 'always already abuzz with something pressing' (Stewart 2011: 448). Similarly, Henri Cartier Bresson commented about Erwitt 'offering a bouquet of stolen photos' (Cartier Bresson 2003: on line), little glimpses of the 'things hanging in the air are worth describing' (Stewart 2011: 446). In the following image Power will have deliberately methodically set up his camera and exposed a single sheet of film,

to draw attention to the irony of the fact that a house, whose outline is traced on the gable end of the neighbouring property, has been removed and replaced with a much smaller house, and a large parking area. My image, which follows, is also the product of a single moment, is a stolen glimpse, the recognition of something 'hanging in the air' which is 'worth describing' (ibid.: 447) a single shot, captured from a moving car. For, as Cartier-Bresson has suggested, '...photography is the recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event' (The RPS Journal December 2014: 745). While not dissimilar compositionally from Power's image, mine draws attention to the juxtaposition, and similarity between, the incongruous palm trees and the Prince of Wales feathers, the safety railings outside the pub, and the decorative railings defining the boundary of the house, with its paved 'garden' parking area of palm trees and ubiquitous wheelie bins.

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Mark Power, *Quarry Bank* 16/4/12



Rachel White, *Prince of Wales with Palm Trees*, 2014

Stewart suggests that the sort of obsessional hyper-vigilance I engage in can become a 'mania', that it 'can start to take on the weight of a *life* from time invested, identities invented, or the need for something' (Stewart 2011: 449).

This relates to my own experience of the ‘weight’ of the ‘need’ to never miss a moment, a drive shared by Erwitt, who, by his own admission, gets ‘in a lousy mood if I make the mistake of going ... without a camera and then see a picture happen’ (Erwitt 1991: 8). The intensity of this engagement differs from the experience that Mark Power described during a talk at Walsall Art Gallery in September 2012. He described the process of constant vigilance as ‘exhausting’ and said that he was only able to keep it up for an hour or so at a time. Stewart suggests that ‘The laboured viscosity of being *in* whatever’s happening renders choices and surfaces already weighty with the atmosphere one is literally attuning to. It produces hard-won attachments that can be hard to get out of once you’re in’ (Stewart 2011: 451). I have first hand experience of Stewart’s ‘hard-won attachments’ and understand that it ‘can be hard to get out of once you’re in’ that place. I work to continually create vast numbers of photographic images which document series of interconnected moments that go beyond the fall of darkness in a manner which Stewart refers to as ‘The moments of arrest that mark a recognition or just a habitual pause in a tempo. All the sidling up to things, the serial immersions in one thing after another’ (ibid.: 452). Or as Erwitt puts it, ‘I have to remember to moderate myself. Girlfriends or my kids can get pissy, because I’m not really at the beach with them. I’m there alone with my camera’ (Erwitt 1991: 8). My experience of constantly ‘sidling up to things’ and the ‘serial immersions’; the sense of being ‘alone with my camera’ have created physical damage that my body is struggling to repair.

In discussing his selection process for an exhibition at The New Art Gallery, Walsall (20 July – 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012) of the images which he created as part of the ‘Black Country Stories’ body of work Power states, ‘ “There are about 450 negatives in the whole project” he says, “but just 26 prints in the show. It could have been a lot more, but I wanted to retain some feeling of space in the gallery”’ (Land 2012: 333). While I respect the idea of retaining a feeling of space when exhibiting work in a gallery, my own selection process

differs. By choosing to exhibit numerous images in order to disseminate the visual research element of this study I am attempting to capture the sense that the aesthetic potential of ordinary, everyday, moments is available all around us at all times. The work refers to what Stewart describes as ‘the serial immersions in one thing after another’ (Stewart 2011: 452). However, despite the quantity of images I have selected for exhibition, these form only a tiny proportion of the images that have been generated as a result of engagement with this research project.

Stewart aptly describes atmosphere as a ‘force field in which people find themselves’ (Stewart 2011: 452). She suggests that atmosphere is an ‘attunement of the senses ... to potential ways of living in or living through things. A living through that shows up in the generative precarity of ordinary sensibilities of ... being in love with some form or life ...being ready for something – anything - to happen’ (ibid.: 452). In closing her paper Stewart draws attention to the fact that ‘Attending to atmospheric attunements and trying to figure their significance incites forms of writing and critique that detour into descriptive eddies and attach to trajectories’ (ibid.: 452). It seems that ‘Attending to atmospheric attunements’ is something I am attempting to do through my photographic practice, as it struggles to grasp the changing nature of nature and of landscape photography, as demonstrated in the image below, and that this is reflected by the eclectic nature of this thesis which draws interconnected threads from seemingly diverse disciplines.



Rachel White, *Drainage Pipe*, 2015

COMMONPLACE BEAUTIES THAT LET US KNOW WE'RE HOME



Rachel White, Petrol Station: *Yellow and Blue*, 2014

## NEW TOPOGRAPHICS: PHOTOGRAPHS OF A MAN-ALTERED LANDSCAPE

The previous chapter referred to Klett's suggestions concerning the importance of finding 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes' and learning to 'see we have a place on the land' (Klett: 1990). Although these suggestions were made by Klett in 1990, his essay was predated by the 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, which heralded a paradigm shift within the genre of landscape photography. *New Topographics* referred to 'less monumental landscapes' which acknowledged human presence, an intent which was clearly stated within the subtitle of the exhibition; *Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*. In the book, *Reframing The New Topographics*, Finis Dunaway comments that the work of the New Topographers 'broke from the tradition of defining landscape as wilderness and instead depicted nature as a backdrop to the built environment' (Dunaway in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 16). In the same book John Rohrbach discusses the New Topographers 'rejection of the dominant wilderness-defined landscape aesthetic' (Rohrbach in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: XX) stating that, by

drawing attention to the contemporary landscape, the *New Topographics* exhibition broke substantially from the outlook of Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter ... Where Adams and Porter defined landscape as separate from humanity, to these young photographers nature and humanity were interwoven. (Rohrbach in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: XVII)

The landscapes depicted by the New Topographers are human in scale, and, in some cases, deliberately provocative, setting out to involve the viewer in a dialogue with the concerns of the work, rather than as a passive observer. The landscape depicted by the New Topographers is not pristine, it is not remote, and it is not removed from the everyday. Unlike the work of Ansel Adams, the

*New Topographics* images do not form ‘sealed packages’ to be ‘viewed’ rather than responded to. Rohrbach refers to the way that the New Topographers ‘offer a low-key alternative to the grandiose visions of their immediate photographic predecessors: Ansel Adams and Minor White’ (Rohrbach in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: XXIII), explaining how

...by carefully crafting their images, they were also creating a new definition of beauty ... Quite simply they were calling on people to stop, look, and think about the activities that were occurring on the land and, like other activists of the day, to engage with it rather than focus only on pristine landscapes as the sites to savor. (Rohrbach in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: XXI)

The images of *New Topographics* encourage a dialogue about the value of the landscape and man’s place within it.

Toby Jurovics refers to a particularly significant comment made by New Topographics photographer, Frank Gohlke, during an interview in 2007, concerning the prevailing aesthetic at the time of the *New Topographics* exhibition. Gohlke’s states that

Landscape work was being done by a lot of people that were influenced by Adams, Weston, Minor White, and Caponigro that just seemed really dead to me – all the conviction had gone out of it. They weren’t responding to the world anymore: they were responding to an ideal of photographic excellence that came purely from other photographers. (Jurovics in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 6)

It is particularly significant that Gohlke states that landscape work wasn’t ‘responding to the *world* anymore’ (my italics) but rather to ‘an ideal of photographic excellence that came purely from other photographers’. The

reality of the landscape is no longer the concern of the prevailing aesthetic, images are accorded merit in terms of 'photographic excellence', that is the technical skills of the photographer, rather than whether the image has anything new to reveal about the world. Most significant of all is Gohlke's comment that this 'ideal of photographic excellence that came *purely from other photographers*' (my italics). The images are defined, not by the information they give about the world, but in terms of the technical skills of the photographer *as judged by other photographers*. While photographic skill is important, valuing images purely on this basis generates the sort of hollow, 'dead' images, lacking in 'conviction', which Gohlke describes. Gohlke's comments relate directly to Solnit's opinion that Ansel Adams is 'the great Oedipal Father of American Landscape Photography', that he is 'an obstacle nearly every western photographer has to find a way past' (Solnit in Brittain 1999: 227) and also to Klett's views about the 'debts' and 'burdens' of Adams' 'legacy', as discussed in the first chapter. While there is certainly a 'debt' owed to Adams for the inspirational quality of his work, his vision of undefiled Wilderness has become an 'obstacle' or 'burden' for both photographers and viewers of his images. Other photographers may aspire to achieve the technical expertise exhibited by Adams at the expense of creating images with repetitious content. Even casual viewers of Adams' work, or of the images which Adams has inspired others to create, may lead to such viewers valuing only images which operate within the rigid aesthetic frame work laid down by Adams. It seems that the excellence of his technical skills has created an additional 'obstacle' or 'burden' for other photographers. Unfortunately, producing the sort of pristine images that display only the technical skills of the photographer rather than offering any new information about the world remains the goal of countless camera club devotees of Ansel Adams.

Writing in the *New York Times* in 2004, Ken Johnson retrospectively described the dramatic effect of the *New Topographics* exhibition, comprising what he described as a series of 'nondescript scenes' and 'emotionally neutral views of

human adaptation to nature', that had been created by 'a new generation of landscape photographers (who rejected) the romanticism of artists like Ansel Adams, Minor White and Edward Weston' (Johnson 2004: 43). Jurovics argues that although the New Topographers

possess a resistance or reaction to what was then the prevailing tradition of landscape photography, the West Coast aesthetic as defined by artists such as Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Minor White, and Paul Caponigro. While the photographs associated with *New Topographics* knowingly exchanged the sublime for the subtle, many carried emotional depth and complexity, as well as an overt moral position equal to, if not greater than, the work of these more popular and familiar photographers. They are anything but what might be considered dispassionate or documentary' (Jurovics in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 1-2)

By 'knowingly' exchanging 'the sublime for the subtle' the photographs of the *New Topographics* aim to challenge the previous aesthetic which valued depictions of the landscape as remote and sublime. Offering something more accessible by subtly drawing attention to the familiar the *New Topographics* images give the viewer the possibility of reassessing their perspective of man's interaction with the landscape. Jurovics argues that the images are far from 'dispassionate', many carry an 'overt moral position' which is at least equal to that of their predecessors, but the landscape depicted by the *New Topographics* is not sublime Wilderness, it is the landscape of 'home'. While the prevailing aesthetic called for protection of a remote idealised landscape, the *New Topographics* images suggest attributing a value to the more ordinary spaces of the everyday.

This paradigm shift is illustrated in the following image by Stephen Shore. If this scene had been photographed by Ansel Adams, or any of the devotees who attempt to emulate his work, it is likely that he, or they, would have

walked beyond the poles and wires, turning their backs to exclude any reference to the 'man altered' landscape in order to create an image of the 'wilderness' beyond. Here Shore deliberately acknowledges human activity; while the landscape is 'monumental', Shore photographs the detail of the landscape rather than the vast remoteness of it. Even though there seems to be a sort of rundown desolation within the image, it is not distant, this is an ordinary scene from everyday life. Shore is standing in the same road that he is photographing, human activity is acknowledged; this image is about learning to 'see we have a place on the land' (Klett: 1990). While the road leads towards the mountains, they are not the subject of the image, they are indistinct rather than highly detailed as Ansel Adams would undoubtedly have depicted them. Instead of being portrayed as a place of pilgrimage, the mountains seem to block the way. The image is animated by human and animal presence, describing what Stewart calls a world that is 'always already abuzz with something pressing' (Stewart 2011: 448), suggesting that a 'still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance. A quivering in the stability of a category or a trajectory, it gives the ordinary a charge of an unfolding' (Stewart 2007: 19).



Stephen Shore, *Presidio, Texas*, 1975

In her 2005 essay 'Landscape and the West: Irony and Critique in New Topographic Photography', Kelly Dennis states that 'New Topographics photography works powerfully – and with considerable irony - to question the validity of the centuries-old distinction between nature and culture in some of the West's most mythologized imagery.' She suggests that the title of the exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, while referring to the nineteenth century U.S. Geological Survey also acknowledges 'the alteration of that terrain during the century intervening' adding that any such 'acknowledgment is missing from mid-century photographs by Ansel Adams.' She draws attention to the way that the New Topographic photographers emphasize 'the domestic containment of the land', adding that 'landscape's traditional midline placement of the horizon for compositional balance between earth and sky is often repositioned by New Topographic photographers above or below midline, or is even absent, rendering the landscape cluttered, unbalanced, or constrained rather than pristine and endless' (Dennis 2005). This sort of repositioning of the horizon, the constraining of the landscape and 'the domestic containment of the land' can be seen in the following image, again by Shore. The buildings themselves, the signs on the buildings and the shadows they cast form a sort of horizon which draws the eye in towards the distant mountains. Yet, as with the previous image, rather than being 'the view', the mountains 'block' the view, this landscape is not 'pristine and endless'.



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Stephen Shore, *Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts July 13, 1974*

It was claimed by curator William Jenkins at the time of the exhibition that the images created a new aesthetic which was impersonal and devoid of emotion. Deborah Bright suggests that even the title of *New Topographers* alluded to 'the aesthetic indifference of the land surveyor (as opposed to the nature poet)' (Bright: 1992). This is a particularly significant comment because emotion and affect are often perceived as problematic. Contemporary practitioners continue to face the dilemma of whether emotion can have a place within landscape photography without reducing the value of an image or creating a parody of the sort of images created by Adams. However, it is questionable whether it is possible to create images that are completely devoid of emotion as Jenkins suggests. Even photographs purporting to be impersonal are containers of personal choices; of viewpoint, framing, lenses and camera settings, etc, decisions that the photographer has made in order to recreate their view of the world within a photographic context. These decisions relate directly to a combination of personal experience and emotion, culminating in the motivation to visually encapsulate what Barthes has described as the 'punctum' (Barthes: 2000). While Barthes suggests that it is the viewer of an image, rather than the creator of the image, who experiences the 'punctum' of

that image, in addition to the viewer being 'pricked' by the image, initially the photographer must, themselves, have been pricked by experiencing a sense of connection or 'punctum' within the world which motivated the creation of that image. The resultant image describes the photographers' sense of connection and shares their experience of the 'punctum' with the viewer.

When New Topographic photographer Lewis Baltz is asked during an interview whether he is 'creating beauty out of ugly things', he replies

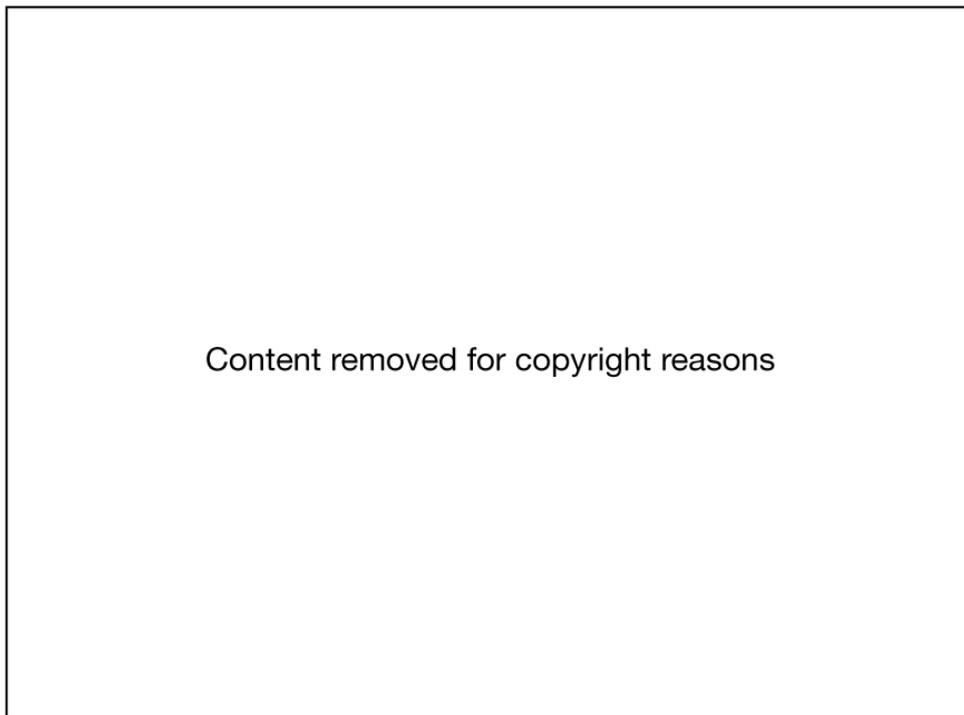
The idea of beauty is completely arbitrary. Duchamp saw this clearly and acted on it: you don't put an object in a museum because it's beautiful; an object is beautiful because you put it in a museum. Everything is photogenic once it's been photographed. The – successful - mission of photography was to deliver the world and all its contents into the category of the picturesque. (Baltz in Greff and Milon: 2011)

What Baltz is suggesting is that you don't (necessarily) photograph an object because it is beautiful, but by photographing an object, 'putting it in a museum' or by paying attention to it, it becomes beautiful. This is not necessarily the case, and the debate about what constitutes beauty will be continued in more detail in the following chapter. However, it seems that the mission 'to deliver the world ... into the category of the picturesque' (Baltz in Greff and Milon: 2011) has been particularly successful in Baltz's 1978 image *Night Construction, Reno*, an image which, contrary to Bright's assertion, does not have 'the aesthetic indifference of the land surveyor' (Bright: 1992). The subject matter has been carefully positioned centrally within the frame, while photographing the structure from this angle, combined with such dramatic lighting, highlights the delicate framework against the solid mass of dark silhouettes of the surrounding landscape. Such decisions and devices heighten the potential beauty of the structure, delivering what could have been a bland or even ugly subject into the realms of what Gilpin describes as 'that peculiar

kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture' (Gilpin 1768). However, while the structure is confined by the framing of the image, the image does not seem to be about 'the domestic containment of the land', rather the landscape wraps itself around this new construction, seeming to cocoon and protect it. Here the 'traditional midline placement of the horizon for compositional balance between earth and sky' is not repositioned, and the landscape does not appear 'cluttered, unbalanced, or constrained', but there is a sense that it could be 'pristine and endless' (Dennis 2005). Although this is a detail within the landscape rather than a huge sweeping vista, the image has a central place for man within the 'pristine and endless' landscape. While human intervention, in the form of the new building is central to, and dominant within, the image, it is held in place, grounded, within the landscape. Of course, the darkness, and the beauty of the light falling onto and defining the structure of the building adds to the pleasing aesthetic of the image. As Baltz suggests, the building 'is photogenic once it's been photographed'; by photographing it the way he has he has imbued it with a visually attractive aesthetic. The image is not a 'nondescript scene'; neither is it an 'emotionally neutral view of human adaptation to nature' (Johnson 2004: 43). Rather, it engages with what Stewart describes as 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (ibid.: 446) it is about something 'hanging in the air ... worth describing' (ibid.: 447). And the image certainly conforms to Klett's suggestion concerning the importance of finding 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes, and to appreciate them in spite of our human presence, to see we have a place on the land' (Klett: 1990).



Lewis Baltz, *Night Construction, Reno* From the Nevada series, 1978



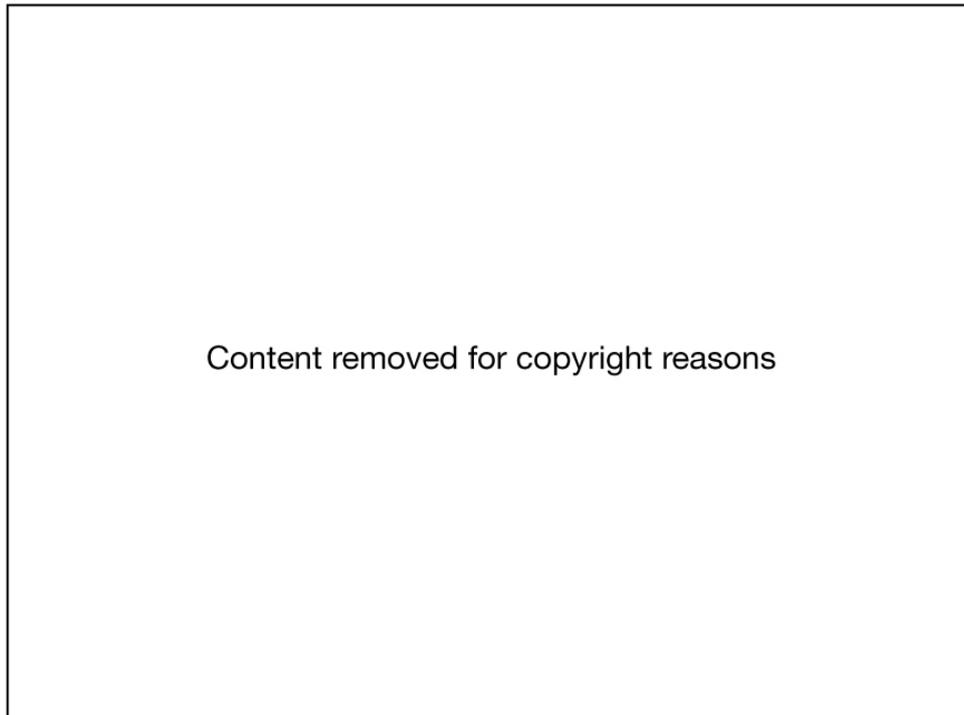
Joe Deal, *Colton, California*, 1978

The image above by New Topographic photographer, Joe Deal, has parallels with Robert Adams's *On Lookout Mountain, next to Buffalo Bill's Grave, Jefferson County, Colorado* (1970), Thomas Cole's painting *'The Oxbow, View*

*from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm.*

1836, and Mark Klett's *Picnic on the edge of the rim, Grand Canyon, 2 December 1983*, which is reproduced later in this chapter. Compositionally similar, each image details human intervention within the landscape, photographed, or painted, from a high vantage point in the foreground, with the exception of Cole's painting, generally in flat or neutral light. In Deal's image human impact is also encroaching into the foreground, the focus of this image is not the surrounding landscape, but the marks made by humans within the landscape.

Closer to home, the following image, by Paul Hill also has a similar composition, high foreground vantage point, human intervention in the landscape below. Although the light is bland and neutral, the child's legs, which echo the legs in Klett's image, instil tension into the image. The framing and cropping of the image opens the image to numerous questions, most pressingly, concerns for the child's safety. Her legs are also used as a device to emphasise the sheerness of the cliff face while the scale of the houses below illustrate the height of the drop. The incongruous pristine and dainty neatness of the child's shoes and socks pushing out into the picture frame to create a horizon line, contrast sharply with her rough, dirty, solid rock perch. While this makes for an interesting scene, it is made intentionally dizzying by Hill's clever suggestion to the viewer 'what if she were to fall'. While it is likely that this image has been carefully set in place, unlike an image by Ansel Adams it does not form a 'sealed' package, the cropping of the image makes the viewer really look hard at the image and think beyond the frame. The tension that is built into the image, primarily by positioning the little girl's legs so close to such a sheer drop, creates a connection. While creating a punctum within a viewer of an image is beyond the control of the photographer, the deliberate juxtaposition of elements within this image establishes a tension which engages the viewer. This is not simply a landscape, but an image of landscape which 'pull(s) the senses into alert' (Stewart 2011: 445).



Paul Hill, *Legs Over High Tor, Matlock*, 1975

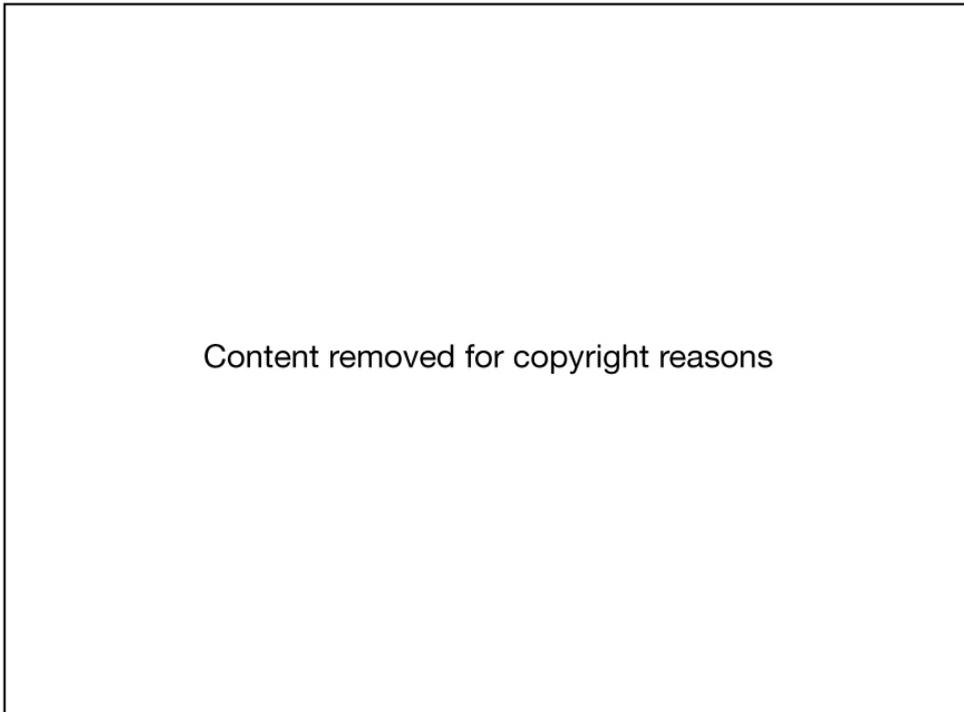
Klett has described landscape photographs as ‘artifacts of what we think we know about the land, and how we have come to know it – the language of an individual’s experience in his or her time, and at their best a form of commentary’ (Klett: 1990). *New York Times* art critic, Andy Grundberg, echoes Klett’s observations in relation to John Pfahl:

Consider John Pfahl's 1977 image *Moonrise over Pie Pan*, from the series *Altered Landscapes*. Pfahl uses his irrepressible humor to mask a more serious intention, which is to call attention to our absence of innocence with regard to the landscape. By intervening in the land with his partly conceptual, partly madcap bag of tricks, and by referencing us not to the scene itself but to another photograph, Ansel Adams's *Moonrise over Hernandez*, Pfahl supplies evidence of the postmodern condition. It seems impossible to claim in this day and age that one can have a direct, unmediated experience of the world. All we see is seen through the kaleidoscope of all that we have seen before’ (Grundberg in Wells 2003: 176).

This comment relates directly to what has been written in the previous chapter concerning the influence of Adams representation of Nature which employs a 'system of visual editing'(Wells 1994: 48) to shape our relationship with the landscape, for, as Haip suggests, 'our concept of what wilderness is and how it looks has, in part, been shaped by Ansel Adams' (Haip, in Read1993: 75). While the placement of mountains and moon in Pfahl's image recall Adam's famous image, and Pfahl's title *Moonrise over Pie Pan* make his intentions clear, by utilising a discarded piece of tin foil to echo the moon, rather than the simple human settlement and religious iconography in the foreground of Adams' image, Pfahl employs the cynicism of postmodern irony to call attention to the reality of the word as opposed to the picturesque construct of Adams. Grundberg's suggestion that 'It seems impossible to claim in this day and age that one can have a direct, unmediated experience of the world. All we see is seen through the kaleidoscope of all that we have seen before' (Grundberg, in Wells 2003: 176) is confirmed by the experiences of Dawson and Klett in visiting places photographed by Adams, and Walker visiting Wells Cathedral or more accurately, visiting Fredrick Evans' photograph *Sea of Steps*. Dawson comments, 'I found the landscape disappointing compared to ... Adams' images' (Dawson and Manchester in Read 1993: 91). While Klett remarks, 'anyone who has visited the site of one of Adams's photographs knows that the romance of his landscapes is often best experienced in the photographs themselves. The reality of the place is quite different' (Klett: 1990). Their experience of the world is 'seen through the kaleidoscope of all that (they) have seen before.'



John Pfahl, *Moonrise over Pie Pan*, 1977



Ansel Adams, *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941

Kelly Dennis suggests that:

while the New Topographic photographs appear to be *of* western

landscapes, trees, deserts, houses, roads, and construction, they are nonetheless, *about* the aesthetic discourse of landscape photography, and about a “man-made wilderness”: that is, they are *about* the American myths of the West, suburban expansion, the American dream, and the exploitation and destruction of natural resources. (Dennis 2005:3)

While Solnit describes the exhibition as follows:

the ‘New Topographics’ show of 1975 which, though more a curatorial rubric than a real movement, pointed out that neither medium nor subject was what it had been. Put simply, the pictures depicted the transformation of landscape into real estate, focusing on stark, soulless tract homes which sprang up like mushrooms in the central West. (Solnit, in Brittain 1999: 228)

She notes that not all the exhibitors went on to produce significant work, citing Robert Adams as the ‘major survivor of the group’, stating that:

His works of the 1980s are largely elegiac: where the first Adams photographed a world as though it were before man, this Adams photographs it as though it were after man. The loneliness of space and the palpable stillness of the photograph come together in these pieces. (Solnit, in Brittain 1999: 228)



Robert Adams, *Colorado Springs, Colorado*, 1968

This representation from Solnit completely describes the image above by Robert Adams which perfectly encapsulates ‘the loneliness of space and the palpable stillness’. While the image may focus on a ‘stark, soulless tract home’, this aesthetic is not ‘impersonal’ or ‘devoid of emotion’. For me at least, the image is emotionally charged and it pricks me with a sense of connection that Barthes refers to as the punctum. The ‘palpable stillness’ captured within the image recalls echoes of childhood boredom, distilling memories of time spent visually exploring my own surroundings, looking intensely, and with delight, attempting to make visual sense of the world. Adams’ image is about looking, it describes the intensity of shadows, lines and curves, light and dark, the juxtaposition of natural textures against manmade surfaces, and captures a perfect, unseen, glimpse into another world. As Mark Rawlinson explains, ‘Light is important to Adams’. He quotes Adams as saying that ‘light “works an alchemy”’, that is, it bestows upon the most base object a transcendent or resplendent quality not usually evident’ (Rawlinson in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 132). For me, this image resonates with something indefinable that is

immensely more powerful than the sum of its parts. It cannot simply be reduced to a formula, to the application of, for example, Cartier Bresson's concept of the 'decisive moment', the perfect instant to release the shutter. While it may not overtly display the technical mastery of Ansel Adams beautiful, but distant, selective aesthetic, it is certainly not devoid of emotion. To logically deconstruct and reconstruct the image does not explain the emotional resonance contained so perfectly in this visual poem. Although the scene continues beyond the confines of the frame, the image forms a perfect whole. It seems to be imbued with emotion; whether this is my own emotion or that of Robert Adams, or as a result of a heightened sense of shared visual appreciation and understanding. This 'nondescript emotionally neutral' scene holds a far stronger emotional charge for me than the pristine images created by Ansel Adams. It seems to be full of what Stewart calls something 'coming into existence' (Stewart 2011: 445), something 'hanging in the air' that is 'worth describing' (ibid.: 447). Like the memories of my childhood, there is a sense that creating this image involved engaging with a 'state of attention that is also impassivity - a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place' (ibid.: 446). By engaging with what Stewart describes as 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (ibid.: 446), the image holds a power which is missing from the remote aesthetic of Ansel Adams' images.

## REPHOTOGRAPHY

In addition to the New Topographics, another development in landscape photography in the United States came through the rephotographic project co-founded by Ellen Manchester and Mark Klett in the 1970s. Solnit states that 'The project set out, very simply, to rephotograph the landscapes of some of the most famous US Geological Survey (USGS) images, from as close to the same standpoint as possible' (Solnit, in Brittain 1999: 229). This approach to

landscape photography, which documents the passage of time, can be viewed as a forerunner to the concerns of Olaf Otto Becker, who has begun a process of creating images accompanied by details of the exact viewpoint to allow others to view or record changes which may occur to the landscape in the future. In relation to the rephotographic project Solnit continues, 'The results showed a landscape that had in most cases changed, but not always for the worse' (ibid.). Presuming that we engage with the romantic notion that 'wilderness' is 'better' than habitation and industry, this is illustrated in the following images.



Left: Timothy O'Sullivan, Untitled [Sugarloaf Rock] 1868. Right: Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *Lot for sale near Sugarloaf Rock, Sixmile Canyon, Nevada*. 1998

Solnit goes on to note that Klett's

images are not assaults on the tradition of virgin wilderness photography nor elegies for a raped landscape. Instead he often photographs majestic 'wilderness' landscapes with a foreground of civilized appurtenances that are not intrusions. In a photograph of the Grand Canyon, a pair of legs juts into the picture, and a plastic wrapper, a pair of apples and a box of Matzohs adorn the rim of the chasm. In *'Profiles of the New West, Parker Strip, 11/11/84'*, a horizon line of jagged mesas includes a television antenna. The West, his work suggests, is not the less sublime for its banal and kitsch additions; instead the two cohabit a landscape without simple moral or visual resolutions. (ibid.)



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Mark Klett, *Picnic on the edge of the rim, Grand Canyon, 2 December 1983*

#### THAT'S THE VIEW. WE'RE IN THE PICTURE

During an interview with Klett in his book, *View Finder: Mark Klett, Photography, and the Reinvention of Landscape*, William Fox expresses surprise that Klett's meticulously composed image re-photographing a view previously photographed by O'Sullivan, contains a pile of photographic equipment, Klett's answer goes beyond detailing the interaction of other people within the landscape, '...that's the view. We're in the picture' (Fox 2001:15). This is contextualised by Fox as part of the on going tradition of landscape photography, stating that O'Sullivan himself often left his own wagon in his images to create a sense of scale. There is also a relationship between this and the deliberate inclusion of man's intervention in the landscape, including the painter himself, in Thomas Cole's 1836 painting, *The Oxbow, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* which was reproduced and briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Another comparison with this approach is the images created by female photographer, Stevie Bezenenet, who deliberately casts her own shadow into forbidden spaces to

claim territory: 'Her shadow extended beyond the possible access of her body, just as her thoughts stretched further than the law allowed' (Wells 1994: 58-59). Even though Bezencenet is not permitted to enter private property, her thoughts, and her shadow, take possession of the landscape. There is an honesty in this sort of approach which documents the significance of 'quiet, less monumental landscapes' which acknowledge that 'we have a place on the land' (Klett: 1990) which is in stark contrast to the exquisite, constructed, depopulated images of Ansel Adams.



Timothy O'Sullivan, *Sand Dunes, Carson Desert, Nevada, 1867*

Klett's essay ends with the statement that 'The real challenge for landscape photographers today is not to discover new wilderness places, but to explore new wilderness values' (Klett: 1990). That is, to value not just the places where man has not been, but also to value spaces that are occupied by humans, or that document the impact that humans have on the land. In the words of Alexander Rodchenko, from 1928, 'In order to educate man to a new way of seeing, one must show him everyday, familiar objects from totally unexpected perspectives and in unexpected situations' (Rodchenko, in Stephan 2005: 64). Rather than dismissing the everyday Rodchenko suggests that it is

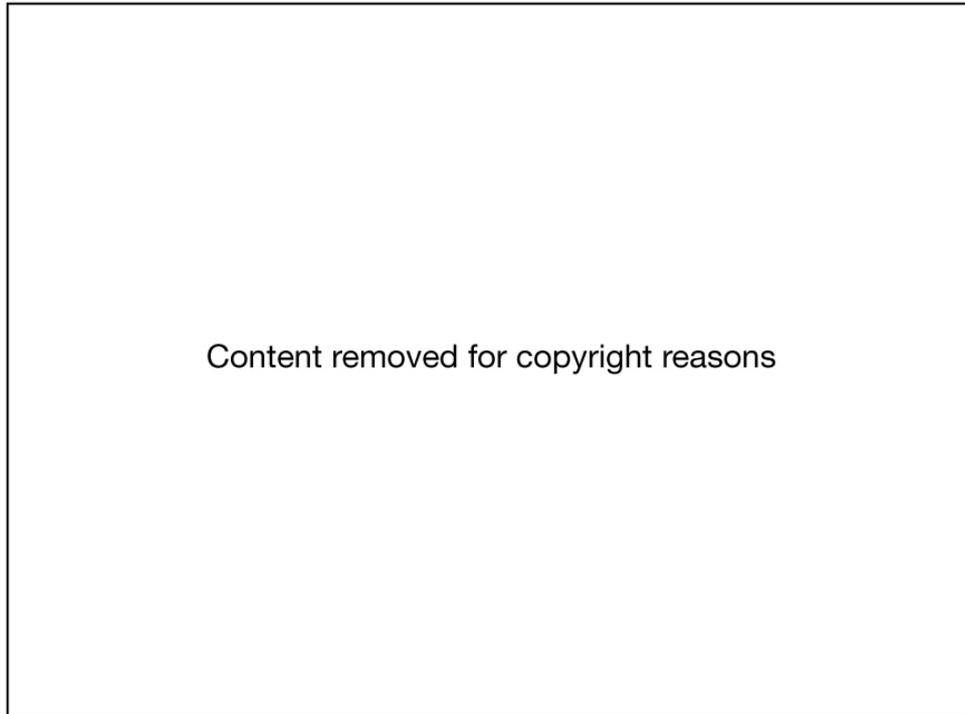
important to pay attention to the familiar, that by re-evaluating ordinary, familiar, objects from unexpected perspectives, as he does in the following image, Rodchenko suggests 'a new way of seeing', offering a new awareness and appreciation of the familiar. This approach parallels the aims of both the New Topographers, and also to an extent, the re-photographic project, both of which engage with the familiar, 'man altered' landscape, rather than upholding the sort of 'visual editing' employed in the remote images of Ansel Adams. Although born prior to Adams, Rodchenko was engaged in photographic practice at a similar time, however by accepting and re-evaluating the familiar, Rodchenko is seeking to connect with the sort of 'new wilderness values' suggested by Klett.



Alexander Rodchenko, *Fire Escape*, 1925

In the following, more contemporary, image Kevin Griffin engages our attention by photographing a scene where human presence is central to the image, which is the antithesis of Adams' meticulously constructed images of untainted wilderness. The light is flat and undramatic, the landscape is occupied and the signs of human presence are key. Griffin's image involves the viewer in a process of assessment which questions the content of the image in relation to established conventions of aesthetic judgement, suggesting an importance in

the ordinary, and offering another sort of 'wilderness value' as suggested by Klett.



Kevin Griffin, *Pascal's home*, 2007

The following image of the moon by Klett is also very different from with the pristine aesthetic of Adams' images of the moon, *Moon and Half Dome* 1960, and *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico*.1941. The use of technology, and the inclusion of that technology within Klett's image offers another exploration of 'new wilderness values'.

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Mark Klett, *Byron checking the position of the moon on his laptop, Flaming George, Wyoming, 8:56 P.M., 8/8/97*



Rachel White, *AJ photographing the sunset, 2010*

There are parallels between Klett's image *Byron checking the position of the moon on his laptop, Flaming George, Wyoming, 8:56 P.M., 8/8/97* and my image of AJ photographing the sunset, reproduced above. The similarities are

not simply compositional, nor to do with the time of day, but the inclusion of both human and technological presence within the images. My image was created because I was interested in the juxtaposition of the picture within a picture, the double framing of the conventionally picturesque seascape, and comparisons between what my camera sees and what AJ's camera sees. There are parallels between the way both Klett's image and my own explore 'new wilderness values', by giving humankind, and technology, a place within, and central to, the wider landscape in complete opposition to the way that Adams presents a landscape untouched by human presence.

Despite some of the issues that have been discussed regarding the selective aesthetic and remoteness of Ansel Adams' images, as a result of my own engagement with commercial photographic practice I can relate to Adams' 'burden' in respect of both the kudos and commercial viability of producing sanitised version of the world, and the ensuing dilemma that appears to preclude the viability of change. However, as I do not have to contend with the 'burden' of a reputation like Adams' I can choose to forego commercial success in order to engage with images that do not conform to the romantic construct of a picturesque, manicured, 'rural idyll'.

As Wells notes, 'all land in Britain has been subjected to extensive human intervention' (Wells in Wells, Newton and Fehily 2000: 10). The encroachment of human presence has an even greater impact on the confined spaces of the British Isles than on the vast wilderness of the American West, and thus on British landscape photography including my own. Unlike Adams, my work does not deny the impact of man. My images of British 'wild places' hold traces of the manmade in the form of pylons, telegraph poles, agriculture, quarrying and road building. In being open to the aesthetic qualities of the 'man-altered' landscape my work connects with Klett's suggestion that the challenge facing contemporary photographers is to explore 'new wilderness values'. While my work is indirectly informed by the impact of the New Topographers there are

substantial differences in my intent. Although the focus of the New Topographics exhibition was the ‘man-altered’ rather than the ‘natural’ landscape, which is not dissimilar to the focus of my own image making, unlike the New Topographers, I do not claim to be acting impartially or that my work is emotionally neutral.



Rachel White, *Pylon*, 2007

In re-examining beauty my work celebrates an aesthetic of the man made. It could be argued that I am engaging with what Bright described, in relation to Pfahl, as ‘a kind of romantic nostalgia for a modern Arcadia where power plants, like rock formations and ancient trees, can be appreciated as objects of a new kind of engineered beauty’ (Bright 1985). Following are four differing images of power stations, one by John Pfahl from 1988, one from 1983 by John Davies, and two by me, from 2002 and 2005.

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John Pfahl, *Bethlehem # 16, Lackawanna, NY, 1988*



Rachel White, *Rugeley Power Station, 2002*

Content removed for copyright reasons

John Davies, *Agecroft Power Station, Pendlebury, Salford, Greater Manchester*,  
1983



Rachel White, *Rugeley Power Station*, 2005

Pfahl's image, while beautiful, raises environmental issues concerning the potential for pollution caused by the huge plumes of cloud which result from mans desire to create and consume ever more energy. My image from 2002 depicts the power station as absolutely beautiful, and completely dwarfed by the power of nature as a band of storm clouds gather overhead. John Davies' image is the earliest of the four reproduced here. It is also the most dispassionate, the camera is seemingly used as a neutral recording tool, yet the photographer has used this tool to illustrate the march of the cooling towers across a bleak landscape. My image from 2005 could possibly be viewed in terms of environmental campaign; however, in reality the image was not created with this intention. While the power station is small, set within the landscape, the heavy black clouds emitted from the cooling towers block out the sun. The image documents light, the contrast between the golden glow of the still, cloud banded sky and the streaming backlit clouds of steam. Having moved from the Midlands to live between the beautiful Llyn Peninsula and the mountains of Snowdonia I miss this power station very much, as I suspected I would. Having photographed it repeatedly in many different sorts of light and weather it became so familiar and almost like an old friend. I was awarded the British Institute of Professional Photography Midlands Region Photographer of the Year as a result of this image. Achieving such an accolade from my peers, may not, as Bourdieu asserts, constitute 'a partial legitimacy which is at least enough to establish the photographer as an artist' (Bourdieu 1996: 147) but it does illustrate a contemporary view of the legitimacy of content that embraces references to the man-altered landscape.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

It is difficult to discuss images of the landscape without reference to environmental concerns. Much landscape photography has been created in order to raise awareness of environmental issues, or, like the work of Ansel

Adams, has been appropriated in order to do so. As my work is not specifically concerned with this aspect of photographic practice lack of space does not permit me to discuss it in any detail here.

However, in the context of my own photographic practice I take issue with Deborah Bright's assertion in her 1992 essay, 'The Machine in The Garden Revisited American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics', that John Pfahl's description of his experiences while photographing the smoke stacks of the Bethlehem Steel plant in Lackawanna, New York, are indicative of the fact that 'confronting hazardous pollution has become the new test of the photographer's personal fortitude' (Bright 1992).

Pfahl's comments, which were published in the *Aperture Beyond Wilderness* issue, have been taken out of context by Bright. I believe that, although his experiences of the noxious fumes while photographing the site were bad enough, the real context of Pfahl's remarks are part of a bigger picture which he goes on to discuss. In the passage referred to by Bright regarding his experience of creating the images Pfahl writes,

Occasionally, however, the clouds come right at me and I become immersed in a lung-searing atmosphere of toxicity. I grab my equipment and stumble back to the car, trying all the while not to inhale too deeply.' However, more significantly, he continues, 'Later, at home, it strikes me that the smell of the smoke, overpowering at full strength, is unnervingly familiar to me. In much more dilute form, it wafts by on certain balmy days when I am working in the garden. I am hardly conscious of it. It is one of the many familiar aromas, along with newly turned earth and the freshly cut grass, that I have come to identify with the notion of home. (Pfahl: on line)

Pfahl's comments do not allude to the heroic nature of engagement with landscape photography, as Bright suggests, but to the much more insidious and sinister effects of pollution. In this case, a 'commonplace' odour that lets

Pfahl 'know that he's home' (Conniff, in Read 1993: 90). Unlike Ansel Adams, Pfahl is no detached observer making forays into the landscape to commune with Nature in order to create images of pristine wilderness. For Pfahl, the landscape, or rather man's intervention within the landscape, follows Pfahl home. The insidious fumes have invaded his domestic space to the extent of becoming a deep-rooted part of what he associates with the sense of 'home', which is a far more frightening prospect than the concept that pollution is 'out there', 'somewhere'.

I can relate to directly to this concern, on both a personal and photographic level, through my repeated engagement with photographing Rugeley Power station. The power station is some miles away from the 'rural idyll' we previously called home, and although, unlike Pfahl, I do not create images to express environmental concerns, I am physically affected by the power station. For us, there are no noxious fumes, however, in addition to the thin film of dust which coats everything as a result of living in an agricultural landscape, the small black particles which make their way inside our home when doors and windows are open, and presumably into our lungs, emanate directly from the power station. When the weather is a certain way and the wind is in the right direction we can also smell Nestlé roasting coffee at their works some considerable distance in the opposite direction from the power station. Having moved from Staffordshire to live in North Wales the beautiful seascapes of Cardigan Bay now form part of my photographic subject matter. However appearances can be deceptive, as Miranda Walker states the Irish Sea 'is one of the most radioactively polluted seas in the world' (Wells 1994: 25-29).

## GENDER

The parameters of this study preclude any detailed discussion of the impact that race and class have on access to, and photography of, the landscape. However the following section of this thesis addresses some major differences

in both vision and methodological approach to photographing landscape that result from disparity in gender. As the majority of landscape photographs have been created by men, it is appropriate to briefly consider my photographic practice in relation to issues of gender. In her essay, 'Reframing Landscape', Liz Wells discusses how gender impacts on photographic practice, referring to the lack of female landscape photographers and stating that

Biographical accounts portray the male photographer, a lone hero figure, up in the middle of the night to capture the landscape at dawn, striding across the countryside, possibly braving rain or snow, rucksack and tripod slung across his back: a solitary figure marking out the territory of his work. (Wells 1994:49)

While in his essay, 'The Legacy of Ansel Adams: Debts and Burdens', Klett discusses the concept of Adams as a 'Western Hero', a view which is reiterated by Colin Westerbeck who describes Adams as having a personality of extremes which range from 'high-minded idealist -Transcendentalist to a kind of John Wayne parody' (Westerbeck in Read1993: 14), Westerbeck cites the first page of Nancy Newhall's biography, *The Eloquent Light* which was written in collaboration with Adams, and which describes Adams making a grand, heroic, entrance into an all night café.

It is not without irony that the theme of male photographer as Western Hero is perpetuated by William Fox in relation to Klett. Fox describes Klett and his male colleagues camping in the desert, pitching themselves against the elements in a landscape populated only by UFO spotters. Seemingly as testimony to their macho prowess and heroic intent, Fox describes the detail and mileage of their various vehicles: 'Mark's pickup has 121,000 miles on it, Byron's wagon is over 220,000, and Stu's Nissan is passing 95,000. Various and sundry pieces of sheetmetal, tail lights, and plastic underbody parts are flapping, blinking and rattling at random' (Fox 2001: 4). Although I enjoy the humour of this picture

of masculine pride, neither my 'gold Jaguar with cream and polished wood interior', nor my 'little red convertible' have the same sort of credibility as their vehicles.

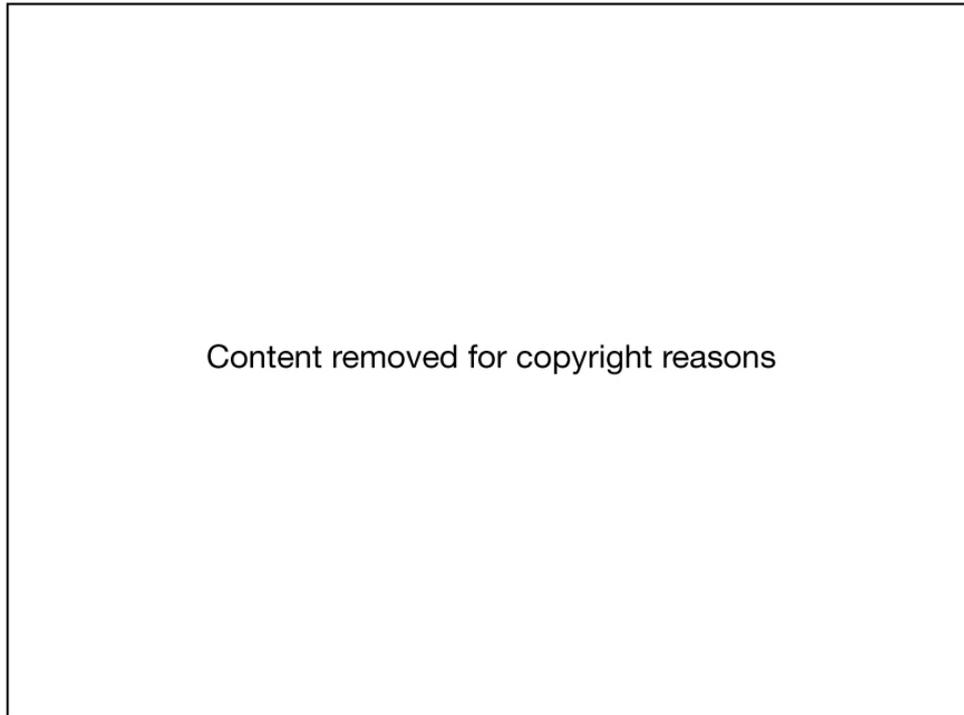
Transport aside, there are significant differences between my practice and methodology and that of my male counterparts. Although I cannot claim the status of myth and legend attributed to Adams, I was once described, by a man, as a 'bohemian maverick'. While I may share some sense of the pioneering spirit, I cannot cast myself in the role of cowboy venturing out heroically to conquer the vast wilderness. However, maybe metaphorically I am engaged in a quest that does not quite relate to the social conventions of femininity. It is interesting to note that in her essay, 'Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography', Deborah Bright suggests that contemporary women landscape photographers might address the 'zones of privacy and public spaces used primarily by their sex.' Writing in 1985 she defines the 'landscapes' used by women as 'the home, beauty salon, shopping mall, etc' (Bright 1985). For me, these are not the sort of 'landscapes' I frequent, so I shall go on to explore my relationship with the more traditionally male dominated landscape that I photograph and look at some of the differences between my methodology and experience of these landscapes compared with that of my male counterparts.

Wells suggests that men use photography to 'tame' nature or map territory.' She states that traditionally women's relationship with land has been 'mediated through daughterhood or marriage', suggesting that as they have not traditionally been landowners, women 'have tended to view the land less acquisitively' than men (Wells 1994: 50). This idea relates to Sontag's concept of photography as a means of collecting the world (Sontag 1977: 3). Although the primary function of my image making is not about forming a collection of specimens, there is an acquisitive element to my work. I have a sense that I am 'capturing' something rare and in doing so, for that brief moment I have

claimed ownership of it. The light and the s/place where the light falls have become mine, become a part of me.

In her introduction to *Viewfindings Women Photographers: Landscape and Environment* Wells suggests that 'women engage with land differently' from men, not, she suggests, 'because women are closer to nature than men' but because nature has 'different sorts of meanings for women'. She states that, in contrast with the majority of conventional male dominated landscape photography 'women have tended to be interested more in the relation between people and places, in the consequences of human interaction with the land' (Wells 1994:5). Sandra Phillips draws attention to this difference in her essay 'Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange: A Friendship of Differences'. Phillips notes that while working together on an assignment 'His contributions were some of the long shots...- distant views of the town - while hers focused on human events of a more personal nature.' Phillips goes on to note that 'He was evincing the beneficence of nature without the intrusion of man, she was trying to find some balance between individuals and the real world' (Phillips in Read1993: 59-60). This view upholds Wells' assertion that women tend towards the relationships between people and place rather than place itself. Although Adams is not portrayed as having much empathy with people, I identify, photographically, at least, with Adams rather than Lange. Although, like Lange, my images often focus on details within the landscape rather than attempting to capture a wider vista in the tradition set out by Adams, my work has more to do with the traces that people have left within the landscape rather than specifically detailing active human presence.

## SAFETY ISSUES



Fay Godwin, *Markerstone, old Harlech to London Road*, 1976

Wells also discusses the limitations placed on women by safety issues and domestic commitments, suggesting that ‘it seems no accident that women end up making images closer to home’ (Wells 1994:5). This holds true in my case, and is compounded by the effects of chronic ill health. Wells notes landscape photographer and confirmed Rambler Fay Godwin’s opinions as expressed during an interview for *The South Bank Show* in 1986, when Godwin suggests that ‘the rural is threatening as well as beautiful, and that she was ‘quite often frightened out in the landscape’ (Wells 1994:50). This comment is surprising as it is usually presumed that a female landscape photographer of the stature of Godwin would feel ‘at one’ and comfortable out in the landscape. Her attitude is at odds with John Blakemore’s methodological approach when photographing the landscape. Blakemore describes his relationship with the landscape as being ‘built around’ a ‘ritual of intimacy with place’ (Campbell 1981:57). He details his meditative preparation for creating images of the landscape, sitting with his eyes closed for twenty minutes or more listening ‘to the sounds of place, the orchestration of water, the sibilance of wind, the

intense hum of insects, the patter of falling leaves.’ In closing off from the visual he develops a deep awareness of his surroundings through his other senses so that, in reopening his eyes, he is able to see afresh. ‘The light, the objects it reveals, have an unusual brilliance, a quality of revelation.’ However, as Blakemore also states, ‘to sit eyes closed is to make oneself vulnerable’ (ibid.: 58).

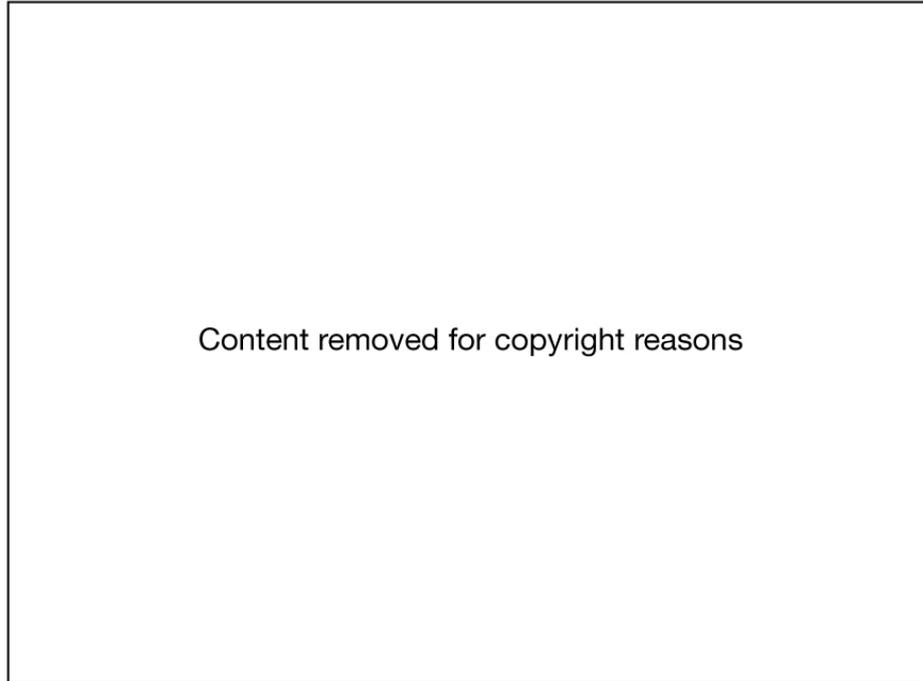


John Blakemore, *Ambergate, Derbyshire, 1979*, from sequence 'Lila'

It is significant that both Godwin and Blakemore began to develop more intimate work in domestic spaces later in their lives. In Blakemore's case photographing the landscape of Derbyshire and the Mawdach Estuary in Wales has been replaced by still life studies of tulips on the kitchen table and images of the garden, which Val Williams describes 'with its enclosed setting, its domesticity, became an increasingly potent photographic motif and a very private place of safety' (Williams 1991:9).

Godwin also changed the emphasis and scale of her images later in her life, moving from the politics of landscape to more intimate urban studies in her *Glasswork and Secret Lives* series. However, despite her considerable reputation as a landscape photographer this change of direction created major

difficulties in finding a publisher for the work and Godwin was forced to self-publish. Both Blakemore and Godwin also began, uncharacteristically, to embrace colour photography as they started to develop images in more intimate surroundings.



Fay Godwin, *untitled from Marion's Secret Lives series*, 1999

There are parallels between the concerns of Blakemore and Godwin's later work and the fact that Robert Adams has recently, in February 2016, published a new book *Around the House*. Rather than images of the wider landscape, the new book features photographs of the more intimate spaces of his home and garden. In promoting the book the Amazon website claims that 'This book is his most personal to date, capturing the small details and spaces that define his daily routine.' Previously Robert Adams has referred to his increasing sense of discomfort because of what he refers to as the 'danger' of photographing areas of the wider landscape.

It was a landscape with a lot of anger in it ... there was evidence of people you didn't want to meet – lots of junk and the sounds of dirt bikes and assault weapons. And even in many of the neighbourhoods ... there was a

feeling of intense hostility ... razor wires, and house after house with aggressive dogs ... One had to be extremely alert. (Adams 2006: 33)

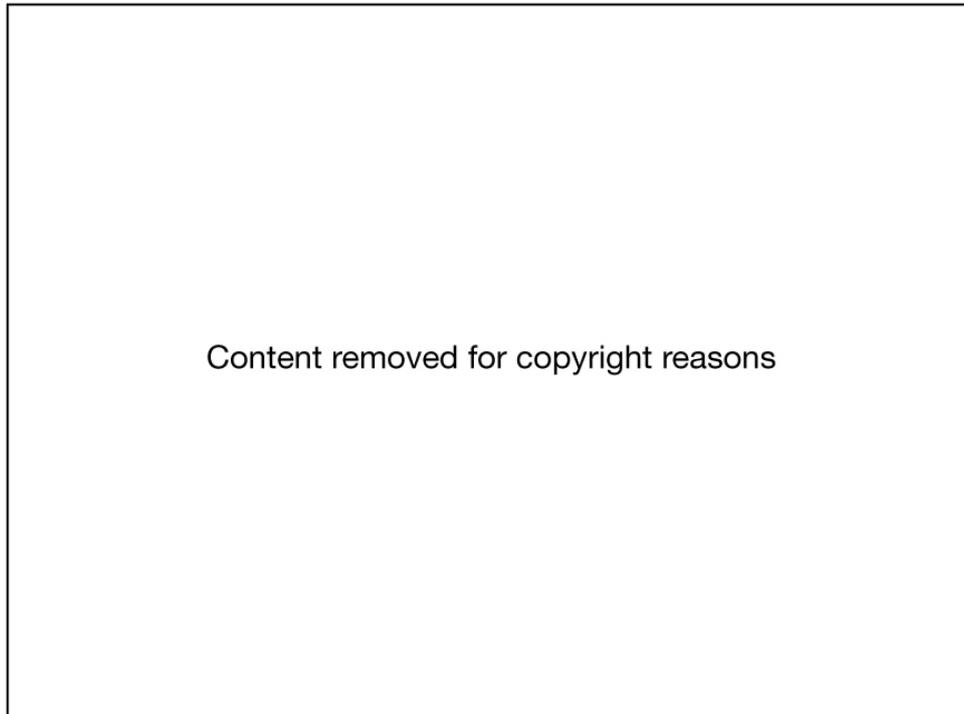
While this 'feeling of intense hostility' is not referred to directly within the images, in this situation it is the discomfort which Adams feels that pulls his 'senses into alert' (Stewart 2011: 445) rather than the creative possibilities of the landscape.

Maybe aging, or in my case, ill health, forces a reassessment of priorities, directing the focus of attention to daily routines and more personal spaces, allowing the significance of such spaces to resonate. As T.S. Eliot puts it,

Love is most nearly itself  
When here and now cease to matter.  
Old men ought to be explorers  
Here and there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion  
(Eliot, 1982: 182-183)

Changing emphasis draws attention inwards, from the wider landscape to focus on the significance of private spaces, 'here and there does not matter', it is not *where* images are created that makes them significant, but how the world is *seen*. As noted in the previous chapter, Er Witt has suggested that it is the content of an image, not the way it was recorded, or in this instance, where it was recorded, that make an image memorable. To be valid an image needs to offer something new, to be open, to move forward, to be 'still and still moving'. In order to achieve 'another intensity', a sense of connection with the landscape, whether that be the wider landscape or the landscape of home, to achieve 'a further union, a deeper communion' to discover new things about

the familiar, ordinary spaces that are part of daily living which offer a new awareness of that environment. Such images of home have a strong link with Klett's advocacy of the importance of finding 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes' (Klett: 1990).



Robert Adams, Cover image for *Around the House*, Published February 2016

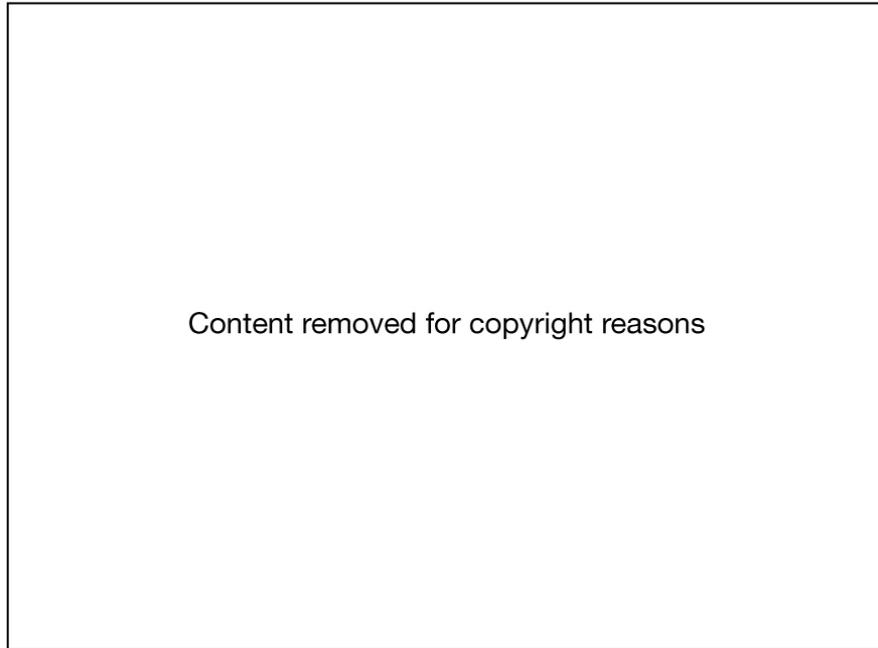
Although much of my work concerns the details of my home and immediate environment this includes vast landscapes, however my images often concentrate on the details within the landscape. As I often use a zoom lens to reveal things happening in the distance, it could be argued that, on a practical level, this methodological approach to photographing the landscape may be linked with some of the gender issues raised by Wells and Godwin. Although my decisions are not governed solely by concerns for my physical safety, nor by the effects of chronic ill health making some places inaccessible to me, however these issues have, undoubtedly, had an indirect influence on my work. I have traded using prime lenses for zoom lenses, and finally I have moved to working with simple 'point and shoot' digital cameras, and so, like Misrach with his 'Destroy this Memory' project, I have compromised the quality of the image, in order to gain a sense of intimacy, spontaneity and an immediacy that

would not be achieved if I were to set myself in the masculine role of trekking for miles with heavy equipment and waiting hours for the 'decisive moment'. This is particularly true of the images I create from the 'safety' of a moving car which deliberately challenge the traditions of the static viewpoint. Notions of quality and depth of field are exchanged for the chance of alchemy. This methodological approach to creating images also relates to an exploration of the sort of 'new wilderness values' suggested by Klett.

The images I create from the windows of my home, in particular from my bedroom window, can also be considered in the context of personal safety and with regard to the effects of ill health. Although there is an element of domesticity and safety, this way of working cannot be entirely attributed to issues of gender. Presumably because of the logistics involved and, inadvertently, the intimacy of the domestic looking outwards onto the world, the earliest photographic images were of views from the photographers window, for example, Nicephore Niepce's *View from the Window at Les Gras*, which was created in 1826 or 1827, and Henry Fox Talbot's *Window at Lacock Abbey August 1835*. Alfred Stieglitz also made a series of images from his 'back window', and, more contemporaneously, this methodological approach can be contextualised with reference to Richard Misrach's Golden Gate series created from the porch of his house, and Ori Gerst's Rear Window series, documenting the view from the window of his London flat.

There is also a relationship with Pfahl's Picture Window Series, a body of work where the images are taken from inside the homes of complete strangers. Pfahl says of the Picture Window Series, that he

came to think that every room was like a giant camera forever pointing at the same view ... It was often hard to tell from the outside what could be seen from the inside, so I was usually surprised when I discovered the scene in its new context' (Pfahl: on line).



John Pfahl, Picture Windows, 790 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York (April 1979)



John Pfahl, Picture Windows 43 Highgate, Wellesley Farms, Massachusetts (November 1978)

This framing and reframing of the view from a window rather than representing the wider landscape offers something unique. In Pfahl's case, by creating images from other people's homes, the view is different, interesting and exciting, holding numerous questions about both the view and also the

inhabitants of the rooms, including their willingness to allow a stranger to create photographs within their homes. This is a different act from repeatedly photographing the same scene from the photographer's own home, which creates parameters that generate a focus on the changing light and weather within a confined space. The familiarity of the view and the repetition of the act create a framework, metaphorically as well as actual, which defines the similarities and differences.

In writing this chapter I have engaged in a reflective process in respect of my own photographic practice. Although my images sit within, and are informed by, the romantic tradition of landscape photography, the ongoing impact of the New Topographers, and the aesthetics of Klett's rephotography projects, in a sense my images are not about landscape. They have not been created in order to raise awareness of environmental concerns, nor to create a vision of the picturesque or to describe man's intervention in the landscape. Rather my work is a way of documenting my daily life in a process which is not dissimilar to the highly personal autobiographical work of Jo Spence or Nan Goldin.

While my work may include subjects more traditionally associated with the picturesque I am not attempting to create a romantic vision of a rural idyll; I live in the country so my work refers to my environment and the 'man-altered' landscape which surrounds me. Often there are no people in my images because my existence is relatively solitary. By including human activity such as ploughing, hot air ballooning and sailing, within the traces of a man-altered landscape of agricultural field patterns, reservoirs and power stations, my work does not deny human presence. However, it could be argued that my constant use of zoom lenses might be perceived as a metaphorical attempt to step up into the mountains, out to sea, or up into the clouds in an attempt to distance myself from human desecration of the landscape. Another explanation is that I am not able to physically get out into the mountains, or up into the air, or out to sea. Chronic ill health impacts on my ability to work directly within the landscape and can often have the effect of making me feel isolated, that life is

passing me by, everything is happening 'somewhere else' 'out there', and that I am disconnected from it. Using a zoom lens or photographing other people's lives from a moving car captures a sense of the voyeuristic role I am often forced to adopt.

Writing in respect of the rephotographic projects Ian Walker notes that, 'These pictures are not documents of facts, but documents of how facts change, of how uncertain reality is, and consequently how uncertain we must be about it' (Walker, in Brittain 1999: 132). This is extremely valid, demonstrating not only that 'reality' is uncertain, but, by definition, that our place within this 'reality' is uncertain too, and crucially, that the only certainty is change. It could be argued that my on-going engagement with repeatedly photographing the same subject forms a personal re-photographic project. In creating images which explore the impact of different sorts of light on the same subject I am repeatedly re-photographing the same scene in order to catalogue the changes that take place; not just changes of season to season, day to day, but from moment to moment as the light shifts and slides. Time passes: things change: sometimes the only certainty in my life is my photographic practice. As Olaf Otto Becker suggests: 'Our perception determines our reality, and since I sometimes mistrust my perception and question what other people describe as reality, I photograph what interests me in the here and now in order to discover my own reality' (Barth 2008: no page numbers given). It might be argued that, as Becker suggests, my continual commitment to photographic practice could be perceived as attempt to 'discover' or construct 'my own reality.' My work is about visually exploring the world rather than attempting to present a fixed viewpoint or solution. While for Ansel Adams it appears that the goal of photographing something is to create a finished print, for me it is about engaging in a continual dialogue with the world. As Berlant suggests, my images are about collecting 'material that might help to ... maintain one's sea legs ...' (Berlant 2010:5). That is, by creating images which document 'how facts change' and describe 'how uncertain reality is' (Walker, in Brittain 1999:

132). I am able to maintain my equilibrium, create my own sense of place, establish my 'sea legs' within a shifting world.

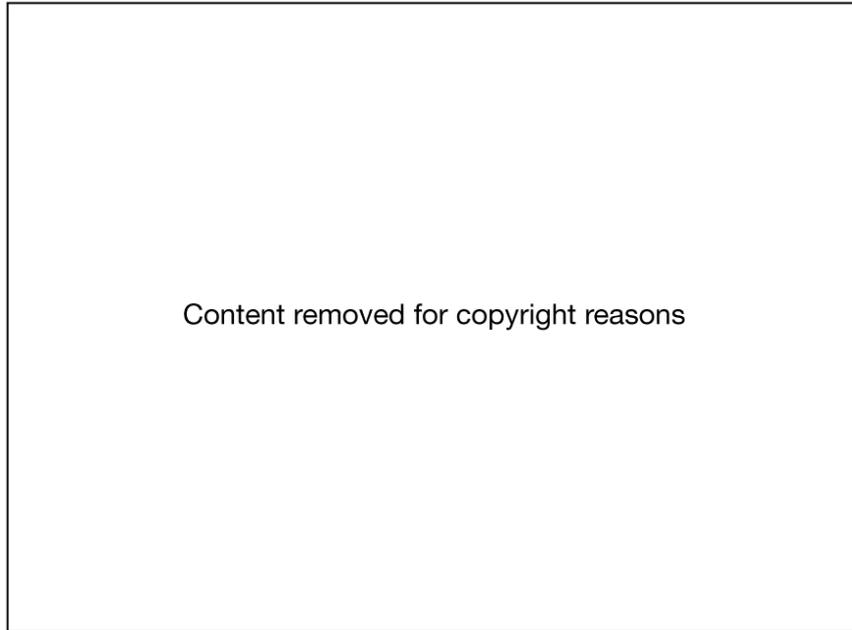


Rachel White, *Tax Disc*, 2007

I am not alone in repeatedly re-photographing the same scene. The following images from Richard Misrach are part of a series documenting the changing light and weather which were taken from the same place on his porch overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge.



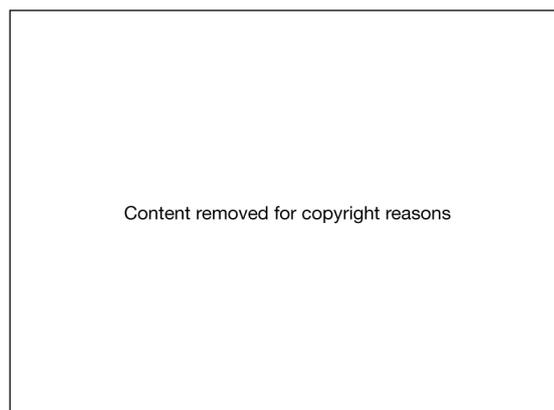
Richard Misrach, *Golden Gate* series, 2001



Richard Misrach, *Golden Gate* series, 2001

Annette Robinson's images of the Jubilee Pool in Penzance have been described as 'An ongoing series recording ever changing combinations of light, colour and reflections' (Wells 1994: 39). While Joel Meyerowitz describes his continual documentation of the horizon line between the sea and the sky in *Bay/Sky* as follows:

There is no story. This is simply a book of days. Today it was crystalline, this day was dark, one day brings to mind a flower petal, another the inside of a shell. Some days are metal: steely, leaden, silver, golden. Other days are minerals or gems: emerald, turquoise, jade, crystal. (Meyerowitz 1993: Afterword)



Joel Meyerowitz, images from *Bay/Sky*, 1993

The narrative of my own process of visual interrogation could be defined as an ongoing 'book of days' detailing the transformative power of light through constant subtle aesthetics shifts resulting from minute changes within my immediate environment. My work is primarily dialogic, capturing fleeting moments, exploring tensions and establishing rhythmic patterns which continually reassess and re-anchor my own sense of reality.

The two images that follow are representations of the wider landscape. Like my work, Susan Collins depicts the constant subtle aesthetics shifts resulting from minute changes within natural landscape of sea and sky, while *Orbite Rosse (Red Orbits)* by Grazia Toderi depicts the manmade environment of the cityscape. Although both works are represented here as static images, in actuality both are moving images. Collins' 2009 *Seascape* exhibition featured an image continually reconstructed pixel by pixel, in real time, from information generated by a series of live webcams.



Susan Collins, *Folkestone, 25 October 08 11.41*

The other non-static representation, this time of the man made landscape, Grazia Toderi's *Orbite Rosse (Red Orbits)* is a mesmerising double video installation created from the distant lights of cities superimposed over one another which continually transform through the movement of life within the

cities and the twinkle of the city lights. The 'red orbits' of the title refer to the red orbits of our eyes. For someone else this may be what Barthes refers to as an 'indifferent work', however, for me it holds the power of a punctum. Having viewed it in a gallery setting I was transfixed. Although I saw the work in 2012, the memory of it, and my sense of connection with it remains immensely powerful. Obviously representing these two works as static images removes the essence of them, however by creating art works which record the dynamic aspects of the landscape, both Collins and Toderi add an authentic dimension to their representation which is at odds with the stillness and remoteness of the aesthetic favoured by Ansel Adams.



Grazia Toderi, *Orbite Rosse (Red Orbits)*, 2009

The non-static nature of these works also challenges the concept of a 'decisive moment'. Although I have not seen Collins' work in any other form than as a static representation, I presume that the ever changing nature of the work replicates the movement of the ocean and the clouds and the play of light on the water, offering a new dimension to the concept of landscape photography. The works also offer a new methodology which challenges the idea that the photographer decides what is recorded, or even sees the images prior to recording the scene.

Another contemporary practitioner who challenges this process is Susan Derges. Her work records movement, and even invisible soundwaves. Sometimes images are created by exposing sensitised paper which is held in place underwater, in darkness or semi-darkness, so that the images she creates result partly from invention and intervention, and partly from serendipity. Wells suggests her work concerns ‘... the alchemical effects of moments of transformation ... ’ (Wells 2011: 294). This methodological approach to image making results in the creation of images which are a revelation to Derges as photographer, as well as the viewers of the completed image. Because she often works directly onto sensitised paper her images are mostly of details of the landscape rather than depictions of a wider landscape. More recently she has begun to work with pre-visualised images which combine analog and digital techniques in her studio rather than generating the complete image outdoors in darkness, which parallels the experiences of working closer to home described in relation to Godwin, Blakemore and Adams.



Susan Derges, *Ivy Bridge*, 2013

The concerns of Collins, Toderi and Derges, have a common thread of exploring the landscape in a fresh and dynamic way. Their work has a sense of

playfulness and openness that is missing from Ansel Adams' remote depiction of landscape. The images have an immediacy and experimental quality that has more in common with the work of the New Topographers or Klett's rephotographic project.

This chapter concludes with the following, lengthy but insightful, comment from one of Klett's rephotographic colleagues, Gregory Conniff.

Beauty is useful and it resides in the world, not in the eye of the beholder. Ansel Adams used it in photographs that helped to direct protective attention to the part of the world that is wilderness. My regret over his work is my belief that in drawing our eyes toward sublime wilderness and away from the places of our daily lives, his photographs make an argument that beauty is *elsewhere*.

A problem with identifying beauty so strongly with wilderness is that it can divert our affection and sense of responsibility away from our inhabited local places. With some tension we come to regard the places where we live as ruined by human presence - and yet also as home. Many photographers have mined this tension; but whether documentary or reflexive-academic in nature, little serious work that I am aware of considers beauty as other than something to avoid or to patronize with irony. And with the world deep in crises there is an easy logic to dismissing as fatuous or as products of denial photographs that bear witness to beauty in everyday life.

Nevertheless, I believe that beauty is part of the information the world offers us about physical reality. It is directive information. It matters. And it is part of local knowledge. The subtle beauties of our home places are part of what gives rise to our love and cultivation of these places. The lesson I have taken from Ansel Adams is that if you love something and

want to protect it, you must first point it out and argue for its value. It is not enough to show the effects of our endless human bungling and greed. I am interested in work that defines and protects the vanishing commonplace beauties that let us know that we're home. (Conniff, in Read 1993: 90)

As Conniff suggests, beauty is not conditional on recognition. It 'resides in the world' whether it is noticed or not. He also suggests that it is a given quality, 'part of the information the world offers us', that it is inherent in the world rather than being defined by, or coming into existence in relation to, the specific judgement of each individual viewer of either the world or images about the world. He draws attention to the fact that by diverting the definition of beauty towards wilderness by excluding our 'inhabited local places' Ansel Adams leads viewers of his images to reject the places they inhabit, considering them to be 'ruined' by human presence. However Conniff does not reject the work of Ansel Adams, but rather argues for the value of recognising the commonplace beauties we encounter each day in the places we call home.

Beauty for me is not 'elsewhere', my images are precisely about the 'commonplace beauties' in my own everyday life. My work documents collisions between the mundane and the sacred, investigating moments of visual alchemy when the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Everyday, commonplace, heart stopping, beauties such as the following moment documented by poet Douglas Dunn:

A builder is repairing someone's leaking roof,

He kneels upright to rest his back,

His trowel catches the light and becomes precious

Douglas Dunn, *On roofs of Terry Street*. (Williams 1972:44)

As the following image demonstrates, my work offers a new awareness of the familiar, defining the 'commonplace beauties' of my reality. 'Commonplace beauties' that let me know I'm 'home'.

In order to contextualise my engagement with photographic practice, further chapters of this thesis will examine the notion of redefining beauty and consider the nature of engagement with the photographic process with particular reference to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of optimal experience.



Rachel White, *Reflected Barn Roof*, 2009

CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS: THE SPLENDOUR OF THE INSIGNIFICANT



Rachel White, *Ifor's Barn*, 2010

## CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS: THE SPLENDOUR OF THE INSIGNIFICANT

The book *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics* (Beckley 1998) contains a transcript of a lecture given by psychologist James Hillman regarding 'The Practice of Beauty'. In his lecture Hillman discusses our 'curious refusal to admit beauty' (Hillman 1998: 263) stating that:

... the most significant unconscious today, the factor that is the most important but most unrecognized in the work of our psychological culture, could be defined as "beauty", for that is what is ignored, omitted, absent. The repressed therefore is not what we usually suppose: violence, misogyny, sexuality, childhood, emotions and feeling, or even the spirit, which receives its due meditation practice. All these themes are common in daily conversation. No, the repressed today is beauty. (ibid.: 263)

This chapter sets out to discuss beauty and the possibilities of a contemporary redefinition of aesthetic value in relation to the concept of commonplace beauty, and to investigate how this relates to the body of photographic work generated as a result of the visual element of this study. The chapter will develop connections that lead to a unique viewpoint by referring to ideas from a diverse range of disciplines in a way that is not dissimilar to the inclusive nature of the subject matter of my images.

The photographic strand of this research project results from my extensive engagement with commonplace beauty. The resultant images deliberately include all of the messy aspects of everyday life which are excluded from the frame by my commercial photographic practice. The carefully constructed approach of the commercial work sets such images within the Ansel Adams tradition of landscape photography, as discussed in the previous chapters, that is, the creation of images which aim to produce a clean, crisp, finished

aesthetic; a marketable 'product' with a clearly defined narrative. The conventions of this aesthetic offer images which are neatly packaged finished stories, complete entities often projecting a sanitised version of reality with little room for imperfection. Conversely, rather than manufacturing imagery of a sanitised world which excludes and adapts reality to conform to the conventions of an idealised version of the world, the images created in the context of this research do not form sealed packages but allow room for the viewer to consider possibilities and to apply their own narrative. As previous Director of the Department of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski, comments, a photographer, and indeed, potential viewers of an image, learns from his photographs that 'the appearance of the world was richer and less simple than his mind would have guessed ... his pictures could reveal not only the clarity but obscurity of things' (Szarkowski 2009:126). The idea of images of a world which is complex and 'obscure' challenges the sort of neatly packaged images created by Ansel Adams which offer simple, clearly defined solutions rather than asking the viewer, or photographer, to engage on a deeper level than aesthetic appreciation, and to question their own perception of the world.

The visual element of my research identifies and develops the aesthetic potential of the mundane through the creation of a series of images which explore the possibilities of a contemporary aesthetic response to the everyday. The work documents series of interconnected moments, revealing both the clarity *and* the obscurity of things. Things are not always as simple as they might seem. Subjects are not always clearly defined, images are not always neatly sealed packages which offer easy solutions. Instead they may refer to the obscurity of the world; suggesting that the world, and images of the world might require attention, engagement and consideration. Objects are bisected by the edge of the frame, motion blur interrupts and extends movement suggesting a living entity beyond the single, stilled, 'decisive' moment, offering possibilities which reach beyond the conventions of a carefully manufactured

compartmentalised world by hinting at a continuing narrative beyond the confines of the frame.

As Szarkowski puts it, the photographer's

central problem is a simple one: what shall he include, what shall he reject? The line of decision between in and out is the picture's edge. While a draughtsman starts with the middle of the sheet, the photographer starts with the frame. The photograph's edge defines the content. It isolates unexpected juxtapositions. By surrounding two facts, it creates a relationship. The edge of the photograph dissects familiar forms and shows their unfamiliar fragment. (Szarkowski 2007: 70)

While this idea also relates to images taken through windows which were discussed in the previous chapter, the way the window 'frames' the view, parallels the way that the confines of the viewfinder, or digital screen create the confines of an image. Decisions about what to include, where to 'draw the line' of the frame are crucial to the meaning of an image. The framing of any image employs what Wells calls a 'system of visual editing' (Wells 1994: 48). While a draughtsman may begin work in the middle of the paper, once a photographer has decided on the subject of an image, decisions about which elements of the scene are put inside the frame and what is left outside assign meaning to the image. While the more traditional aesthetic of Ansel Adams often excludes 'undesirable' aspects from the frame as a starting point to capturing his vision of an undefiled world, other practitioners use the framing of an image to 'isolate unexpected juxtapositions'. This can be seen, for example, in Rodchenko's, *Fire Escape*, and particularly in Hill's *Legs Over High Tor, Matlock*, which were reproduced in previous chapters. While Adams captures wide sweeping 'wilderness' landscapes, the narrow view of the New Topographers, often seems to render the landscape 'cluttered, unbalanced, or

constrained rather than pristine and endless' (Dennis 2005). As Robert Adams' image, *Colorado Springs, Colorado, Power's Willenhall 02/12/11* and my *Petrol Station: Yellow and Blue*, which were reproduced in previous chapters, demonstrate, a relationship is created between the elements that are included within the frame. Drawing attention to sometimes diverse elements 'creates a relationship' between them that may have previously been overlooked. This can be seen in Erwit's *Florida Keys*, reproduced in the previous chapter. Similarly, as demonstrated by Hill's *Legs Over High Tor, Matlock*, only revealing part of an object within an image offers a new way of looking at familiar objects, engaging with what Stewart describes as 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (Stewart 2011: 446) and revealing 'not only the clarity but obscurity of things' (Szarkowski 2009:126). By paying attention to things which are often over looked, and valuing unexpected juxtapositions and unfamiliar fragments, my work explores the aesthetic potential of spaces between the obvious; things that are

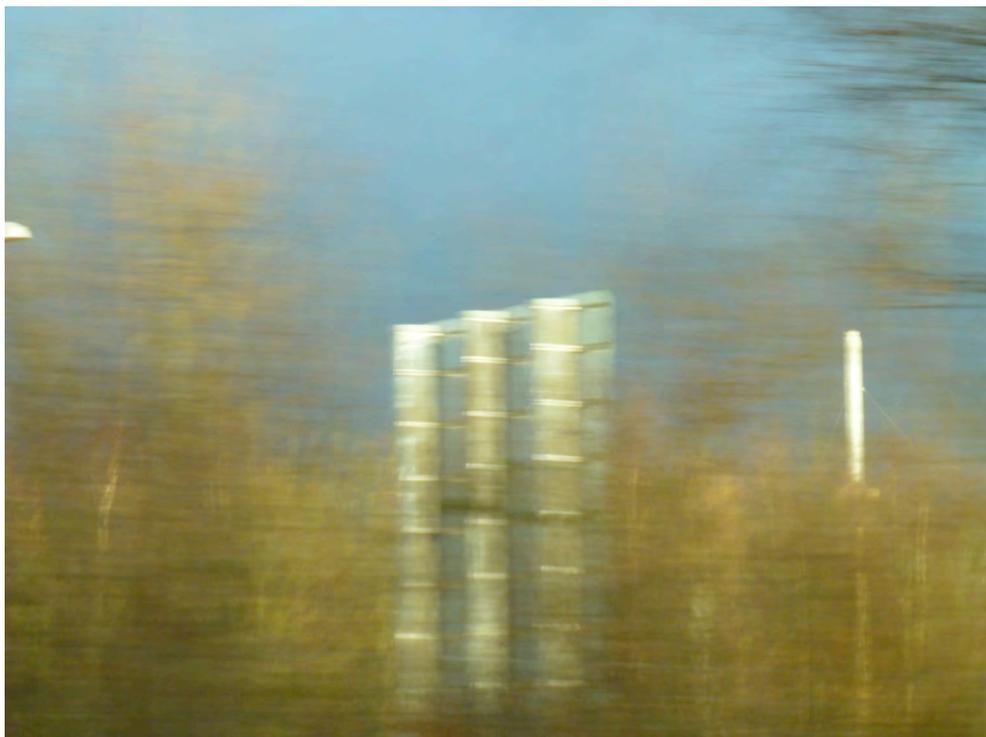
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
(Eliot 1982:198)

The research recognises those moments which are so fully integrated into everyday life that they often pass completely unnoticed; moments which are so familiar that they are 'not noticed, because they are not looked' for, passing unnoticed while the mind is engaged in other things rather than being open to looking and fully experiencing the everyday. Such moments can be seen and appreciated if a person is open to noticing the detail of life. Writing about Arts-based research; Shaun McNiff comments that:

Art embraces ordinary things with an eye for their unusual and extraordinary qualities. The artist looks at banal phenomena from a

perspective of aesthetic significance and gives them a value they do not normally have. (McNiff, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 37).

My attribution of aesthetic significance to what may be perceived as banal phenomena is illustrated in the following image, which was taken from a moving car. As we sped past, the light glinted off the back of the road sign, the light and the motion blur within the image gives the 'banal' road sign a 'value' and 'significance' that may not usually be attributed to such an 'ordinary thing'. Although the subject matter is very ordinary the content of this image is not instantly recognisable. By photographing an ordinary object in an unusual way the image draws attention to the aesthetic significance of the moment. The image concerns 'not only the clarity but obscurity of things' (Szarkowski 2009:126). The subject matter is not 'clear'; there is an obscurity which requires the viewer to connect with the image and to consider the extraordinary qualities of the everyday which are referred to within the image.



Rachel White, *Road Sign*, 2014

Also writing about Arts informed research Sandra Weber suggests:

Seeing, being surrounded by the visual, doesn't always necessarily mean that we *notice* what we see. It is the *paying attention*, the looking and the taking note of what we see that makes images especially important to art, scholarship and research. Indeed the discourse of academy is all about persuading others to see what we see. (Weber, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 42)

I share, at least in part, Diane Arbus's belief she photographed 'things which no one else would see unless I photograph them' (Dyer 2007: 48). But, as a result of being exposed to the constant stream of visual imagery which access to digital technology has so fully integrated into the daily routines of contemporary culture, unlike Arbus, I recognise that others do see at least some of the things that I notice. However, not everyone sees everything and no one sees the world in quite the same way. McNiff refers to asking his students when he senses a reluctance to 'recognise and trust personal creative resources', 'What feels most natural to you? Where does your authentic expertise lie? What is it that you have done that others have not experienced with the same range or intensity?' (McNiff, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 39). Poet, Carl Leggo suggests, 'We need imagination to break out of stereotypes and to create other possibilities' (Leggo, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 168). And Weber notes, 'Images literally help us to adopt someone else's gaze, see someone else's point of view, and borrow their experience for a moment' (Weber, in Knowles and Cole 2008: 45). My images of everyday landscapes of sea, sky, pylons and cars document the aspects of the world that are most 'natural' to me. I do not choose to photograph people because my world is relatively solitary, but catching half seen glimpses of other worlds from a moving car is part of my 'authentic' experience of the world. By creating images of the things that generate intensities for me lends my experience of that intensity to the viewer. Viewing the world from my perspective, paying

attention to the things that pull my 'senses into alert' (Stewart 2011: 445) may lead the viewer to new discoveries within their own understanding and experience of the world.

As Graham Higgs suggests in an essay entitled 'Psychology: Knowing the Self Through Arts': 'Arts reflect the dynamic self of the artist and the artist's perspective on experience. They are a personal expression of an understanding of the world, and they evoke the distilled experience of being in the world of the individual. As researchers, artists are attuned to the self-knowing reflective practice. The artist as researcher creates meaning' (Higgs in Knowles and Cole 2008: 551). That is, in creating photographic images I am utilising this dynamic to offer my experiences and my perspective to viewers of my work. The images I create are personal expressions of my own understanding of the world and, at their most successful, the images have the ability to distil my individual experience and evoke a similar experience within the viewer.

## **AN AESTHETIC SMILE: MAKING THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY**

In his introduction to *The Photographer's Eye* Szarkowski writes that

In 1853 the NEW YORK DAILY TRIBUNE estimated that three million daguerreotypes were being produced that year. Some of these pictures were the product of knowledge and skill and sensibility and invention; many were the product of accident, improvisation, misunderstanding, and empirical experiment. But whether produced by art or luck, each picture was part of a massive assault on our traditional habits of seeing.  
(Szarkowski 2007: no page numbers indicated)

He continues: 'Some of the new images were memorable, and seemed significant beyond their limited intention', later adding that 'These remembered

pictures enlarged one's sense of possibilities as he [sic] looked again at the real world' (Author's capitals) (Szarkowski 2007: no page numbers indicated). This final comment in particular relates to the idea that by drawing attention to aspects of the world photographs can allow the viewer of the photograph to experience the real world from a different perspective. Writing about photographer Wynn Bullock, Barbara Bullock-Wilson and Edna Bullock comment: 'Mysteries live all around us, even in the most familiar things, waiting only to be perceived' (Bullock-Wilson and Bullock 1984: 21). Photographs can help others perceive the 'mysteries', 'not only the clarity but obscurity of things' (Szarkowski 2009:126) that reside within the familiar.

Paying attention to the ordinary in life is not a new idea. James Hillman discusses 'the power of ordinary things', linking his ideas to suggestions made by philosopher, Plotinus:

After all: is that not the great puzzle: that ordinary things - the objet trouve, the collage of newsprint, wallpaper and postage stamps, the light glinting off the icicle - can exhibit the invisible power of beauty? Plotinus argues that "We do not habitually examine or in any way question ordinary things, but we set to doubting when confronted with any display of powers which are out of the ordinary, and encounter the extraordinary with astonishment though we should be astonished at these ordinary things too if we were unfamiliar with them and someone presented a detailed account of them and explained their powers." Plotinus is saying that we take ordinary things for granted, and that they are "ordinary" precisely because we do not examine them carefully enough in detail, which does not allow the power of their aesthetic smile to appear. The artist, of course, does indeed reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. (Hillman 1998: 267-268)

For me, the 'aesthetic smile' of an image is often connected with 'the light

glinting off the icicle’, that is the transformative power of light. As in the following image, much of my own work is about the alchemy of changing light. The work documents collisions between the mundane and the sacred, investigating moments of alchemy when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, capturing the moment when dramatic or strange light creates a dynamic aesthetic which stimulates a new awareness of the familiar.



Rachel White, *Goose Feather on Lake*, 2016

Hillman’s idea that objects can hold an ‘aesthetic smile’ echoes Cartier Bresson’s comment concerning the way that Erwitte’s images offer ‘a smile from his deeper self.’ I will return to the concept of a person’s ‘deeper self’ in the following chapter. However, here Hillman is referring to the idea that this ‘smile’ gives objects a value and a ‘power’ which can be underestimated because it is not revealed if we do not ‘examine them carefully enough in detail’ (Hillman 1998: 267-268). As McNiff suggests, ‘Art embraces ordinary things with an eye for their unusual and extraordinary qualities. The artist looks at banal phenomena from a perspective of aesthetic significance and gives them a value they do not normally have’ (McNiff in Knowles and Cole 2008: 37). By creating photographic images of the mundane, easily overlooked,

aspects of everyday life I aim to capture and share my experiences, to draw attention to the details that I am motivated to record. For, as Weber suggests,

Art makes us look; it engages us. The reason we need and create art has to do with its ability to discover what we didn't know we knew, or to see what we never noticed before, even when it was right in front of our noses. Artistic images can make the ordinary seem extraordinary – breaking through common resistance, forcing us to consider new ways of seeing or doing things. (Weber in Knowles and Cole 2008: 44)

Weber's statement helps to clarify the comparison between the aims of my research images and their relationship with the sealed off repetitious aesthetic associated with the Ansel Adams tradition of landscape photography, where the world is presented as a complete entity with no requirement for 'breaking through common resistance, or forcing us to consider new ways of seeing or doing things'. While such images are polished and admirable they can seem remote and irrelevant, often without the immediacy that offers new insights that enable us to reconsider the minutiae our own environment or daily life. Because, as Stewart suggests, 'The ordinary is a moving target' (Stewart 2007: 93) we are perpetually challenged 'to consider new ways of seeing or doing things' (Weber in Knowles and Cole 2008: 44).

In a review of Ansel Adams' autobiography, reproduced in Robert Adams' book *Why People Photograph*, he draws attention to the fact that the best known of Ansel Adams images are 'consciously stylized'. He refers to the fact that Adams was very aware of the repetitive nature of his work, and quotes him as follows; 'My vision established its own groove, as I know I have been derivative of myself for fifty years.' (Adams 1994:116). However Robert Adams also notes that the autobiography, which was published in 1985, only directly refers once to the suggestion that Ansel Adams' photography is 'not relevant to today's world' (ibid.:117); there is no suggestion that it may not have been

relevant previously either. The concerns of my creative practice are not specifically relevant to contemporary society, my images are not intentionally created to raise awareness of issues such as concerns for the environment, they do not address poverty or war; however in a broader sense I believe that the work has relevance. Sharing my experience of the world through the images may offer viewers of the work new insights into the world, new ways of looking at the familiar which may lead to new knowledge and a new understanding of the world. The work is about learning new things by learning to develop an openness to recognising and recording the extraordinary within the ordinary.

Writing about Harry Callahan Szarkowski states that:

Since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, artists have advised each other to find their subject matter close to home, among things native to their own experience... the work of most artists clearly aims at extrapolating from their personal experience, to make it the vessel for a broader and more universal statement. Such work invites us to work our way outward, from the private and specific to the larger world. Harry Callahan's work is an exception, for it draws us ever more insistently inward toward the center of Callahan's private sensibility. ... Callahan has photographed ... materials so close at hand, so universally and obviously accessible, that one might have supposed that a dedicated photographer could exhaust their potential in a fraction of that time. Yet Callahan has repeatedly made these simple experiences new again by virtue of the precision of his feeling. ... The point is that for Harry Callahan photography has been a way of living – his way of meeting and making peace with the day. (Szarkowski 1980: 166)



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Harry Callahan, *Sunlight on Water*, 1943

## THE TRANSIENT NATURE OF THINGS: EXHILARATION AND EXHAUSTION

Like Callahan, my photography is a ‘way of living’. For me too, it is a ‘way of meeting and making peace with the day.’ My methodological approach to creating images is one of constant vigilance, the easily over looked random moments that I photograph, once past, are lost forever. As Cartier-Bresson wrote in 1952, ‘We photographers deal in things that are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth that can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory’ (Szarkowski 2007: 112). The nature of life, of the passage of time and the importance of paying attention to glimpsed moments that ‘pull the senses into alert’ (Stewart 2011: 445) requires a conscious and on-going commitment to looking and really seeing, to engaging fully with the act of attentiveness. In creating images I discover new things about the world. The state of constant vigilance, the ‘attunement of the senses’ (ibid.: 452) that is required is both exhilarating and exhausting.

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes discusses his experience of viewing, rather than creating, photographic images, referring to his realisation that the people 'contained' within the images are now dead, or will become dead at some point in the future (Barthes 2000: 95-96). There 'is no contrivance on earth that can make them come back again' (Szarkowski 2007: 112). In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Beautiful and Damned* Gloria remarks that, 'There's no beauty without poignancy and there's no poignancy without the feeling that it's going, men, names, books, houses – bound for dust –mortal –' (Fitzgerald 2004:140). The transient nature of things adds another layer of meaning to experience. Sontag quotes Berenice Abbott: 'The photographer is the contemporary par excellence; through his eyes the now becomes past' (Sontag 1979: 67). That is, the instant that the shutter is released, the moment which is captured within an image instantly becomes history, 'the past'. As Szarkowski puts it, 'Immobilizing these thin slices of time has been a source of continuing fascination for the photographer' (Szarkowski 2007: no page numbers indicated). Susan Derges suggests that 'Photography is kind of tied up with death in many respects in terms of you're looking at absent moments; they're no longer there. So it is quite a lot I think to do with loss as well as holding and showing' (Derges: 2010 on line).

As a creative practitioner I appreciate the importance of cultivating a state of constant awareness, while specifically as a photographer, I am particularly alive to the fleeting passage of light within the 'landscape' of the everyday. I am open to paying attention to the detail of life, to the siren call of the 'half-heard', or half-glimpsed; those fragments of the commonplace, 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (Stewart 2011: 446) which exert a force that motivates a response. My photographic practice is not about travelling to a clearly defined location at a specific time to create a pre-envisaged image of a specific subject, instead it concerns recognising and cultivating an awareness of the aesthetic potential available at all times and all circumstances of daily life. The following image demonstrates some of this attentiveness through the

way the landscape is recognised and caught in an instant from a moving car. It juxtaposes hay bales and cooling towers, the sign recommending 'vision' urges us to look, the car registration, cc, 'see, see,' or the cc of the carbon copy shapes of the cooling towers and hay bales, while the arrows point beyond the confines of the frame.



Rachel White, *Vision: cc: Rugeley Power Station*, 2015

## ROGUE INTENSITIES: THE IMPORTANT THING IS NOT TO BLINK

As Sontag suggests, with reference to the work of photographer Diane Arbus, 'The important thing is not to blink' (Sontag 1979: 41). Although Sontag is referring to the fact that Arbus does not look away from the odd or uncomfortable, my work does not 'blink' or look away, from potential subject matter. Therefore my photographic practice is not a compartmentalised recreational activity but involves a state of constant vigilance and the development of an awareness of the aesthetic potential of every moment. The work focuses on the ordinary, the small wonders and moments of intensity. In

this respect the images parallel what Stewart describes as the 'rogue intensities' which 'pulse at the edge' of the ordinary.

Rogue intensities roam the streets of the ordinary.

There are all the lived, yet unassimilated, impacts of things, all the fragments of experience left hanging.

Everything left unframed by the stories of what makes a life pulses at the edges of things

(Stewart 2007: 44)

As with the image above, by framing the insignificant details which do not form part of the obvious 'stories' of life, the details which might otherwise be left 'unframed' and unnoticed, my images create stories, or at least the potential for a viewer to generate their own narrative, both from within and beyond the confines of the frame. The images provide me, in the role of photographer, and any potential viewer of an image, with a chance to both 'stop time' and to 'take time' to think, to look closely and to re-evaluate the overlooked, to assimilate the impact of those fragments of daily experience that are left hanging by not seeming central to the 'story' of life, but which may be key to our experience of living. In a phrase reminiscent of what Stewart calls 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (Stewart 2011: 446), Mark Holborn discusses Robert Frank, stating that 'the voltage of a photograph is its ability to cut through a fragment of a second and write a legend. Style and sensationalism are low currents. We are arrested by those pictures that burn all the way to the edges' (Holborn in Haworth-Booth 1983: 64).

In his book *Ordinary Lives* Ben Highmore describes Kathleen Stewart's book, *Ordinary Affects*, as 'conjuring up a world of humdrum violence, banal perseverance and unexpected tenderness. ... and outbreaks of intensity' (Highmore 2011: 7). However he suggests that Stewart's book contains 'nothing explicit ... that can simply be extracted and applied to something else,

... no easily quotable paragraph that would underwrite a methodology' (ibid.: 8). This is not my understanding of Stewart's work; my own methodological approach involves being open to the possibility of responding to precisely the sort of 'outbreaks of intensity' and 'unexpected tenderness' that Highmore refers to; the possibility of being 'pricked' by the 'unexpected flash' or 'punctum', that 'lacerating emphasis' that Roland Barthes describes as being 'no longer of form but of intensity' (Barthes 2000: 96).

By paying attention to the intensity of everyday beauties that are an integral part of ordinary life, beauties such as light glancing off a manhole cover or the slow, viscous, progress of condensation running down a windowpane, my work aims to broaden knowledge by generating a new awareness and appreciation of the familiar. As T. S. Eliot, who through his poetic exploration most fully describes my experiences of the different ways in which time can pass or be held still, and whose ideas reference the concepts at the very heart of my photographic practice, puts it:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time  
(Eliot 1982: 197)

By exploring what we think we know we can perhaps begin to appreciate our familiar surroundings on a different level, to see things 'with new eyes'. Journalist Geoff Dyer quotes John Szarkowski's comments in respect of photographer Garry Winogrand, stating that his best images were 'not illustrations of what he had known, but were new knowledge' (Dyer 2007: 7). By connecting with a process of visual awareness and exploration like Winogrand, my work aims to be more than mere 'illustration'; my attentiveness to the everyday aims not simply to remind us of what we already know by

confirming established positions or values, but rather, to create ‘new knowledge’ in the way that Dyer suggests of Winogrand. I am not creating images as a means of affirming what I already know about the world, but using my camera as a tool to explore the familiar, to see the world with new eyes, as if to ‘know the place for the first time’ (Eliot 1982: 197). My images aim to promote a new understanding of what Gregory Conniff calls the ‘commonplace beauties that let us know that we’re home’ (Conniff in Read 1993: 30).



Rachel White, *Spring Morning, Porthmadog*, 2016



Rachel White, *Shed with Stake*, 2016

## THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

In the ‘conversation’ which concludes D.J. Waldie’s book *Holy Land A Suburban Memoir* Waldie describes his daily life: ‘I can’t think of anything more ordinary. It’s exactly as described in *Holy Land*. The pedestrian and the sacred are both there’ (Waldie 2005: 186). That is, the pedestrian ordinariness of the commonplace is held in equal measure with a reverence for the sacred nature of Waldie’s spiritual connection with the commonplace. He describes the book as being about ‘falling in love’ and ‘the obligations that falling in love brings’, adding ‘It’s about longing for what you already have’ (ibid.: 184). By noticing the ‘sacred’ qualities of the ‘pedestrian’ everyday, creating images of ‘what you already have’ gives a reverence to the moment. It involves a deep longing to be at one with that moment and hold onto the intensity of the connection. As Dyer suggests, an image can be ‘simultaneously of contentment and yearning’, quoting photographer Joel Meyerowitz: ‘*I’m not really interested in gas stations or anything about gas stations. This happens to be an excuse for seeing*’ (Dyer’s italics) (Dyer 2007: 198). That is, the act of creating images

involves a sense of both commitment and contentment, it secures the photographer's place in the world at that moment, and yet also generates a sense of longing for what you already have, a yearning to become more deeply involved, to remain connected to the intensity of the moment. Szarkowski notes that 'An artist ... seeks new structures in which to order and simplify his sense of the reality of his life' (Szarkowski 2007: no page numbers indicated).

Falling in love with seeing, not simply the act of creating an image, but learning, and creating the place the photographer inhabits within the world. As Szarkowski suggests in relation to Callahan, who photographed

materials so close at hand, so universally and obviously accessible, that one might have supposed that a dedicated photographer could exhaust their potential ... Yet Callahan has repeatedly made these simple experiences new again by virtue of the precision of his feeling. ... The point is that for Harry Callahan photography has been a way of living – his way of meeting and making peace with the day. (Szarkowski 1980: 166)

Photographer Edward Weston describes his own experience of creating images; 'Putting one's head under the focusing cloth is thrilling... To pivot the camera slowly around watching the image change on the ground-glass is a revelation, one becomes a discoverer ... and finally the complete idea is there...' (Szarkowski 2007: 72)

Barthes suggests, 'I ...realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love' (Barthes 2000:116). As Arnold Berleant suggests in Light and Smith's *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, there are parallels between love and art. "Love and art dwell ... in the perceptual domains of sense, imagination, and memory, and both focus on the sensory qualities of the situation' (Berleant in Light and Smith 2005: 34). This idea relates to

Stewart description of the 'sensory qualities of the situation' as a 'force field in which people find themselves' (Stewart 2011: 452), suggesting that an 'attunement of the senses' is required to access the potential 'of ordinary sensibilities of ... being in love with some form or life' (ibid.: 452).

## THE TENDERNESS OF THE ENCOUNTER

The power of this 'love', the 'lacerating emphasis' of such intensity, and also the individuality of each encounter, can be summed up by the 'unexpected tenderness' of Barthes' own reaction to a picture of his mother. Although in his book, *Camera Lucida*, he writes at some length about the image and his reaction to it and connection with it, the image itself does not appear in the book. Barthes writes:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary"; ... at most it would interest your *studium*: period clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound. (Barthes 2000: 73)

Even if a picture is considered to be worth, at least, a thousand words, the power of this image is far greater than the words used to discuss it. For me, Barthes refusal to reproduce the image, to make the private available to public scrutiny and consumption, is utterly moving. Although there is a logic to his explanation, his justification, Barthes has reproduced numerous images which cannot hold the same meaning, the same *punctum*, for the viewer as they do for Barthes. It is as though the power of his connection with the 'Winter Garden Photograph', the 'lacerating emphasis' of his 'wound', is so strong, that it has become sacred and therefore it would be almost an act of debasement to transform such intensity of feeling into the mere illustration of a point by

reproducing it in the book. And I am deeply moved by what I perceive as the 'unexpected tenderness' of Barthes' insistence that it remain private. The power and intensity of our attachment to photographic images is a theme I will return to later with particular reference to the employment of photography within the field of therapeutics.

My own work connects with this overwhelming sense of 'love' and intense longing for the 'sacred' 'common place beauties' that can be found within the pedestrian aspects of ordinary daily life. For, as Solnit suggests, 'To love someone is to put yourself in their place ... which is to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story' (Solnit 2013: 3). My images concern telling the story of my love for the 'common place beauties' that are part of my everyday life. As with Conniff's suggestion of commonplace beauties letting us 'know that we're home', Waldie explains his use of the term 'grace' in *Holy Land* 'to describe what someone else might experience as the unbidden, unstoppable inrush of feeling that comes from being in the company of a place to which one hopes to be native' (Waldie 2005: 189). In this context the term grace could equally be applied to my experience of creating photographic images, my sense of identification with and love for what I photograph, and my sense of belonging to and being a part of that place at that moment. Waldie also refers to the fact that 'We all live on land we've wounded by our living on it. Yet we must be here or be nowhere.' He adds that we 'hunger for a home but doubt its worth when we have it.' (ibid.) This suggestion is not dissimilar to Conniff's concerns regarding the 'tension' that we feel because we 'regard the places where we live as ruined by human presence – and yet also as home.' (Conniff in Read 1993: 30) Waldie goes on to suggest that '*Holy Land* is, in part, a meditation on the fate of the things we touch and the corresponding effects of their touch on us.' Suggesting that 'What we hope for, I think, is tenderness in this encounter.' (Waldie 2005: 190).

## DISCORDANT LANDSCAPES: IMPERFECT LIVES IN IMPERFECT PLACES

Like the ‘unexpected tenderness’ that Highmore identifies in Stewart’s writing, my images connect with the tenderness of my encounters with the ‘wounds’ we make to the land in creating our homes. This contradiction is at the heart of much of the photography I discuss in this thesis, such as the New Topographics, and it is clearly evident in my own work. The images recognise the fact that we must live somewhere, however they do not doubt the ‘worth’ of the spaces we call home, rather they explore our connection with the ‘things we touch’ and the impact that our environment has on us. As Robert Adams suggests in respect of the changes which have taken place, including the construction of an atomic weapons factory, on the plateau near Denver which has served as a focus of his photography for many years, ‘Though not many landscapes are at once as beautiful and as damaged as this one, most are, as we have invaded them, similarly discordant’ (Adams 1994: 180). An uncomfortable feeling of discord often runs through our perception of the landscape because of the scars we make on the land, and Waldie’s comment in respect of *Holy Land*, parallels the concerns of my work which document the discordance of ‘the imperfect lives we lead in imperfect places’ (Waldie 2005: 193).

Waldie’s final comment in *Holy Land* is that if he moved away from the suburb of Lakewood, where he has lived all his life, he would ‘go looking for a different kind of solitude’ (Waldie 2005: 193), implying that even when he is surrounded by his suburban neighbours he is alone. A kind of loneliness pervades the book and it could be perceived that there is a kind of solitude about my images too, in neither instance because of a lack of people, rather due to a sense of separateness. At the same time as having a strong sense of connection there is also the feeling of looking in from outside; a sense of being in ‘the company of a place to which one hopes to be native’ (Waldie 2005: 189). By focusing on the everyday, like Waldie’s writing, and by ‘assimilating the ‘impacts’ of the

fragments of intensity that are part of ordinary experience (Stewart 2007: 44), my images present a visual exploration of the commonplace in order to reveal new aspects of the familiar; or as Eliot suggests, arriving back where we started from as if knowing the place for the first time.

## **AMAZING GRACE: THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR**

Maybe there is a sense of religious endeavour, or at least of spirituality, involved in the quest for knowledge or self-knowledge entrenched within these forms of exploration of the familiar. Waldie refers to the religious connotations in order to signify his sense of spiritual connection with everyday life, choosing the title *Holy Land*, and through references to the 'sacred' and the achievement of a state of 'grace,' which, like the divine Grace of God, signifies the sanctity of setting something apart, giving it purity, making it holy. Likewise, my images concern a sense of the sacred which can be found within the secular experiences of everyday life. My methodological approach involves identifying and developing the potential of the secular experience through engaging in a process of constant attentiveness which explores my sense of spiritual connection with the 'rogue intensities' which pulse 'at the edges of things'. The resultant images investigate the possibilities of a sacred response to the everyday which, like Waldie's writing, call upon what could almost be described as a sort of spiritual zeal in order to bear 'witness to beauty in everyday life' (Conniff 1993: 90).

In his book *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, under the heading of 'Nothing Much', Ben Highmore describes the seemingly sacred intensity of his experience of an ordinary secular moment, of a sense of connection, of setting a moment apart and taking time to see the familiar with fresh eyes.

I take a break from work to enjoy the early summer sun. I take a cup of

coffee outside. My head is full of essay marking and a list of things that I should do. I'm fairly sealed off, caught in a maze of preoccupations. The sun begins to warm my skin and clothes; the warmed skin presses 'its' attention on consciousness. I realise I had been staring at the ground, and now I look up and around, noticing my surroundings for the first time since I had come outside. This is enough to momentarily stop the endless replaying of the cycle of 'to do' lists that have been looping round in my mind. ... the sunlight bolts across the grass towards me as someone on the second floor opens their window and my eyes catch the glare ...  
(Highmore 2011: 3)

By giving his full attention to the intensity of his sensory experience the pressures of Highmore's daily life are temporarily interrupted. By giving himself wholly to this 'sacred' experience of 'ordinary' intensity he achieves a state of 'Grace' through which he perceives his familiar surroundings with fresh eyes and achieves a state of renewal.

As Stewart suggests, 'The ordinary can happen before the mind can think. Little experiences of shock, recognition, confusion, and déjà vu pepper the most ordinary practices and moves. Sometimes you have to pause to catch up with where you already are' (Stewart 2007:63). The experiences of poet Carl Leggo support this idea, he writes: 'For so much of my life I have hurried here and there, out of breath. In poetry I am learning to breathe' (Leggo in Knowles and Cole (2008: 167). For Leggo it is his engagement with poetry that allows him to pause and 'catch up' with where he already is. Art critic, Dave Hickey, describes how an encounter with a creative work, Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*, allowed him to disengage from the present, and re-engage with a renewed awareness of his own surroundings.

Flaubert's story, which transported me out of the present, delivered me back into it with sharpened awareness. I can still remember the hard angle

of the morning light and the smell of cottonseed in the lazy air as I sat there on the swing with my forearms on my knees and *Trois Contes* between my hands, amazed that writing could do what it had just done. (Hickey 1997: 25)

Because of the intensity of his engagement with Flaubert's writing Hickey experiences a sort of epiphany which in turn leads to a new awareness and a deeper appreciation of his own surroundings.

For me, achieving the sort of heightened awareness described by Highmore and Hickey is a relatively commonplace experience which often results from my engagement with photographic practice. By developing an awareness that attends to the details of daily life through engagement with photographic practice I aim to be open, to fully experience my surroundings and to combat becoming 'sealed off' within my own internal thought processes. There is little room for 'preoccupations' or the 'endless replaying of the cycle of 'to do lists' when I am completely engaged in creating images. My images concern capturing precisely the sort of mundane moments of 'ordinary' intensity which Hickey and Highmore describe; moments when 'the sunlight bolts across the grass ... as someone on the second floor opens their window and my eyes catch the glare...' These 'breathing spaces' are moments of spiritual connection for me, moments of the sort of Grace that Waldie refers to. Moments that I consider sacred, which I choose to set apart and consider pure. Although the images may be of 'impure' places, the resonance that they have for me, and the intensity of my experience of them, lends a sort of purity to them. By connecting with 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary.' (Stewart 2011: 446) the world stops, time stands still, and I inhabit what T.S. Eliot describes as 'the still point of the turning world' (Eliot 1982: 175). For, as he explains,

## Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

To be conscious is not to be in time

(Eliot 1982: 173)

I will return to the experience of moments spent 'at the still point of the turning world' in a further chapter of this thesis specifically to evaluate the therapeutic aspects of this sort of intense engagement.

## **THE FRAGMENTARY NATURE OF EXPERIENCE: THE MOMENTOUSNESS OF EACH MOMENT AND KEEPING AN OPEN MIND**

The following, lengthy, quotation offers further insights into the sacred aspects of photographic engagement:

For Wynn Bullock life was a transcendent mystery and living was an exhilarating, challenging quest to gain some insight into that mystery. One of Bullock's favourite quotations on this subject was a statement by Albert Einstein:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead. His eyes are closed. ...

In an interview near the end of his life, Bullock read this statement and commented, "That's my religion." Then he added, "My photography is the best way I know of bringing me closer to some of these mysteries of existence. To make a good picture is part of the search. I'm not searching with my camera to please anyone or to report on happenings or to sell pictures. I photograph to learn and to understand." (Bullock-Wilson, and

Bullock 1984: 12)

Poet and researcher, Carl Leggo, writes of his motivation to remain open and attentive, of being fully in the present and open to the possibilities of each moment:

Poetry is a way of knowing, being, and becoming in the world. Poetry begins with attentiveness, imagination, mystery, enchantment. Poetry invites researchers to experiment with language, to create, to know, to engage creatively and imaginatively with experience. The poet-researcher seeks to live attentively in the moment, to know the momentousness of each moment, to seek to enter lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings. In poetry I am not trying to close anything down; I am not trying to understand everything; I am not seeking control. Instead, I am open to the world, open to process and mystery, open to fragmentariness, open to understanding as an archipelago of fragments. This does not mean I am not trying to make connections in understanding, but I am no longer pretending that I understand what I do not know. I am fundamentally *agnostic*, knowing above all that there is much I do not know and will never likely know. (Leggo in Knowles and Cole. 2008: 168)

In remaining open to each encounter and the possibility of making new connections that increase understanding Leggo recognises the importance of engaging 'creatively and imaginatively' and of accepting the fragmentary nature of experience. Leggo experiences writing in a similar way that Bullock experiences photography, both practitioners use their creativity as a way to 'learn and to understand' the world (Bullock in Bullock-Wilson, and Bullock 1984: 12).

In an episode of *The Culture Show*, broadcast in conjunction with an exhibition of sculptor Anthony Caro's work at Chatsworth House, (BBC 2 Wales 17.3.2012), Caro discusses his relationship with the creative process and the need to remain 'open'. When presenter and art critic Alistair Sooke asks him whether he thinks all art precedes from instinct Caro responds:

I can't say what other people do, but I think a lot of art precedes from instinct, yes. You're allowing bits of your mind full play, which you don't admit to allowing normally. Like gut feeling, you know. You can't describe why you love somebody. You have to open yourself to sculpture, you have to open your mind to what they're saying and you don't try and invest what you see in front of you with your thoughts.

Like Leggo and Bullock Caro remains 'open to each encounter and the possibility of making new connections which increase understanding' (Leggo in Knowles and Cole. 2008: 168) in order to 'learn and to understand' (Bullock in Bullock-Wilson, and Bullock 1984: 12).

Dyer refers to the opposite of this sort of open mindedness in regard to cultivating an openness to everyday experiences as subject matter for appreciation while writing about photographer Bruce Davidson's experience of ordinary moments on the New York subway. He notes that Davidson considers that his use of flash enabled him to see beyond the obvious, to 'uncover a beauty that goes unnoticed by passengers, who are themselves trapped underground, hide behind protective masks, closed off and unseeing' (Dyer 2007:22).



Bruce Davidson, *Subway*, 1986

Mulligan and Wooters refer to Garry Winogrand who created a vision that stressed the authenticity of the fleeting moment, and the clarity of purpose that could emerge from within that moment. For him, the very act of taking photographs was the essence of experience, as he sought the extraordinary in the commonplace. (Mulligan and Wooters 1999: 660)



Garry Winogrand, *World's Fair, New York City*, 1964

Highmore notes philosopher Jacques Rancière's comments concerning seeking 'the extraordinary in the commonplace' through the appropriation of fragments of the everyday for creative purposes

... the aesthetic revolution is the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of; art can show and speak of everything in the same manner. In this sense, the aesthetic revolution is an extension to infinity of the realm of language, of poetry. (Rancière in Highmore 2011: 50)

Rancière is suggesting that any object or event can become significant 'material for art' as a result of paying attention and valuing its aesthetic potential. Susan Sontag writes about the development of this process in connection with how photography overcame being 'governed by its subject'. She refers to how, by photographing something as simple as milk bottle on a fire escape, Steichen draws attention to the aesthetic potential of 'the extraordinary in the commonplace', celebrating the beauty that can be found in 'plain, tawdry, or even vapid material'.

In photography's early decades, photographs were expected to be idealized images. This is still the aim of most amateur photographers, for whom a beautiful photograph is a photograph of something beautiful, like a woman, a sunset. In 1915 Edward Steichen photographed a milk bottle on a tenement fire escape, an early example of quite a different idea of the beautiful photograph. And since the 1920s, ambitious professionals, those whose work gets into museums, have steadily drifted away from lyrical subjects, conscientiously exploring plain, tawdry, or even vapid material. In recent decades, photography has succeeded in somewhat revising, for everybody, the definitions of what is beautiful and ugly. (Sontag 1979: 28)

She proceeds to quote Walt Whitman: 'each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits beauty' suggesting that if this is so 'it becomes superficial to single out some things as beautiful and others as not' (ibid.: 28).

## SUPERFICIAL AVERSION AND THE TRANSMUTATIONAL POWER OF ART

Writing with reference to painting art therapist, David Maclagan, suggests that

The idea that mere 'attention' to what is ugly will lead to its transformation into something 'beautiful' feels like a sleight of hand when applied to painting. It defuses the discordant, objectionable aspect of ugliness, and glosses over the fact that in Modernist aesthetics the raw and the awkward contribute as much, or more, to a work's effects as the balance or the lovely... Ugliness, or the depiction of 'ugly' or barren scenes in paintings (for example in the industrial landscapes of L S Lowry or Prunella Clough) cannot be reduced to mere reflections of the urban wasteland: on the contrary, they try to alert us to what a superficial reaction of aversion will make us miss. At the same time they present their own aesthetic qualities, however ger or dull they may at first appear. Just as the painting of a picturesque landscape is more than a reproduction of the original experience of nature, so the transmutational power of art has something to do with the interplay of its own intrinsic aesthetic properties, not just with a redirection of our attention to a neglected aspect of the material world' (Maclagan 2001: 75).

Creating an image of an object that is ugly cannot transform it into something beautiful. But because the photograph has it's own aesthetic qualities as an object, the image is not a mere reflection of the subject that has been photographed. However, by creating a photographic image of a subject the 'transmutational power' of that photograph encourages the viewer to look at the subject of the image in the real world. It tries to 'alert us to what a superficial reaction of aversion will make us miss'.



William Eggleston, *Paris 2006 -2008*

Writing about William Eggleston in *The Guardian*, on the occasion of Eggleston receiving the 'Outstanding Contribution to Photography Award' in 2013, Sean O'Hagan states that when Eggleston's colour photographs were first exhibited at in MOMA, New York in 1976, critics dismissed his work as 'banal' (O'Hagan 2013). This critical viewpoint is not dissimilar to that expressed in connection with *New Topographics* which was being exhibited at a similar time. As demonstrated in the image above, Eggleston's colour images of everyday life alert us, through the 'intrinsic aesthetic properties' of the photographic image and the 'transmutational power of art' to 'what a superficial reaction of aversion' to 'a world held in common' (Highmore 2011: 50-51) 'will make us miss.'

Highmore suggests that he is interested in the work of Rancière because of Rancière's

insistence that the aesthetic regime of art institutes the opening up of art onto the everyday and the ordinary, and that it does this not just through its subject matter but by its ability to produce a world held in common. ... Similarly it is the very fact that Rancière holds onto the value of art in relation to the everyday not as a representation but as a sensorial

pedagogy that gives it such potential for a quotidian aesthetics. The aesthetic regime of art works on our senses, on the sensate world we perceive and experience, and in doing so gives new significance to the ordinary, as well as fundamentally transforming our experience of the ordinary. (Highmore 2011: 50-51)

This relates directly to Hickey's experience in connection with reading Flaubert, and in part, to that of Highmore. Although not a work of art, Highmore's inhabitation of the sensate world also offers a significance which transforms his experience of an 'ordinary' coffee break. By paying attention with my senses to the common place beauties of a 'world held in common, rather than creating images of *places* held sacred, of untouched nature, of mountains and oceans, by offering images about my experience of what is, for me as an individual, sacred, I aim to transform the experience of others and suggest a new significance to the ordinary.

Highmore refers further to Rancière:

According to the logic of the aesthetic regime of art, in order for photography or the cinema to belong to art, their subjects first had to belong to art. Everything that could be taken in by a glance had to have been already susceptible to being something artistic; the insignificant had in itself to be potentially art. [sic] The rupture of the system of representation was first brought about by what was so ineptly called 'realism'; this 'realism' held that, not only was everything represented equal, but also that there was an inherent splendour to the insignificant. (Rancière in Highmore 2011: 51)

In his book, *Beauty in Photography*, Robert Adams writes that splendour

is a useful word, especially for a photographer, because it implies light –

light of overwhelming intensity. The Form towards which art points is of an incontrovertible brilliance, but it is also far too intense to examine directly. We are compelled to understand Form by its fragmentary reflection in the daily objects around us; art will never fully define light. (Adams 1996: 25)

Light, and splendour, are central to my images. Adams is making a very valid point, the more intense the light, the more intense the experience. However, when the light is so intense (so incontrovertibly brilliant) that it cannot be looked at directly, it can only be seen through the tiny glimpses, or 'fragmentary reflections', that the light throws onto the objects all around. The quality of this light is no less brilliant when falling onto a 'low status' or a 'high status' object. As in the following image, because the light is so brilliant representations will never be able to 'fully define' the light. Photographic images of light do not glow the way light does, intense light in a photographic image is a negative, a blank space, or in painting, a white mark, a nothing. This idea is explored visually in a number of the images reproduced in the book *Cherish* that will be exhibited as part of this study.



Rachel White, *Horizon*, 2016

Conversely, in this context of equals which suggests that a subject can be recognised and represented by giving equal or full attention all things, then the value of the perfected aesthetic embodied within my commercial work, or by photographers such as Ansel Adams, is not compromised or diminished by the value of recognising the aesthetic potential of the everyday; the 'splendour of the insignificant.'

Parallels may to be drawn between the eclectic subject matter of my work and that of Wolfgang Tillmans. Writing in *The Guardian* (26<sup>th</sup> June 2010) Liz Jobey suggests that in Tillmans' exhibition *If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters* his images 'were casual-seeming in both their subject matter and their dispensation around the walls'. Referring to the 'plurality of subject matter' and 'the shifts between genres' she suggests that 'In their profusion, they fostered the impression that Tillmans was bent on collecting every picture he'd ever taken.' She continues: 'His intention, he explains now, was not that at all

"I don't mean it as everything is the same, but that everything has the potential to be something, and that one should not close one's eyes, just because we have preformed ideas about a value system – this is higher, this is lower. One shouldn't use it in reverse, as 'anything goes'." (Jobey 2010: on line)



Wolfgang Tillmans, *If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters*, Book Cover, 2003

Again this refers to the idea of not closing the eyes, or the mind, to the potential value of things, or, as Sontag suggested in relation to Arbus, the importance of not 'blinking' (Sontag 1979: 41). Sontag also states that 'To photograph is to confer importance' (Sontag 1979 :28). However, I cannot agree with her claim that 'There is probably no subject that cannot be beautified'(Sontag 1979: 28). As previously noted, Gregory Coniff suggests that, contrary to the popular adage, beauty 'resides in the world, not in the eye of the beholder' (Conniff in Read 1993:90). I take issue with this. Although I can appreciate the concept that beauty exists whether it is noticed or not, conferring attention on a subject does not make it beautiful, or, for that matter, turning away does not confer ugliness on something. The beauty or ugliness exist irrespective of any attention that it paid to it. However we all have different ideas about the beauty or ugliness of things, or as Barthes asserts in connection with the photograph of his mother in the winter garden, 'It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture ... for you, no wound' (Barthes 2000:73).

In his book *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*, Dave Hickey upholds what he perceives as beauty in images created by Robert Mapplethorpe. In particular

he writes about the image *Helmut and Brooks, N.Y.C., 1978*, which illustrates an intimate act, which for me, cannot be considered beautiful, either the act itself or the image of the act. The image does contain a power, but for me, it is the power of revulsion. Although the image might be beautifully photographed, and while, unlike war and bullfighting, I have no problem with what Helmut and Brooks choose to do, I do not wish to confront the reality of this private act. There are some images I wish I had never seen and now cannot erase from my memory, as Weber states, 'Images illicit emotional as well as intellectual responses and have overtones that stay with us and have a habit of popping up unbidden later on' (Weber in Knowles and Cole 2008: 45). Like Barthes response in relation to the image of his mother in the winter garden the strength of my reaction towards the image means that I do not want to reproduce it here in order to illustrate the point. Even if I were to do so, as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it might be that readers of this thesis would not be repulsed by the image, it may be considered beautiful, or as Barthes suggests, to another viewer it may be 'nothing but an indifferent picture'.

## **NEWS FROM OUR BESIEGED WORLD**

The horror and disgust evoked by the ongoing carnage of war, or for me, personally images such as Peter Buckley's harrowing images of bull 'fighting', 'Manoletina Pass, Bilbao 1957' (Szarkowski 2009: 118) are way beyond beautification, although it would seem from other images that Buckley does not appear to share my absolute despair and shame for the capacity of human-'kind' to do such a thing. The scenes inside the concentration camps that confronted photographers Lee Miller and George Rodger are beyond beautification. Again, as with the Mapplethorpe images, I cannot reproduce examples here, neither images of concentration camps or those which detail more contemporary atrocities. Although the images of concentration camps

created by Rodger made his reputation he was so horrified by the experience that he refused to look at the images he had created and suffered from nightmares and depression for the rest of his life as a result of his experience. As Weber suggests 'Images tend not only to convey additional information but also to "burn themselves into our brain", forming internal memories that may be hard to erase' (Weber, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 45). Rodgers was particularly disturbed to realise that he had inadvertently been seeking to create pleasing compositions from the piles of dead bodies. Despite the absolutely dire circumstances, as a photographer I can understand how easily this could happen. When totally absorbed in creating images I am aware of nothing else and the subject itself takes on a role that goes beyond what it is in actuality. I can appreciate how easily a photographer working within a war zone could become a casualty. Being at once fully in the moment, but also part of another reality, has the effect of making a photographer feel invincible, both a part of and apart from what is happening; an invincible voyeur seeing the world 'through' the magic protective power of the camera, from 'behind' the lens. In such circumstances creating an image becomes an almost instinctive reflex action. However even instinctive creative responses evolve as a result of a decision making process, subject matter, view point, lens, film stock, framing and cropping and so forth affect the final image. Access to technology is currently generating an epidemic of images even amongst those who would claim to be non-photographers. In his introduction to *The Photographer's Eye* Szarkowski quotes from an article entitled 'Bad Form in Photography', which was written in 1893 by E. E. Cohen and expresses his opinion that the ease of creating photographs had 'created an army of photographers who run rampant over the globe, photographing objects of all sorts, sizes and shapes' with little thought about the images they create or why they are doing so (Szarkowski 2077: no page number indicated). While photographing a beautiful subject does not always equate with the creation of a beautiful image conversely, a beautiful image is not automatically defined by beautiful subject matter, neither does an ugly subject always produce an ugly image. As Maclagan

suggests, 'It is important to bear in mind that these aesthetic responses are not triggered only by attractive or pleasant things, they may equally be set off by ungraceful or ugly things, or even by things that are dull, bland or banal' (Maclagan 2001: 72). In the context of Sontag's suggestion that 'There is probably no subject that cannot be beautified' (Sontag 1979: 28), Adam Fuss has created seductively coloured images of animal entrails, which, without knowledge of the subject matter could be seen as being beautiful, but once subject matter is known, while the images may still be as they were, the new knowledge makes them abhorrent to me.

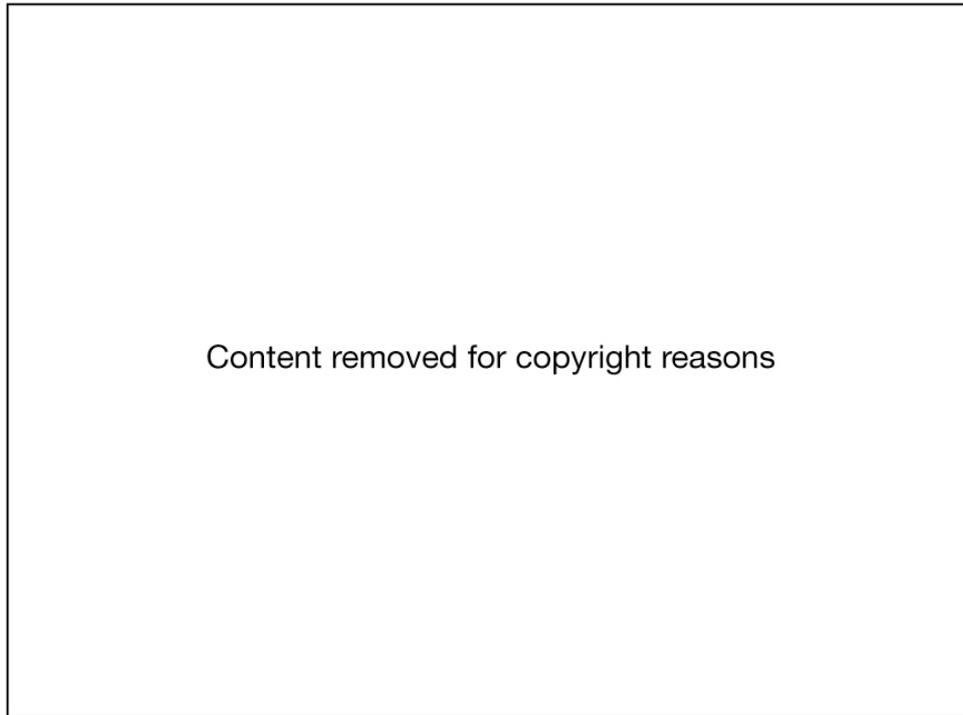
While it has become increasingly acceptable to document accessible day to day subject matter rather than focusing entirely on the rarefied, it remains difficult to relinquish the habitual urge to create images which adhere in some way to the set confines of a more traditional aesthetic. Unlike the lack of enhancements available to the photographer in 1865, when the Rev. H. J. Morton wrote in *The Philadelphia Photographer* that 'The photographer cannot, like Turner, whisk an invisible town around a hill, and bring it into view, and add a tower or two to a palatial building, or shave off a mountain's scalp...He must take what he sees, just as he sees it' (Szarkowski 2007: 129), the slick finish of many contemporary images result from the 'post-production' techniques of computer software such as Photoshop. Ironically this technology is often employed to perpetuate an aesthetic of the 'picturesque', a term introduced by William Gilpin in the eighteenth century. Currently with photographic images, as in the past with painting, trees can be removed, inserted, and relocated at will, skies appropriated from other images, views 'stitched' together, all 'enhanced' to create what is perceived as a 'better' aesthetic. This also raises issues regarding not just aesthetic judgement but also the perceived 'truth' and impartiality of the photographic image, issues which are particularly relevant to images of war, but which are beyond the scope of this thesis to explore in any detail.

In the case of my research it is important for me that my images are not manipulated post-production. Although the decisions made while creating an image, such as equipment used, viewpoint, in camera cropping, for example, offer an element of personal choice which does not make the work impartial, the challenge is to show the world, my world, as it is. To appreciate the place I call home for what it is rather than reject the 'reality' by attempting to beautify it. For, as Szarkowski suggests, 'The first thing that the photographer learned was that photography dealt with the actual; he had not only to accept this fact, but to treasure it' adding that 'It was the photographer's problem to see not simply the reality before him but the still invisible picture and to make his choices in terms of the latter.' Szarkowski later refers to the fact that, unlike a painting, the 'photographer's picture was not conceived but selected' (Szarkowski 2009 no page numbers indicated). Living as I do in the 'picturesque' landscape of the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales, overlooking Cardigan Bay and surrounded by the mountains of Snowdonia, it can be challenging not to exclude the reality of the telegraph poles and mobile phone masts which are woven into the landscape. Traditional sensibilities and habitual reference to commercial viability are so ingrained that it takes a conscious effort to include what is more usually excluded from the frame. However, even in response to rapidly changing light, even considering my involvement and immersion in the moment, I have time to think. The process does not have the trauma or pressure of the situation which confronted George Rodger. Even with time to think and to challenge my aesthetic decisions it can be a struggle to reject conventional standpoints; little wonder then that Rodger was pulled into the default of attempting to create a pleasing aesthetic. Although photographing the absolute horror of piles of dead people the instinct to create a pleasing picture is so strong that the photographer develops an ability to create images almost regardless of subject matter. The fact that Rodger was unable to look at the images he had created once he had stepped beyond the protective act of creating, out from behind the protective shield of the lens, can be explained by his horror at the reality of what he had

photographed, and particularly his horror at his own reflex action to create beautiful images under such circumstances. In this instance it is testament to his humanity that he had to 'blink' to 'look away' from the horror of what he had documented and in particular his reflex action to create a pleasing aesthetic.

## VISUAL SEDUCTION

However, Rodger's experience is not unique, Sontag suggests that 'Travelling between degraded and glamorous realities is part of the momentum of the photographic enterprise' (Sontag 1979: 58). Photographer Sebastiao Salgado, for example, has been accused of beautifying conflict, and there is a strong aesthetic appeal to Joel Meyerowitz's images of the remnants of the World Trade Centre, and also within Richard Misrach's *Desert Cantos* and other bodies of work which document the destructive nature of man and our relationship with our environment. Such powerful beautification can be employed as a method to draw a viewer to an image in a way that could not be achieved by presenting the full horror of a situation which may cause the viewer to 'blink', to recoil and turn away. The beauty itself becomes a means of communicating the message, of imploring the viewer to pay attention, not to blink, not to turn away. The following image by Meyerowitz is the cover of his book detailing the 'Aftermath' of the destruction of the World Trade Centre.



Joel Meyerowitz, *Aftermath*, Book Cover, 2006

Misrach's book *Violent Legacies. Three Cantos*, details the devastation caused by nuclear testing in the American desert. In the book Misrach is interviewed by writer Melissa Harris. Harris suggests to Misrach, 'Richard, your photographs are visually very seductive. Yet your subjects are death, contamination, and violence. Are you perhaps aestheticizing the horrific, and thus, exploiting it?' Misrach responds,

Probably the strongest criticism of my work is that I'm making "poetry out of holocaust". But I've come to believe that beauty can be a very powerful conveyor of difficult ideas. It engages people when they might otherwise look away. Recent theory has been critical of the distancing effect of artistic expression - "Create solutions, not art." But the impact of art may be more complex and far reaching than theory is capable of assessing. To me, the work I do is a means of interpreting unsettling truths, of bearing witness, and of sounding an alarm. The beauty of formal representation both carries an affirmation of life and subversively brings us face to face with news from our besieged world. (Misrach 1992: 90)

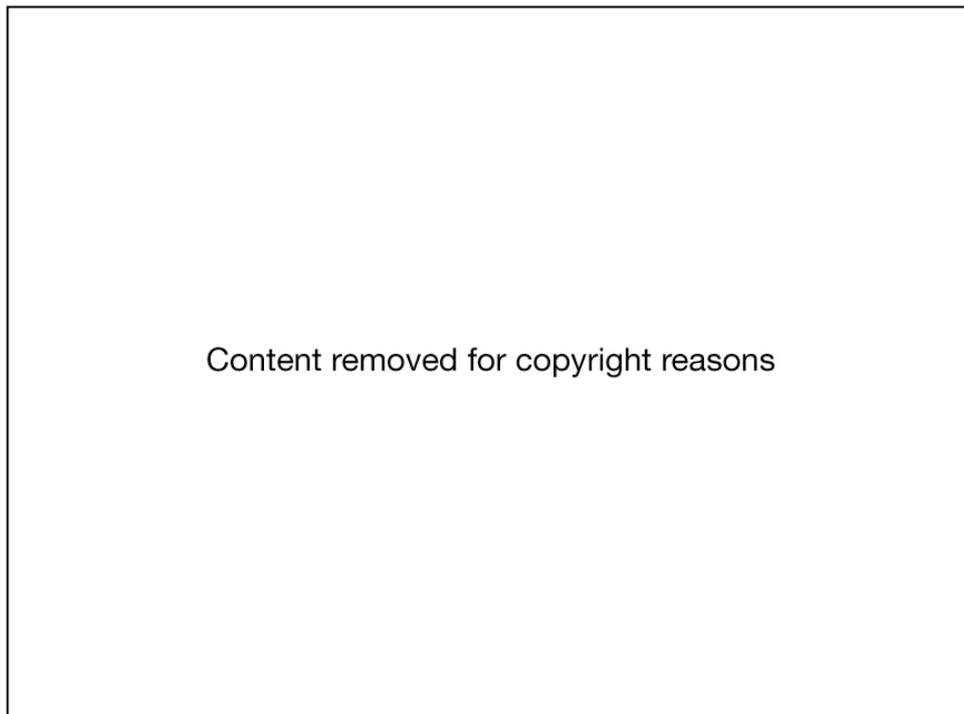
In relation to Misrach's work, Solnit states that 'His huge, formally stunning colour images take on the subject matter usually reserved for photojournalism: the unnatural disaster is his most perennial theme,' yet he 'refuses to respect the tradition in which politics is represented in the hasty, grainy black and white of photojournalism.' She argues that 'In representing violated landscapes...as sublime, he too refuses the neat aesthetic before-and- after virgin/whore categories in which both nature-calendar and New Topographics photography participate' (Solnit in Brittain 1999: 231). Unlike the images the 'nature-calendar' representations of the 'virgin' landscape, or the 'sold out' 'whore' landscapes of the New Topographics, the images created by both Misrach, and Meyerowitz, recognize the beauty of the violated landscapes of the everyday. There is no claim of neutrality, no neat conclusion, the landscape is recognized as sublime despite the wounds created by human intervention. As Misrach put it, 'The beauty of formal representation both carries an affirmation of life and subversively brings us face to face with news from our besieged world' (Misrach 1992: 90).



Richard Misrach, Cover of *Petrochemical America*, 2012

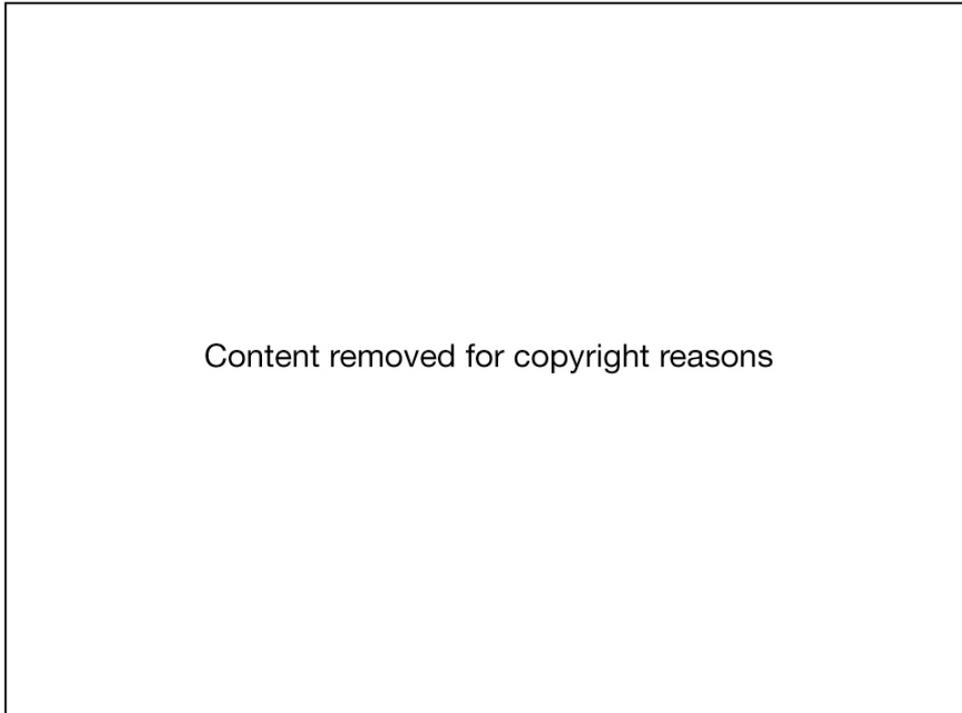
The antithesis of the sort of visual seduction employed in the images by Misrach and Meyerowitz is used in photographs such as Chloe Dewe Mathews'

'Shot at Dawn', Joel Sternfeld's 'On this Site', and Paul Seawright's 'Sectarian Murder'. These are images of ordinary, nondescript, easily overlooked, landscapes, which have become significant due to events that have happened there. The land that has witnessed these events remains impartial, the images of the land only become significant through the viewers knowledge of the events that have taken place there.



Paul Seawright, *Dandy Street*, 1988

In the following image Sternfeld documents the ordinary bus stop opposite the Department of Housing and Urban Development, where a forty three year old mother of three froze to death in 1993 after being turned away from a homeless shelter.



Joe Sternfeld, *Metro Bus Shelter, 7<sup>th</sup> Street at E street, Southwest, Washington, D.C., April 1995*



Chloe Dewes Mathews, *Private James Crozier. 07:05/27.2.1916. Le Domaine des Cordeliers, Maily-Maillet, Picardie. From Shot at Dawn. 2013*

The immense power of such images as those above lies, not in their visual seductiveness, but in their very normality. While these are beautifully

photographed images, they are images of familiar landscapes, landscapes in everyday use. There is no visual horror, nothing within the images to make us turn away, or 'blink'. The punctum is not contained in the image itself, but rather within the caption and the viewer layering meaning, adding their own experiences and knowledge, maybe from television reports, newspapers, history books family histories, about the sorts of atrocities that have happened in these landscapes. The very fact that they are mundane, everyday landscapes and seemingly mundane, everyday images creates poignancy, a raw sharpness because of the absolute horror that has happened there.

The images from Misrach and Meyerowitz draw the viewer in, in a way that is not necessarily achieved by the less dynamic aesthetic of the images by Chloe Dewe Mathews, Joel Sternfeld, and Paul Seawright. However, the strength, and immense shock, of the images from Chloe Dewe Mathews, Joel Sternfeld, and Paul Seawright is precisely because of their less dynamic aesthetic. These images, photographed in neutral light, are of corners of a world that we are mostly familiar with, a bus stop, a turning in the road, a clump of bushes, this is the world of the everyday and we can connect with this in a very real way that is not achieved by the visually seductive, but still distant, images from photographers such as Misrach and Meyerowitz. It could even be argued that, by comparison with the 'normality' of these images, the beautiful, yet somehow detached, aesthetic employed by Misrach and Meyerowitz might seem almost akin to that of Ansel Adams.

## **THE GRADUAL SUPPRESSION OF QUEASINESS: LOWERING THE THRESHOLD OF WHAT IS TERRIBLE**

Psychologist, James Hillman, states that Greek philosopher, Plotinus defined the ugly as that which makes the soul "shrink within itself, denies the thing, turns away from it, resentful and alienated from it." Does this not suggest that

whatever we turn from and deny becomes therefore ugly? And does this not as well suggest that what we turn toward may become beautiful? (Hillman 1998: 272)

Sontag suggests that 'Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible' (Sontag 1979: 40). She proceeds to discuss how 'By getting us used to what, formerly, we could not bear to see or hear, because it was too shocking, painful, or embarrassing, art changes morals.' Stating that 'The gradual suppression of queasiness' has the effect of making us reflect on the 'arbitrariness' of 'the taboos constructed by art and morals' (Sontag 1979: 41). Although Sontag is referring to 'what is terrible' this arbitrariness of judgement can equally be applied to what is beautiful. Forcing us to re-evaluate the judgements we make is a great strength of creative enterprise, but so too is reconsidering the implication that 'anything goes'. While it is important to continually reassess value judgements, it is equally crucial to ultimately uphold the worth of personal boundaries, to be open and questioning, but be true to personal ideals, not just of beauty, but also of horror. This means for me, that while I may create images of the everyday, of pylons and litter, I do not hold all 'sealed package' images of sunset in complete disdain. As Barthes suggests, there are images which have little impact on me, and yet there are terrible images which have burned themselves into my brain and which pop into my head unbidden, there are times when I do 'blink', images which make me turn away, and things I wish I had not seen, and subject matter that I believe cannot be beautified. Like Tillmans, I consider that while 'one should not close one's eyes, just because we have preformed ideas about a value system ... One shouldn't use it in reverse, as 'anything goes' (Jobey 2010: on line). While I may understand the intellectual argument about 'not blinking', I believe that it is important to be steadfast in recognising human revulsion and I have no desire, either as an individual or as a creative practitioner, to have my queasiness suppressed or my threshold lowered.

## PHOTOGRAPHING PRECONCEPTIONS

Although for me, 'anything' doesn't 'go', it is important to work at remaining 'open' in order to explore the world and find out new things about the world, as Eliot suggests,

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time  
(Eliot 1982: 197)

Writing about research within creative disciplines poet Carl Leggo suggests that

If we think about the prefix “re” in researcher, we understand that our questing/questioning is always a returning, a turning again. ... Too many researchers are looking for answers, and often researchers shape their research goal in a way that can be answered with a sense of resounding conclusion. ... I am caught up in language, in word making, in meaning making, constantly striving to create the world, or at least a sense of place in the world. Like Kingsolver (2002), “my way of finding my place in this world is to write one” (Kingsolver, 2002, p.233) Writing is then “about finding a way to be alive” (Kingsolver, 2002, p.233) Writing does not enable the writer to hammer down secure truth; writing enables the writer to explore possibilities for meaningful living in the world’(Leggo in Knowles and Cole 2008: 171).

Unlike a scientific research process that proposes a set theory or solution, which the researcher then sets out to prove or disprove by a series of methodical steps or experiments, my own visually conducted research is about exploring possibilities. It is intentionally shaped by the progression that the

work dictates rather than with the aim of reaching a ‘resounding conclusion’. It concerns finding a place in the world, a way to be alive, and, above all, acknowledging that there are no secure truths, only further questions. For example, that which we consider to be ugly can be beautiful, the landscapes of home that are ‘spoilt’ by human presence can have aesthetic value.

The following description from Highmore, from a chapter entitled ‘Familiar Things’, is highly evocative precisely because it gives attention to the memory of small seemingly insignificant details. He writes of his experience as an eleven year old boy sitting in a low chair and of how he is aware of ‘the underneath of things: the underneath of old tables that might have been smooth and polished on top but from underneath looked dusty, wooden and generally thrown together, with little sprinklings of glue, random wooden pegs and nail heads.’ (Highmore 2011: 65) The memory is more powerful precisely because it draws attention to small details of the common place. Details held in common that are powerful because they are easy to relate to. Later Highmore writes

This book (the one you are reading now) joins a number of others in calling attention to the affective life of people, and it joins others in wanting to provide more sensual and phenomenological descriptions of social and cultural life. But it also wants to connect the turn towards affect and emotion with an interest in the senses and with the experience of such seemingly nebulous phenomena as time and memory in the name of a more general social aesthetics. (Highmore 2011: 166)

To overlook ‘such seemingly nebulous’ phenomena as ‘affect and emotion’ is to overlook a significant part of our ‘social and cultural life’.

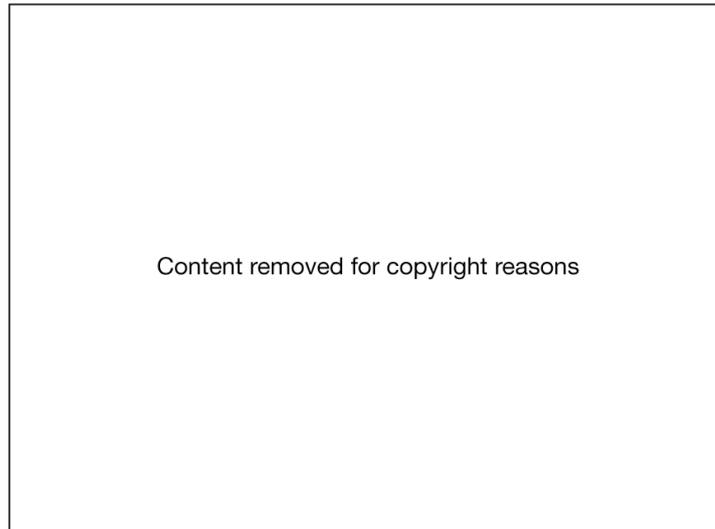
## INTERNAL LANDSCAPES: ECHOES OF THE SELF

Further to Highmore's 'calling attention' to the 'affective life of people', in an essay entitled 'Art and Knowledge' Elliot Eisner makes the following suggestions regarding the contribution that

... the arts make to knowledge has to do with empathetic feeling. ...Art often creates such a powerful image that as a result we tend to see our world in terms of it rather than it in terms of our world. ... Becoming aware of our capacity to feel is a way of discovering our humanity. Art helps us to connect with personal, subjective emotions, and through such a process, it enables us to discover our own interior landscape. Not an unimportant achievement. ... The arts are a way of enriching our awareness and expanding our humanity. (Eisner in Knowles and Cole 2008:11)

Or as Szarkowski suggests, 'the lens draws the subject, the photographer defines it' (Szarkowski 2009: 12).

There is a direct relationship between the concept that 'Art often creates such a powerful image that as a result we tend to see our world in terms of it rather than it in terms of our world' and what Ansel Adams wrote, in 1957, 'Ernst Haas opens up new vistas of perception and execution with the color camera. His 'recognition' becomes our experience' (Adams 1993: 24). Haas' contribution to photographic seeing is currently overlooked, however, the deep rich colours and details described in his images confirm the value I give to the ordinarily overlooked of the everyday. Haas focuses on an aesthetic of the everyday that is open to everyone, it can be found all around, sometimes it has to be looked for, sometimes it is unmissable. Although working to find beauty in unexpected places is valuable, so is appreciating the beauty that has become almost overlooked as it is maybe considered too easy to see.



Ernst Haas, *New York Billboard*

As previously discussed, it is not only the viewer of an image who makes discoveries as a result of engaging with a work, the photographer can also learn new things about the world or about themselves as a result of having created an image. A parallel can be drawn between Rodger's realisation that, in following an aesthetic traditional proposed by William Gilpin, he had been attempting to create pleasing compositions from piles of dead bodies, and, phototherapist, Judy Weiser's suggestion that, 'Sometimes our photographs later show us things we didn't realize at the time we pressed the shutter' (Weiser 1999: 230). Or, as Leggo comments, 'if you knew what a given poem was, you could just write it down. But you're responding to something you feel claimed by, but can't yet articulate, or maybe even identify' (Leggo in Knowles and Cole (2008: 168). Mark Power discussed his use of 5x4 film in an article in the Royal Photographic Society Journal, stating:

Something ... I love about large format are the tiny details that emerge on close scrutiny, which I'm often not aware of myself when I press the button. I'd like to think that people will spend a little time in front of the work enjoying these. I've never been one for giving people pictures on a plate, for easy consumption. (Land 2012: 332)

After considering images relating to the horror of war and destruction it seems banal to refer back to the concerns of my own work which does not deliberately set out to make any statement other than recognising and revealing the aesthetic potential of mundane aspects of my own life. However, Weiser's concept that a photographer may not be consciously aware of things that may be revealed through an image is certainly true of my experience of the creative photographic process and my need to be constantly open to the detail of daily life. On one level, this is particularly so in respect of images taken from a moving car. The eye only has a fraction of a second to catch a glimpse of something therefore I must act extremely quickly without time to analyse what has captured my interest and although the resultant image may hold only a fraction of a glimpse of something, only half a story, it often contains something highly compelling. Then the full story begins to evolve as I look at the image I have created and it transfers to others' eyes through the image. As discussed previously, the aesthetic of an image can work beyond the intention of the creator, opening up a dialogue with the viewer, and then establishing a dialogue beyond the artwork, between the viewer and the world.

As Weiser suggests,

Regarding the critical photographic moment, I usually take photographs more because of what I feel than what I see, or rather, how what I "see" makes me feel, but this is certainly not a process that is cognitively pondered at great length while holding the camera. I have found this out only after pausing to retrospectively examine my own particular style and rationale of photo taking. Some of my most insightful photographs have occurred at moments when I was not even conscious that I had pressed the shutter, and, for me, though not necessarily the same for anyone else, this is not an infrequent happening. Much the same as Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" (or in Minor White's phrasing, "the moment waiting for the photographer it has chosen"), my camera has pointed out to me what

it is that I have been observing and attending to about what was already there (or, at least, is seen to be there) in front of my eyes.

All media mediate; it's just that often we don't notice these filters because they do not noticeably intrude. In being a "reflective" medium, photographs can also suggest information to the viewers about the self who took the pictures in much the same way that self-portraits do. It's just that the "self" being represented in the photos being taken may not have an actual duplicate bodily correspondence appearing on the film as subject. Nevertheless, the "self" of the photographer appears in every photograph he or she has ever taken' (Weiser 1999: 230).

These comments from Weiser relate directly to Stieglitz's theory of 'equivalents', which suggests that every image a photographer creates reflects some equivalent aspect of themselves. That the subject matter of an image and the way in which that subject is photographed and presented to the world owes its transformation into a photographic image to the recognition by the photographer, either consciously or subconsciously, of something about that subject which echoes an element of their sense of self.

Art therapist, David Maclagan quotes phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a chapter entitled 'The Split Between Inner and Outer Worlds'. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy suggests that our knowledge about the world results directly from our bodily experiences of it. Maclagan writes that 'our perception of an object involves as much internal as external response, and that a painting both inscribes and recovers this.' In respect of equivalents, or echoes of the self in external objects Maclagan quotes Merleau-Ponty as follows;

Quality, light, colour, depth, that are out there in front of us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body, because it makes them

welcome. This internal equivalent, this carnal recipe {formule charnelle} for their presence, that is evoked in me by things, why should they not in their turn engender a trace, one still visible, in which any other gaze could recover the themes that underlie its inspection of the world? (Merleau-Ponty in Maclagan 2001: 35)

In respect of this suggestion it would seem that because objects 'awaken an echo in our body' which 'makes them welcome' the traces of the gaze of the artist, their sense of connection with their subject matter or their internal equivalent, may be visible to the viewer an art work. For, as art critic, Robert Hughes, suggests 'If art can't tell us about the world we live in then I don't believe there's much point in having it' (*Mona Lisa Curse* Channel 4, 2008).

## A SENSE OF INCLUSION

Robert Adams suggests that after being profoundly moved by his visits to a number of German churches designed by architect Rudolph Schwarz, that 'It was, in a way, why I started photographing, to see if I could find, by pictures, an emotional equivalent to the churches' (Adams 1994: 171). He later reflects:

At our best and most fortunate we make pictures because of what stands in front of the camera, to honor [sic] what is greater and more interesting than we are. We never accomplish this perfectly, though in return we are given something perfect – a sense of inclusion. Our subject thus redefines us, and is part of the biography by which we want to be known. (Adams 1994: 179)

Here Adams not only refers to the photographer's sense of self, but also echoes the sense of belonging referred to previously in respect of Waldie and my own experiences of creating photographic images.

Maclagan quotes art historian, James Elkins, as follows;

Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. It is entangled in the passions – jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in affect – in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain. Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is a metamorphosis, not a mechanism. (Elkins in Maclagan 2001: 34)

As photographer, John Blakemore, suggests, 'One cannot photograph experience, but to have lived it, can change and develop habitual ways of seeing, of knowing' (Blakemore: On Line). Maclagan also refers to what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has written about the capacity of objects to be 'transformational' for a person:

The aesthetic moment constitutes a deep rapport between subject and object and provides the person with a generative illustration of fitting with an object, evoking an existential memory. Existential, as opposed to cognitive, memory is conveyed not through visual or abstract thinking, but through the effects of being. Such moments feel familiar, uncanny, sacred, reverential, and outside cognitive coherence. (Bollas in Maclagan 2001: 43)

There are parallels between this description of sacred and reverential moments and what has been written previously in relation to Waldie's concept of a *Holy Land* and also my own practice. The idea of being 'outside cognitive coherence' also relates to TS Eliot's suggestion of inhabiting a space, which is at once in and out of time, 'at the still point of the turning world' of a place or internal

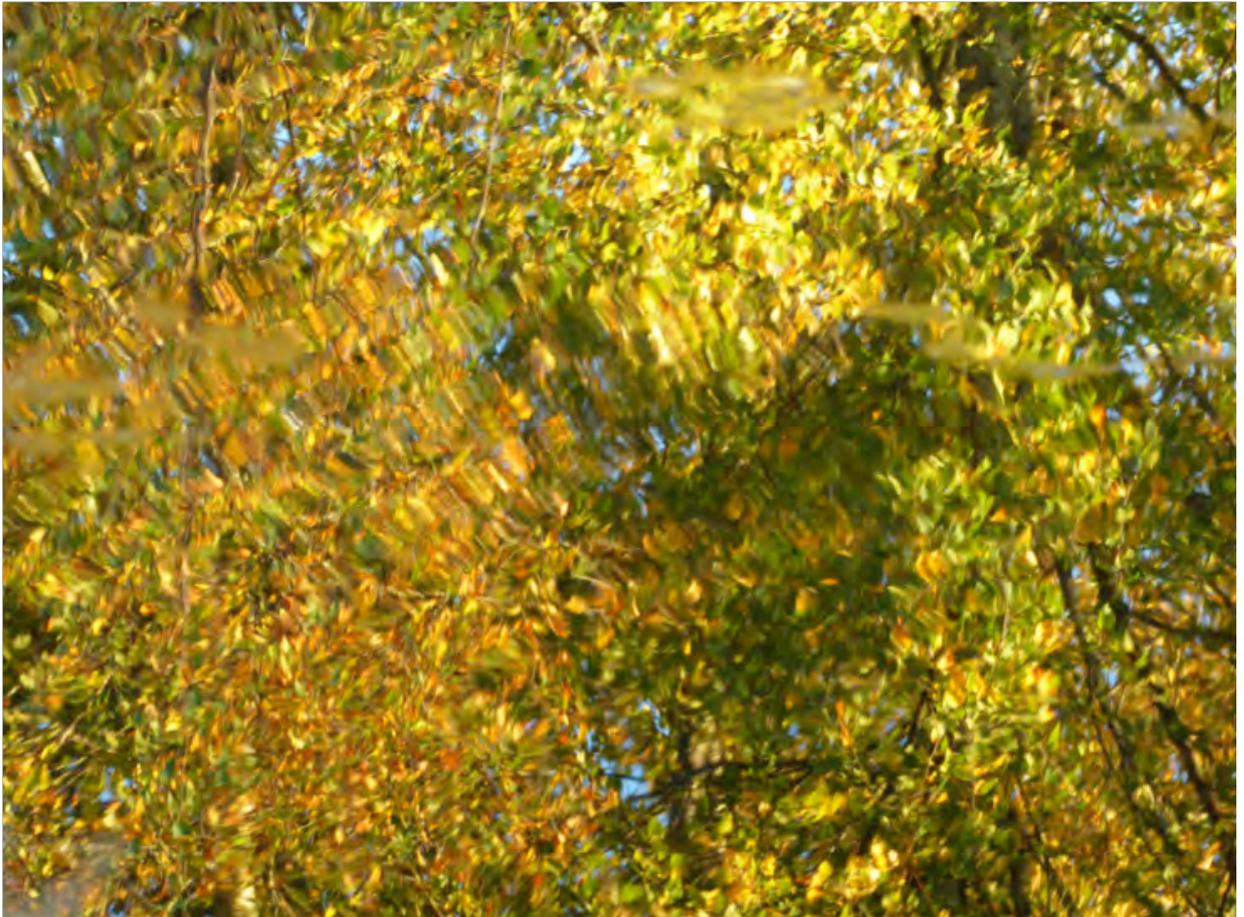
space which lies beyond cognition, but which is 'heard, half-heard, in the stillness Between two waves of the sea' (Eliot 1982:198).

Hillman concludes his lecture, 'So above all else I have said - and I have said far too much too fast and too crudely - let the heart be stirred' (Hillman 1998: 273-274). The following chapter will explore some ideas about how the heart can be stirred in relation to experiencing 'the still point of the turning world' in respect of the concept of mindfulness and the therapeutic aspects of creative engagement with photographic practice. The final image in this chapter concerns allowing 'the heart be stirred' by noticing the 'splendour of the insignificant', something as simple as the relationship between the colours and textures of the last sweet left in the bowl.



Rachel White, *Pink and Red*, 2016

**RISKING ENCHANTMENT:  
THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF ENGAGING WITH THE MOMENT**



Rachel White, *Reflections*, 2015

## RISKING ENCHANTMENT: THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF ENGAGING WITH THE MOMENT

The following chapter sets out to explore the new knowledge that can be gained as a result of engagement with photographic practice, not simply in terms of the external world, but also the internal world of the practitioner. In order to further contextualise physical and mental engagement with photographic practice the chapter will consider the therapeutic value of fully engaging with the moment by entering into a state known as 'optimal experience' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002), or 'mindfulness' (Crane 2010). Reference will be made to the benefits to health, wellbeing and personal growth that are associated with optimal experience in relation to the sort of intense engagement that can be experienced while creating photographic images that has been discussed in previous chapters. The chapter will develop links between establishing a participatory awareness of the everyday and the expanded definition of landscape presented in earlier chapters, the achievement of a state of optimal experience, the act of creating photographic images and personal and creative growth, which links back to what has been referred to in previous chapters regarding cultivating an awareness of the ordinary.

In order to contextualise my own experiences of engagement with photographic practice in relation to the issues explored within the following chapter, while my photographic practice is not defined by health issues, reference must be made to the constraints imposed by the chronic health condition which I have lived with for over twenty five years. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis is a condition characterised by a fluctuating pattern of pain and debilitating exhaustion. This has huge impact on my life and my photographic practice, which needs to be taken into account if the representation of my experiences of engaging with photographic practice is to be authentic and valid. Links will be made between my experiences and some

of the concepts explored within the chapter, and therefore this chapter of the thesis will, of necessity, have a particularly personal component.

## **A POWERFUL ACT OF PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION**

My interest in the therapeutic value of photographic practice began during a conversation with Hazel Snowden, the Senior Occupational Therapist in the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Team, which is part of the Physical Health Psychology Department at Cannock Chase Hospital. Hazel suggested that the intense concentration required by my engagement with photographic practice is not dissimilar to the state of mindfulness that she attempts to instill in her patients in order for them to achieve a state of deep relaxation to assist with the management of chronic health conditions and, in particular, pain relief. She suggested that my experience while creating photographic images may offer similarly beneficial positive psychological and physical changes, commenting that even while simply communicating about my photographic practice with her, both in terms of viewing and discussing images, that my 'demeanor was enhanced' which, she concluded, could in itself provide a positive stimulus to enhanced wellbeing (July 2007).

Snowden's comments not only contextualise certain aspects of my motivation to engage in the process of creating photographic images, but also offer further insights into the sort of moments of intensity discussed in the previous chapter. For example, there are parallels between Highmore's experience during his coffee break, which were discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, and the therapeutic practices employed in physical health psychology, as described by Rebecca Crane in her 2010 book, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy*. Crane suggests that when a person is absorbed in the tasks of daily living

Because the mind is engaged on thinking ... awareness of present-moment sensory experience is fragmented or absent – *processing of experience is happening on autopilot*. Experience becomes “narrowed” and our view constricted. In this state it becomes unlikely that the small beauties and pleasures of life are seen or appreciated. (Crane 2010: 38)

This suggestion relates directly to Highmore’s experience, to his being ‘sealed off, caught in a maze of preoccupations.’ (Highmore 2011:3) He only begins to appreciate the ‘small beauties and pleasures of life’ once he begins to engage with the present-moment awareness of his sensory experience,

The sun begins to warm my skin and clothes; the warmed skin presses ‘it’s’ attention on consciousness. I realise I had been staring at the ground, and now I look up and around, noticing my surroundings for the first time since I had come outside. This is enough to momentarily stop the endless replaying of the cycle of ‘to do’ lists that have been looping round in my mind. (ibid.)

Crane’s suggestions also relate directly to Stewart’s ideas, discussed in the previous chapter, regarding the ‘rogue intensities’ that ‘roam the streets of the ordinary’; the everyday things that are easily overlooked, the ‘unassimilated’ aspects of daily life (Stewart 2007: 44), or what Crane describes as, ‘the small beauties and pleasures of life’ (Crane 2010: 38). Rather than living on ‘autopilot’, but instead, developing the framework for ‘mindfulness’ set out by Crane and actively seeking to connect with ‘those fragments of experience left hanging’, which ‘pulses at the edges of things’ (Stewart 2007: 44), can lead to a richer more vibrant and fulfilling experience of the world. The following image illustrates ‘the small beauties and pleasures of life’, ‘those fragments of experience left hanging’, it is not, as it seems to the casual glance, a picture of pink petals, but the remnants of lunch waiting to go into the compost bin. Once the unexpected context is known the image

becomes more significant than if it had simply been a flower, because the beauty of flowers is well known, while this image offers an alternative sort of 'small beauty' that can be recognized and appreciated as part of ordinary life.



Rachel White, *Kitchen roll, tomato skin and lettuce*, 2015

Crane's book is written specifically for therapists working in the field of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and sets out an eight week curriculum of exercises for use in the consulting room with follow up home practice sessions. The home practice involves scheduling at least 45 minutes each day to commit to practicing formal mindfulness techniques in order to develop skills in awareness of the direct experience of the moment by engaging in what Crane refers to as 'a powerful act of participatory observation' (Crane 2010: 4). During the mindfulness exercises participants learn to develop present moment awareness, creating a state of total focus where time stands still and the participant becomes fully engaged and aware only of that moment, the distractions of the external world pass unnoticed. In addition to more general benefits of inhabiting what T.S. Eliot refers to as 'the still point of the turning world' (Eliot 1982:175). Crane's techniques of mindfulness based cognitive therapy can be applied in particular by those suffering from chronic pain or

depression in order to provide a means of halting negative thought processes spiraling out of control.

An information leaflet *Chronic pain treatment Learn to manage pain successfully* produced by the Spire Yale Hospital private health care group also advocates mindfulness as method of pain management. While an article about wellbeing by Madeleine Bailey in the British Heart Foundation magazine, *Heart Matters*, refers specifically to the practice of seeking out beauty, quoting 'Huw from Bromley': 'My counsellor suggested that everyday I should find one thing of beauty and appreciate it. So I changed my route to work to go through a park, where I can spot dogs chasing sticks or blue tits squabbling. It's really uplifting!' (*Heart Matters* October/November Issue 40. 2011:26) In Huw's case his 'powerful act of participatory observation' is not only about cultivating an awareness and appreciation of his surroundings, but specifically searching out something which he defines as being 'of beauty' as a means of lifting his spirits and enhancing his sense of wellbeing.

Developing a state of mindfulness in relation to an awareness of beauty relates to what James Hillman has written concerning

... the familiar idea that beauty arrests motion ... You draw in your breath and stop still'. He asks, 'Does this not suggest that if beauty is to appear, we must be stopped still; the eye's roving perceptions, the body's habitual forward thrust, the mind's ceaseless associations arrested?' (Hillman 1998: 271- 272)

Here Hillman is suggesting that in order to fully engage with, appreciate, and benefit from, the recognition of beauty, the mind must step beyond the daily 'maze of preoccupations' learning to be 'still' and 'open' rather than 'sealed off'. For, as when Highmore looks up and notices his surroundings, the simple act of present moment awareness is 'enough to momentarily stop the endless

replaying of the cycle of ‘to do’ lists that have been looping round in my mind.’  
(Highmore 2011: 3)

Hillman’s phrase, ‘if beauty is to appear’ also relates to the suggestion made by Conniff, referred to in the previous chapter, that beauty resides ‘in the world, not in the eye of the beholder’ (Conniff, in Read 1993: 90). Both statements suggest that beauty exists in the world whether it is noticed or not, but Hillman goes further in suggesting that in order to recognise ‘commonplace beauties’ we ‘must be stopped still’ and ‘the mind’s ceaseless associations arrested’, or, as Crane puts it, become engaged in ‘a powerful act of participatory observation’.



Rachel White, *Traffic Jam*, 2015

As a creative practitioner my motivation for engaging in the ‘powerful act of participatory observation’ that results in the creation of photographic imagery may have an impact on my wellbeing and lift my spirits. However, as previously discussed, engaging in a state of present moment awareness can also be beneficial to the outcome of the creative process by offering space for both personal and creative growth by arresting ‘the mind’s ceaseless associations’

and allowing a practitioner to fully participate in the moment, facilitating new discoveries and associations rather than repeating 'safe' formulaic paths. The previous image illustrates how, by engaging with the moment, even something as mundane as being held up in a traffic jam can have a creative outcome.

## THE SUSPENDED MOMENT: PERSONAL AND CREATIVE GROWTH

In his book, *The Inner Game of Music*, Barry Green discusses how musical performance can be enhanced by being in a state of present moment awareness which offers little room for the sort of mental 'to do' lists Highmore discusses. Green suggests,

That effortless fast technical passage, that quick motion to a high note when you hit it right on the button, and most of all, that unique suspended moment when you actually became the emotion or sensory quality of the music – the colours, the water, the love – we have all had times like these. They happen when we are mentally alert and aware, but too absorbed in the moment to be running any mental gossip. (Green 1987: 25)

Here Green is referring to the sort of self-conscious 'mental gossip' and self doubt which can detract from a performance, in a way that is not dissimilar from the way that Highmore's preoccupation with his 'to do lists' detracts from his experience of his surroundings. Green's book advocates cultivating a state of present moment awareness, learning to loosen inhibitions by entering fully into the music. He suggests that becoming absorbed in the moment is a method of enhancing performance, that learning to inhabit the music fully engages a process of personal growth which leads to musical accomplishment. There is a link between Green's suggestions and Hillman's idea that

... in photography where the still shot frames and holds a moment as if in eternal presence ... The moment of attention does not last: it breaks the flow of time for an instant, but time returns ... described in T.S. Eliot's words: "The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness./Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts".... "or music heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/While the music lasts" (Hillman 1998: 271- 272).

Hillman, Green, and Eliot are all referring to the intensity of concentration and sense of connection required to suspend time, to inhabit a moment so deeply that you have the sense of becoming one with that moment. A sense of 'normal' time only returns after the moment is over. Because music is intangible the sense of being the note might only last as long as the final note of the performance hangs in the air, or hangs in the memory. However due to the visual nature of photography if an image captures the sense of being one with the moment, the intensity of that moment can be held in 'eternal presence'. Art critic, Marina Vaizey, quotes Dorothea Lange's comment concerning her photograph, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco*, as follows; 'I knew I was looking at something. You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you' (Haworth-Booth 1983: 124).



Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco, 1933*

The idea of time ‘standing still, or ‘waiting’ for the photographer to create an image is at odds with Cartier-Bresson’s concept of the decisive moment. Although Cartier-Bresson’s work is ostensibly about the one single ‘decisive moment’, a mythology has grown up around the concept and in truth Cartier-Bresson’s often created a number of images of his subjects and later selected the one which he considered to most be the most representative of his experience. With the image above Lange is acutely aware that if one tiny component of the image above were to shift even slightly then the image would become something else and possibly not contain the power that it does. While in my own experience I can relate to Cartier-Bresson’s methodology of creating numerous images in any given situation, my experience of the act of creating images feels more aligned to that of Lange, where time stands still, moments seem to hang in the air, waiting to be captured. As Lange states, I know when I’m looking at something, and when a moment such as this is recognized everything else drops from consciousness, the focus is entire, the

breath is stopped. Sometimes, you just know.

Rather than choosing a photographic image for the home page of his website, landscape photographer Charlie Waite offers the following comment, 'I often think of that rare fulfilling joy when I am in the presence of some wonderful alignment of events. When the light, the colour, the shapes and the balance all interlock so beautifully that I feel truly overwhelmed by the wonder of it' (Waite 2009: On Line). While the website Artsy.net quotes New Topographic photographer Henry Wessel referring to a similar experience, "You're suddenly seeing the coherence and the interconnectedness of everything, left to right, bottom to top, front to back. It's all connected, and somehow, it's all in balance. And that's of course, when you go 'Yes!'" (Wessel: on line). The following image, a view framed by a window has similar concerns to the images from windows noted previously in chapter 2. It also demonstrates the sort of 'coherence and interconnectedness' and 'balance' that Wessel refers to, the moments when a photographer goes 'Yes'.



Henry Wessel *Tucson, Arizona* 1976

Ansel Adams is quoted in *Visual Art*, The magazine of the Royal Photographic Society Visual Art Group, (2006): 'Sometimes I do get to places just when God's ready to have somebody click the shutter', while Weiser refers to Minor White's phrasing, 'the moment waiting for the photographer it has chosen' (Weiser 1999: 230). Photographers pay attention to the 'rogue intensities' that 'roam the streets of the ordinary' (Stewart 2007: 44), engaging with what Stewart describes as a 'state of attention that is also impassivity - a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place' (Stewart 2011: 446). Through engaging in a process of vigilance a photographer is 'attuned' to recognise intensity, the significance of the moment when things come together, 'rind up or snap into place'. The moment is there, as if waiting to be photographed, as though 'the moment itself' or 'God' have a power that compels the photographer to record that specific moment of balance when all the disparate components come into perfect alignment.

Weiser comments on the intensity that can be generated by our experience of photography, poetry and music referred to by Hillman, Green, and Eliot; 'Someone once told me that they understood photographs as being poems without words and called them visually frozen music' (Weiser 1999: 347). In his introduction to Robert Frank's seminal book, *The Americans*, Jack Kerouac also makes a link between photography and poetry, commenting that '... with that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand he sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world' (Kerouac in Frank 1988).

## OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

Engaging in present moment awareness relates directly to Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, Highmore's *Ordinary Lives*, discussed in the previous chapters, and to

my own experience of 'ordinary intensities'. It is a state familiar to many people and can be experienced in numerous aspects of ordinary life, from gardening to reading a book. Complete immersion in a task results in the sensation of being transported to 'another place' and losing all track of time. This state of intense concentration is referred to by athletes and performers as being 'in the zone', and is credited, as Green has noted, with enhanced performance and so is positively cultivated.

In his book *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*, psychologist, Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to this state of intense concentration and present moment engagement as optimal experience, or flow. He suggests that experiencing a state of optimal experience in everyday life, generates happiness, a sense of inner peace and release from the sort of daily 'endless replaying of the cycle of 'to do lists'' described by Highmore. Csikszentmihalyi asserts that

One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience is that, while it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life' explaining that 'This feature of flow is an important by-product of the fact that enjoyable activities require a complete focusing of attention on the task in hand - thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 58)

Like the experiences described by Hillman, Green, and Eliot, Csikszentmihalyi refers to the transformation of time which is experienced during flow:

One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does. The objective, external duration we measure with reference to outside events like night and day, or the orderly progression of clocks, is rendered irrelevant by the rhythms dictated by the activity. (ibid.: 66)

For, as Highmore suggests, 'Emotion colours time; intensifying it, elongating it, truncating it and filling it.' (Highmore 2011: 18) While T.S. Eliot asserts that

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

To be conscious is not to be in time.

(Eliot 1982: 173)

That is, to be fully conscious, fully aware and alive, fully engaged in a state of mindfulness or flow, requires stepping outside the conventional boundaries and scale of time.

Judy Weiser writes about the experience of looking at photographic images, 'With photographs, time literally stops and external reality in some ways ceases to exist' (Weiser 1999: 343). This description could equally relate to the experience of mindfulness or flow, and to the ability of the photographic image to stop time in the instant that the shutter was released. And also to the way that photographs can create an alternative reality of 'the past', which runs alongside the present, but which may be a 'past' constructed by the act of viewing the images, either by creating a world of 'the past' or by the images overriding and erasing memories and making a new, stronger 'memory', of the past. However, here Weiser is referring to the process of becoming engrossed in looking through a photograph album which parallels previously mentioned suggestions made by Barthes and Sontag relating to the fact that photography reminds us of our own mortality. Although an image 'stops time' holds a person, place, or object in a state of perpetual stillness, the subject of the image is, in reality, bound to change, the people in a photograph are either dead or will be dead one day. This 'external' reality does in some ways 'cease to exist' when we relate to the 'now' contained within an image.

Photographs are powerful as both memory and as object. The talismanic strength of the photographic image was demonstrated during a phototherapy workshop run by Mark Wheeler and Nick Stein, in February 2009. In an adaptation of an exercise pioneered by Weiser, each participant was required to take a selection of 21 images which were of particular significance to them to the workshop. The premise was established that these images were to be imagined to be stored on a computer. The computer proceeded to give out the message that the computer memory was full and that 10 of the images must be discarded (in this case, simply put face down on the table) or, failing that, the computer would crash and all of the images would be lost. The exercise stipulated a time limit before all images were 'destroyed by the computer', in order to focus the mind. The process was repeated until only one image could be saved. The reaction of the participants brought into sharp focus the fact that photographic images are precious as objects and as containers, and generators, of emotion. Although the exercise ended with 'the computer' flashing up the message that the problem has been resolved and all of the images had been reinstated, many of the participants described being traumatised by the feeling that simply by turning their images over on the table they had 'rejected' loved ones. Although we all knew these were only bits of paper, participants felt that they had chosen one family member over another and that the choices they had made could not be undone. Participants were advised NEVER to undertake this exercise with a client as it was merely a tool to impress the power of the image in order to engender an awareness and sensitivity further to using family photographs in a therapeutic context.

While reality is ever changing, the power of the photograph to stop time holds a person in perpetual stillness. Some images maybe of people who are no longer alive, or may recall the intensity of shared moments or relationships that now belong to the past, serving as reminders of what Stewart describes as 'lived sensory moments' (Stewart 2011: 445). External reality, the passage of time, does in some ways 'cease to exist' when we relate to the 'now'

contained within an image. Csikszentmihalyi states that

Having a record of the past can make a great contribution to the quality of life. It frees us from the tyranny of the present and, and makes it possible for consciousness to revisit former times. It makes it possible to select and preserve in memory events that are especially pleasant and meaningful, and so to “create” a past that will help us deal with the future’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:133).

Photographs are only paper, meaningless to those unconnected with the image, or who do not feel a sense of connection, but the same image can be a container of intense emotion, as Barthes writes, ‘I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing’ (Barthes 2000: 73).

## **HAPPINESS**

Whether viewing photographs of the world, viewing the world through a viewfinder, or simply being open to viewing the world directly, Csikszentmihalyi’s insights regarding the relationship between controlling inner experience by achieving a state of optimal experience in relation to achieving happiness are particularly significant. He claims that

... happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them. Happiness is, in fact, a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can become to being happy. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 2)

Or, as double bass player and author of *The Inner Game of Music*, Barry Green puts it,

There are days when we wake up in the morning and the world looks full of promise and excitement, and other days when everything appears drab and uninteresting. In the final analysis it is our state of consciousness, the way we look at the world, that determines the experience we have' (Green 1987: 144).

These suggestions relate to the work carried out by Hazel Snowden and the Physical Health Psychology Department team, which recognizes the impact that cultivating happiness through mindfulness based practice has on both mental and physical health. Green suggestion that 'the way we look at the world ... determines the experience we have' parallels my own experience of the world, being open to discovering new things about the ordinary aspects of daily life allows me to see things that might otherwise go unnoticed and to respond by creating photographic images of what I have seen.



Rachel White, *Pylon - Webs of Light*, 2015

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that:

Control over consciousness is not simply a cognitive skill. At least as much as intelligence, it requires the commitment of emotions and will. It is not enough to know how to do it; one must do it, consistently, in the same way as athletes or musicians who must keep practicing what they know in theory. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 21)

This premise relates to Green's suggestions about improving musical performance, by committing emotionally to the moment, Crane's curriculum of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy exercises, and to my own motivation to constantly pursue an involvement with photographic practice. Repeatedly practicing what I 'know in theory' allows me to gain a deeper engagement with optimal experience, which ultimately leads to a more fulfilling experience, and a more complex creative outcome. It may also define the reason why repeatedly engaging in a creatively based flow state has implications that go beyond the mere enjoyment of being in the state of flow, offering the ability to grow creatively rather than simply pursue the state of flow as an end in itself.

While my own images are not defined by my health issues, I understand that my photographic practice cannot be seen in isolation from them. Although the images are primarily a means of creative expression, there is, I think, a link between my preoccupation with engaging in photographic encounters and a desire to 'control my inner experience'. As previously explained, my photographic practice is not set *apart from* my life, it is a *part of* my life. I deliberately work to 'cultivate' and 'defend' my photographic practice as a means of controlling the quality of my life. This is particularly important for me due to the therapeutic benefits that can be derived from achieving a state of optimal experience, or mindfulness, in terms of regulating chronic pain. As Csikszentmihalyi suggests, 'How we feel about ourselves, the joy we get from living, ultimately depend directly on how the mind filters and interprets

everyday experiences' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 9). While I am not able to remove the pain and debilitating exhaustion which are a part of the pattern of my everyday experience, I work very hard to cultivate moments of respite by engaging in a state of optimal experience through being open to 'the splendor of the insignificant' in ordinary experiences, just as I can appreciate it in the other photographers that I have engaged with in this thesis. For, as Csikszentmihalyi states,

Although the flow experience appears to be effortless, it is far from being so. It often requires strenuous physical exertion or highly disciplined mental activity. It does not happen without the application of skilled performance. Any lapse in concentration will erase it. And yet while it lasts consciousness works smoothly, action follows action seamlessly. In normal life, we keep interrupting what we do with doubts and questions. "Why am I doing this? Should I perhaps be doing something else?" Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions, and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 54)

My own experience is as Csikszentmihalyi describes, 'any lapse in concentration' will 'erase' the moment, break the spell, and the pain and exhaustion come flooding back.

Csikszentmihalyi's comments also relate to Highmore's preoccupation with his 'to do lists' detracting from his experience of his surroundings, and to Green's references to the 'self-conscious mental gossip' that can detract from a performance. While experiencing flow can be magical, it also has a relationship with the dark process which so appalled George Rodger in respect of his own ability to seek to create beautiful images from the piles of dead bodies, as discussed in the previous chapter. His state of deep concentration 'carried him forward as if by magic', while the automatic judgments resulting from his

photographic vision and skill gave 'no requirement for him to reflect'. Reflection, and horror, came later.

## A CONDITION OF COMPLETE SIMPLICITY

Tilden Edwards, Director of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, suggests that 'Participative seeing marks the beginning of a contemplative awareness. It involves a way of remaining innocently present with our eyes' (Edwards in Farrelly-Hansen 2001: 118). An openness to the possibilities inherent in the everyday involves open, innocent, seeing, which precedes the contemplative awareness, which in the case of Rodger, made him 'turn away' from what he had seen. Remaining 'innocently present with our eyes' involves a deep level of engagement, requiring what T.S. Eliot refers to as

A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
(Eliot 1982: 198)

That is, in order to control inner experience and engage fully, it is vital to not become 'sealed off', absolutely everything has to be given to the moment. For, as Sontag suggests, 'In the fairy tale of photography the magic box ... rewards innocence' (Sontag 1979: 53). Cultivating a state of openness and simplicity by giving up self-consciousness, preconceptions and other distractions, opens up new creative possibilities. There are parallels between my experience of photographic practice and what Szarkowski has written concerning the innocence of Andre Kertesz, who he says,

had never been much interested in deliberate, analytical description; since he had begun photographing in 1912 he had sought the revelation of the elliptical view, the unexpected detail, the ephemeral moment – not the

epic but the lyric truth. ... there is in the work of Kertesz another quality less easily analyzed, but surely no less important. It is a sense of the sweetness of life, a free and childlike pleasure in the beauty of the world and the preciousness of sight. (Szarkowski 1980: 92)

As Hollie Willetts writes in the *Royal Photographic Society Journal*,

Kertesz does not seek out hidden or secret places, but captures scenes of Paris which are open for all to see. He presents everyday visions of the city in such elegant composition that we are invited to look at them more deeply: to see, as he does, the beauty in what could easily be dismissed as mundane. (Willetts 2014:117)

The following image is an example of the way that I capture 'scenes which are open for all to see.' As Szarkowski suggests in respect of Kertesz, I share a 'childlike pleasure in the beauty of the world and the preciousness of sight' (Szarkowski 1980: 92). As Kafka puts it, there is a link between being open, or childlike, in looking for moments of beauty in the world, 'Youth is happy because it has the ability to see beauty. Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old' (Kafka in Schwandt 2006: 83). What is meant here is that being engaged with the world, looking with fresh eyes, keeps the mind open, alert and alive to possibilities, so that it does not wither away by falling into rigid formulaic ways of thinking. The image below resulted from keeping an open mind while simply driving to the shops. By paying attention to the 'rogue intensities' that 'roam the streets of the ordinary' (Stewart 2007: 44) and engaging with what Stewart describes as a 'state of attention that is also impassivity - a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place' (Stewart 2011: 446). I became aware of this scene as we drove past, there was a moment when everything fell into an alignment, and the lady with the pink hair stepping into the frame was a gift. In the words of Wessel, it was a moment when the photographer 'goes "Yes"'.



Rachel White, *North Wales Domestic Appliance Centre*, 2015

## THE TEMPORARILY DISSOLVED SELF

Taking such ‘childlike pleasure in the beauty of the world’ (Szarkowski 1980: 92) requires putting aside self-consciousness. Art therapist, David Maclagan, refers to the work of artist, psychologist and psychoanalyst, Marion Milner, in respect of ‘the creative collaboration between conscious and unconscious processes, and the capacity to surrender, or allow the self to be temporarily dissolved, that is an essential condition for this’ (Milner in Maclagan 2001: 43). Maclagan adds ‘I do not think it far-fetched or exaggerated that some aspects of aesthetic response involve an experience of rapture or ‘madness’ in which there is sometimes a magical coincidence between hitherto unknown parts of oneself and the specific material qualities of another’s work of art’ (Maclagan 2001: 43).

The idea of rapture, or ‘madness’ relates to Barthes assertion that there is a ‘sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose

name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love' (Barthes 2000:116). Csikszentmihalyi writes that 'Individuals who depart from the norms - heroes, saints, sages, artists and poets, as well as madmen and criminals - look for different things in life than most others do' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 28). By including opposite ends of the spectrum in his list of heroes, saints, sages and criminals Csikszentmihalyi takes Barthes' suggestion even further. While MacLagan, writes,

... some forms of aesthetic experience have a rapturous, ecstatic feel to them that could, in other contexts, be called 'mad'. So too does the experience of making art: normal boundaries between subject and object are suspended in the 'manic-oceanic' phase of the creative process.' Adding, 'The traditional convergence between genius and madness reaches a sort of apogee in the figure of psychotic creators and their work, isolated and driven in upon themselves by confinement. (MacLagan 2001: 78)

It could be argued that the intensity involved with the creative process is a sort of 'madness', certainly it is well understood by creative practitioners that developing a deep engagement with the creative process can be enough to stimulate a state of optimal experience which can lead to a new understanding of both the internal and the external worlds. Looking for 'different things in life than most others do' may seem to be a form of 'madness' when viewed from a 'normal' perspective, but it enables creative practitioners to pursue different goals and commit to focusing on different aspects of both the self and the world, than others do. The idea of the creative practitioner being involved in a form of 'madness' or being 'different' from 'normal people' relates to the comment about my being a 'bohemian maverick' referred to in the second chapter. The person who made this statement recognized something in me that makes me 'different', maybe connected with a form of 'madness', which sets me apart from the 'norm'. By looking *at* 'different things *about* life than

most others do' rather than being 'mad', creative practitioners can be open to learning through creative practice and offer new knowledge to, and about, the world. For, as Csikszentmihalyi suggests, '...each of us is temperamentally sensitive to a certain range of information that we learn to value more than most other people do' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 54). By paying attention to the things that we, as individuals, value we are able to cultivate an awareness of these aspects of the world and, as creative practitioners, we are able use our skills to offer new ways of seeing the phenomena which we value.

Barthes asks,

Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad if this realism is absolute, and so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic *ecstasy*. (Barthes 2000: 119)

By this Barthes is referring to the sort of 'tameness' that Solnit attributes to the habitual aesthetic of Ansel Adams, whose work, she claims, is 'defined by the purer images alone ...[t]his lineal tradition has dwindled into calendar pictures and coffee-table books, which ... seem paralysed by a worn-out aesthetic' (Solnit, in Brittain 1999: 227). In contrast, Barthes asserts that the sort of photographs which work beyond the traditional 'rigid formula' of seeing, attuning to and connecting with the kind of 'rogue intensities' that 'roam the streets of the ordinary' that pulse 'at the edges of things' (Stewart 2007: 44) to create an 'original' way of looking at the world, those photographs that require absolute engagement with the power of 'loving and terrified consciousness' to capture, and even reverse, a slice of time, may be referred to as 'mad'. However Barthes proceeds to clarify his idea; because of their

honesty and intensity, this sort of 'madness', is not 'paralysed' like that of 'tame' photographs, but burns with the all consuming passion of 'ecstasy.'

As Higgs suggests,

Arts reflect the dynamic self of the artist and the artist's perspective on experience. They are a personal expression of an understanding of the world, and they evoke the distilled experience of being in the world of the individual. As researchers, artists are attuned to the self-knowing reflective practice. The artist as researcher creates meaning. (Higgs in Knowles and Cole 2008: 551)

Weiser suggests that, in addition to images created by a person,

A remembered image can also be suggestive of the things that are important to a person...The photos people take and keep serve as tangible extensions of the self and as, quite literally, personal constructs of reality in the fullest definition of the term. (Weiser 1999: 229)

This idea relates directly to the suggestion made by Robert Adams, which was noted in the previous chapter, that 'Our subject thus redefines us, and is part of the biography by which we want to be known' (Adams 1994: 179).

As previously suggested it is not only creative practitioners, performers and athletes who are able to attain a deep level of optimal experience.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that while 'it is not easy to transform ordinary experience into flow, but almost anyone can improve his or her ability to do so' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 83). However he adds that some people have a greater predisposition to do so than others, and goes on to explore 'whether all people have the same potential to control consciousness ...and what distinguishes those who do it easily from those who don't' (ibid.: 85),

concluding that although further research is needed he has discovered a strong link between the ability to control the attention and to concentrate and the achievement of a state of flow. However he also cautions that

In addition to the people who have found a way to create flow in their lives, there are too many who have no conception of what they are missing. As the studies of experience of everyday life clearly show, in their hard won free time most people sink into a state of apathy that brings no joy and leads to no awakening. (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1998: 383)

Here Csikszentmihalyi's ideas relate to the therapeutic benefits of engaging in Crane's curriculum mindfulness-based cognitive therapy exercises, and also to the experiences of 'Huw from Bromley' as he engages with something he defines as being beautiful each day. Arnold Berleant attests '... aesthetic involvement need not be a rare or restricted event. It is limited only by our capabilities and willingness to participate' (Berleant, in Light and Smith 2005: 29). The following image relates to my willingness to include aesthetic involvement as part of my ordinary experience of everyday life.



Rachel White, *Leaves Caught in the Weir*, 2015

## PERSONAL GROWTH

In the introduction to her book *Spirituality and Art Therapy: Living The Connection*, Mimi Farrelly-Hansen states that ‘... art making is inherently spiritual and ... spirituality is an important ingredient in therapy or becoming more whole’ (Farrelly-Hansen2001:17). Csikszentmihalyi also suggests that in addition to the sense of happiness and wellbeing that optimal experience can bring it can also have a beneficial effect on personal growth. ‘The self becomes complex as a result of experiencing flow. Paradoxically, it is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than we were’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 42).

When all a person’s relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person’s attention is completely absorbed by the activity. There is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers. All attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli. As a result, one of the most universal and distinctive features of optimal experience takes place: people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing. (ibid.: 53)

This relates directly to what was suggested by Green in terms of enhanced performance by musicians and athletes when they are ‘in the zone’ totally focused on the task they are performing with no room for self-consciousness or ‘what ifs’. It also relates to experiences, such as that of Rodgers, and also Weiser’s comments, and my own experiences, referred to in the previous chapter, concerning images which are created spontaneously without over thinking, and why sometimes the resulting images offer a new insight that the practitioner was not fully aware of at the moment the image was created. An open mind, or condition of complete simplicity, underpinned by mastery of

equipment, whether musical instrument or camera, which has been 'rehearsed' until so familiar that use is automatic and the practitioner stops being aware of themselves as separate from their equipment, can lead to achievement of a state of flow, or optimal experience. In this state the creativity of the practitioner is not compromised by either technical issues or by self doubt, but able to enter fully and openly into the possibilities of the moment or performance. The self is unencumbered with extraneous thoughts, all concentration is focused on the moment, offering the freedom to explore the possibilities inherent in the activity itself. Such intense concentration allows the absorption, or 'temporary dissolving', of the self into the moment and into the activity. The outcome of such intense engagement can lead to new insights and understandings because the performer is not merely running through a preconceived pattern, but open to new discoveries.

Hillman has observed that

Beauty cannot enter art unless the mind in the work is anchored beyond itself so that in some way the finished work reflects the sacred and the doing of the work, ritual. ...We perform ritual with cool concentration, a "disinterestedness" that is anything but diffident, and yet, at the same time, with intensely passionate devotion. The timeless repetitious character of ritual lifts repression from beauty. Ritual suspends the forward motion of will and ego towards some fixed purpose: instead, a dedication to the powers served by the ritual. (Hillman 1998: 273)

In the case of engaging with creative practice, suspending the 'mental gossip' or 'ego' allows the concentration required to recognize beauty and develop an attunement to it within the work. The thorough knowledge of the creative equipment, musical instrument or camera, allows, through the repetition of practice, for the use of the equipment to become an instinctive ritual. Concentration is reserved for the subject, the participants 'powers' are

dedicated to the moment which is served by the 'ritual' that has been prepared for by previous practice. Hillman uses words and phrases such as sacred, ritual, and passionate devotion, which relate directly to the concept of the holy state of Grace, of being able to channel the 'sacredness' of the experience that can be achieved by being fully in the moment that has been referred to previously, and which is illustrated in the image below. Because 'the repetition of practice' allows me to concentrate on the subject the 'instinctive ritual' of using my equipment allows me to dedicate my 'powers' to the moment. The 'self' is 'temporary dissolved', my mind is 'anchored beyond itself', allowing beauty to enter, so that 'the finished work reflects the sacred' 'intensely passionate devotion' (Hillman 1998: 273) I have for my subject, which in this instance, is the transformative power of light. The image depicts a moment of collision between the mundane landscape and the sacred alchemy of light, which, as illustrated here, has the power to make the ordinary extraordinary.



Rachel White, *Shine*, 2015

As with the preceding image, Szarkowski writes,

There are times when the process of photography seems invested with magic. At these times it is as though the camera points the photographer and leads him to the place where that camera will work its revelation. Paul Caponigro has expressed in words the nature of such occasions. “Of all my photographs, the ones that have most meaning for me are those I was moved to make from a certain vantage point, at a certain moment and no other, and for which I did not draw on my abilities to fabricate a picture, composition-wise or other-wise. You might say I was taken in.”

(Szarkowski 1980: 192)

Szarkowski adds that ‘Photography, if practiced with high seriousness, is a contest between a photographer and the presumptions of approximate and habitual seeing’ (ibid.192). That is, a serious photographer has the ability to reveal the magic of a new world from the elements that are more usually dismissed or over looked out of habit or only approximately rather than fully seen because of the presumption that they are not worthy of attention. For Caponigro, the images he considers as having the most meaning for him are those that were revelatory to him as photographer, showing him something he was not previously aware of, irrespective of any influence they may have over a future viewer.

This experience is not unique, in an interview with David Land in the Royal Photographic Society Journal in 2012, Joel Meyerowitz discusses his experiences of creating photographic images. While he states that he ‘love(s) the flexibility’ of an SLR, he makes the following comments regarding the use of large format cameras,

... I also like the meditation, where you go under the dark cloth and just stand there and dwell in the experience. Often, it makes it richer for me. I suddenly see that there’s an emphasis somewhere I didn’t think I was going to experience it, and that way the picture morphs into a new kind of

image or a new subject. That discovery happens only when you encourage time to be part of it. (Meyerowitz, in Land 2012: 398)

Meyerowitz is advocating the very sort of openness involved in optimal experience as a key to personal development. Rather than photographing to a rigid formula, by actively 'dwelling in the experience' and concentrating on becoming fully involved in the moment he is open to new possibilities.

Meyerowitz makes discoveries that he did not expect; both the experience and the outcome are richer because he has taken time to become fully immersed in the moment.

Meyerowitz's experience relates to Berleant's suggestion that,

In both art and love we may have a sense of being in place, of a dissolution of barriers and boundaries, of communion. Such connectedness, such continuity, such engagement lie at the very center [sic] of the aesthetic, occurring with the greatest intensity on the most powerful occasions. (Berleant in Light and Smith 2005: 33)

Here Berleant uses a number of phrases that have been employed by others referred to in this thesis to describe the intensity of experience and the sense of belonging and being at one with a situation or subject. The dissolution of barriers and boundaries described by Berleant is similar to the 'capacity to surrender' and the 'dissolving of the self' referred to by Weiser, while 'connectedness', 'continuity', and 'engagement' are prerequisites for achieving optimal experience and mindfulness. Berleant's use of the word 'communion' echoes what has been written previously in relation to the idea of the sacred.

The sort of 'openness' that is required to participate fully in the moment is described by Weiser with reference to the work of Carl Jung who proposed that creating art can be used as part of the healing process. Weiser writes,

Taking pictures can be conceived of as an active decision by the photographer to record a scene, or as a more passive receptivity by the photographer of a scene that calls to him or her, demanding to be recorded. Not unlike Jung's (1971) dichotomy of the origins of art (springing from the artist's intention or forcing itself upon the artist), photographs are taken in response to one or both of these influences. The unconscious, though influencing both modes, seems to push strongest when given most opportunity in those situations where the photographer had not consciously planned to take a snapshot but found him- or herself doing so simply because the moment *felt* right. (Weiser 1999: 229)

She continues,

When we take photos, or even think about taking them, we assume a different stance in regard to life itself. We transform from being involved participants unaware of our own position to being observers. We no longer are part of what is going on. Thus a scene that we examine and try to document is irrevocably changed as a result of our observation of it and our removal of ourselves from its process. To really be involved is to be unaware of participation. To be aware of our part in it is to become self-aware and construct a boundary, no matter how permeable it may be, between us and whatever we are looking at. (Weiser 1999: 229)

It is this 'permeable boundary', created by self-awareness, which is removed during moments of optimal experience, the lack of the boundary or sense of self, allows complete involvement which can result in new understanding. The self does not intrude.

As Csikszentmihalyi suggests, during a state of flow 'One item that disappears from awareness deserves a special mention, because in normal life we spend so

much time thinking about it: our own self.’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 62) Adding that

There is one very important and at first apparently paradoxical relationship between losing the sense of self in a flow experience, and having it emerge stronger afterward. It almost seems that occasionally giving up self-consciousness is necessary for building a strong self-concept. Why this is so should be fairly clear. In flow a person is challenged to do her best, and must constantly improve her skills. At the time, she doesn't have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self- if she did allow herself to become self-conscious the experience would not have been very deep. But afterward, when the activity is over self-consciousness has a chance to resume, the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh activities. (ibid.: 66)

The process builds new understandings, both of the self, and beyond the self, which are created by reflecting on the results of the intensity of the inner experience and offering it outwards to the external world.

Learning to inhabit this internal world so deeply takes practice. My own experience of achieving a state of optimal experience as a result of engaging with photograph practice equates to a 'condition of complete simplicity', which involves no longer being self conscious, of no longer even being aware of the self 'as separate from the actions I am performing'. My experience of the deep concentration required when creating an image parallels that of the chess player taking part in a tournament who relates his experience to Csikszentmihalyi, "... the concentration is like breathing – you never think of it. The roof could fall in and, if it missed you, you would be unaware of it" (ibid.: 53-54). This depth of concentration is required even when creating seemingly spontaneous images from a moving car, although the action of pressing of the

shutter is an instantaneous act, it requires total and absolute concentration to recognize the moment when the shutter needs to be pressed. Sometimes when I'm creating images I even forget to breathe, the breath is controlled during an exposure and I have to consciously begin to breathe again once the exposure is complete. When I am creating images I am often so focused on what I am doing that darkness falls and I only become aware of it when I am no longer able to adapt my equipment to the situation to see my subject at all. There are also similarities between this intense concentration and a sense of being invincible; for the chess player the roof falling in would not be a distraction - unless it fell on top of him, in a way that is not dissimilar from for example the sense of being shielded by the camera in a war zone, where the photographer inhabits an internal reality, becoming an observer rather than a participant in the action and thus feels removed from or protected from the external world and the effects of that external world. The practitioner has removed the 'permeable boundary' that sits between themselves and the external world and replaced it with an internal boundary, created by the state of optimal experience, which draws the external world, via the camera, musical instrument or other 'tool', into the practitioners internal world. In reflecting on this experience and reflecting it back to the external world an intensity of experience is generated which can be shared by another participant, viewer or listener, who may catch an echo of their own internal experience in the work created. Or, as Berleant describes it,

In full appreciative engagement, what often develops is a sense of personal exchange with the image ... that may evoke a strong feeling of kinship or human empathy or the intensity of an epiphany. (Berleant in Light and Smith 2005: 33)

This applies to both the creator of an image and subsequently to viewers of that image. The following image is taken from a series during which I was engaged in 'full appreciative engagement' which led to 'a strong feeling of

kinship', of being one with the sea and the sand.



Rachel White, *Wet Sand*, 2015

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that ‘...the flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control – or, more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical of many situations in normal life (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 59), concluding that ‘When people restrain themselves out of fear, their lives are by necessity diminished. They become rigid and defensive, and their self stops growing’ (ibid. :115). This premise could be applied to Ansel Adams and other photographers, creative practitioners, or anyone else, who becomes ‘stuck’ or ‘sealed off’, repeating what has been successful for them previously and fearful of attempting anything different. As a result both their creative practice and their ‘self’ stops growing. No new discoveries are made.

In his book, *The Inner Game of Music*, Barry Green suggests that

For most people the outer result is the one that counts: what we accomplish, whether we succeed, whether we win or lose. When you are

playing the Inner Game, on the other hand, the quality of your experience comes to be as important as your actual success. (Green 1987: 38)

This suggestion relates to Csikszentmihalyi's assertion that 'Individuals who depart from the norms ... look for different things in life than most others do.' In the case of Green's comments, winning or losing become less important than the experience itself, while Csikszentmihalyi's suggestion may relate to a wider sphere in terms of individuals who choose to seek experiences which enable the 'self' to develop as being more important to them than the short term happiness of, for example, a new car. The inner experience becomes more significant than the external world. I do not consider this to be self-absorbed or solipsistic. In the case of the creative practitioner, the 'quality' of the experience can be directly related to the quality of the creative outcome that is generated as a result of that experience. In terms of photographic practice, an insightful image resulting from the quality of the experience, returns to the world and begins a dialogue, beyond the self of the photographer, with the external world. As Barthes suggests, 'a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see' (Barthes 2000: 6). Because the camera mediates between the photographer and the world, the images produced offer a new view of the world, both to photographer and to the viewer. The images reflects something back into the world which links with Hillman comment

... suppose we were to imagine that beauty is permanently given, inherent to the world in its data, there always on display, a display that evokes an aesthetic response. This inherent radiance lights up more translucently, more intensively within certain events, particularly those events that aim to seize it and reveal it, such as artworks. (Hillman 1998: 267)

While the inner experience may be more significant than the external world, by aiming to 'seize' and 'reveal' the beauty that is 'permanently given' in the external world, the 'inherent radiance' of the world is most translucent in

artworks that connect with an inner awareness and aesthetic response to the external world.

Green goes on to suggest that

In order to take real advantage of everything that simple awareness can teach us, we need to leave our assumptions and ready-made judgments on one side and pay attention to what is actually going on. We can choose to put our attention where we want it instead of leaving it on the distractions. What's important here is that we should choose a focus for our awareness in the present moment, something happening right now – and not wander off into the past or the future. When we are aware of what's happening in the present moment, our concentration develops and things often seem to improve almost effortlessly. (Green 1987: 51-52)

Interestingly Csikszentmihalyi states that he describes optimal experience as 'flow' because it is 'seemingly effortless' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 53-54). Green refers to violin teacher and author of *Stage Fright*, Kató Havas, who states that her goal in music is to 'eliminate the self'. 'The player needs to be able to forget about himself', she writes. 'This is when real communication begins. For with the elimination of the self, he is able to reach the very core of the music, and is free to transmit it' (Green 1987: 95). In terms of musicianship, my experience of both taking part in and attending performances given by others upholds this statement. For example, while he plays cellist Philip Higham is very obviously transported to another place; by losing all sense of self he is able to enter fully into the creative act and make music at a level that really communicates with the audience, draws them in and holds them in the spell with him. His performances are greater because of his ability to 'dissolve' the self, and, because of this, his inner experience affects the external world. The intensity of his inner experience is reflected through the music, back into the external world, to create an echo of this experience within

his audience. Beyond the internal self, the external world recognizes his capacity to make music come to life, to take on a life of its own, which has won him numerous international accolades.

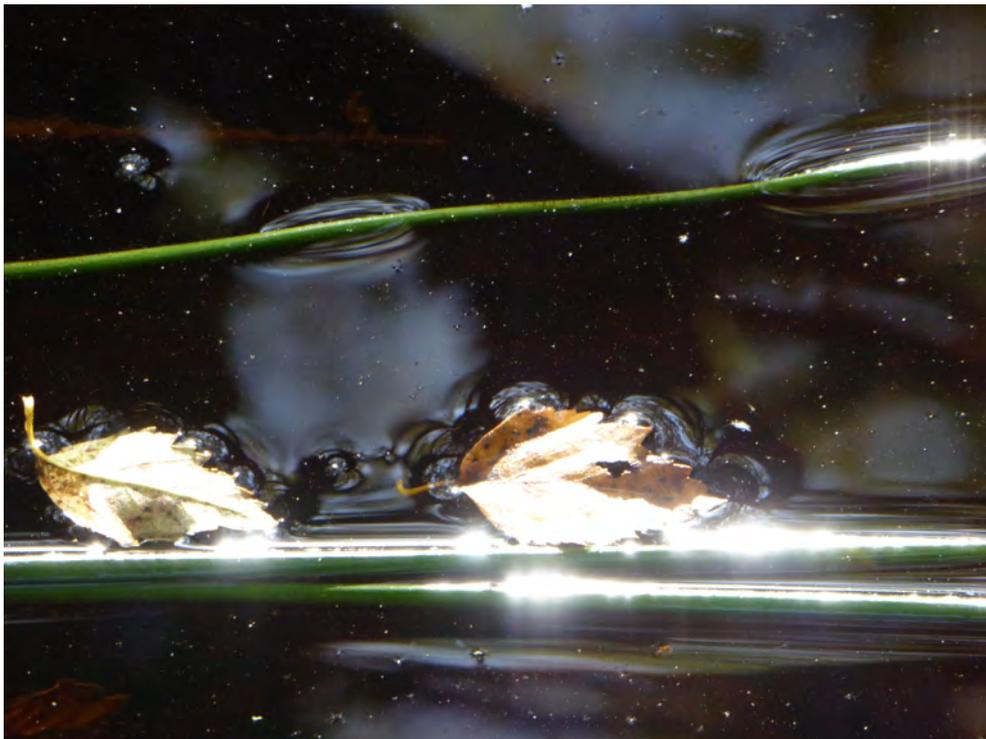
Csikszentmihalyi refers to this 'elimination of the self' as key for personal development and growth;

In our studies we found that every flow activity, whether it involved competition, chance, or any other dimension of experience, had this in common: It provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness. In short it transformed the self by making it more complex. In this growth of the self lies the key to flow activities.  
(Csikszentmihalyi 2002:74)

## **SENSORY DELIGHT**

Csikszentmihalyi discusses the ways in which a state of flow can be achieved by paying attention to the senses. He suggests that 'Occasionally people stop to "feast their eyes" when a particularly gorgeous sight happens to appear in front of them, but they do not cultivate systematically the potential of their vision', adding that, 'Visual skills, however, can provide constant access to enjoyable experiences' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 107). This relates directly to what has been written in previous chapters concerning the benefits of paying constant attention to the ordinary. To develop a way of living with an openness, not 'sealed off', but working to cultivate the potential of looking at everyday surroundings and really seeing rather than rejecting the landscape of the everyday that lets us know we're home. In being open to cultivating our vision we have the capacity to grow visually and to develop the self as a result

of engagement with the ‘rogue intensities’ that roam the streets of the ordinary’ those things that ‘pulse at the edges of things’ (Stewart 2007: 44). Or, as Hillman urges ‘risk gorgeous or exquisite intensity, that is, to risk excess’ (Hillman 1998: 272). By being open to noticing details of the ordinary the following image risks ‘gorgeous’ and ‘exquisite intensity’. Although it is not a comment on a ‘man altered’ landscape, it is part of the ordinary world that surrounds me, easily overlooked, because it pulses ‘at the edges of things’ (Stewart 2007: 44), but the tension on the surface of the water and the light glinting up are imbued with ‘gorgeous’ ‘rogue intensity’.



Rachel White, *Leaves on the Lake*, 2015

Robert Adams describes photography as a

kind of intoxication’ asking, why it is that ‘occasionally photographers discover tears in their eyes for the joy of seeing. I think it is because they’ve known a miracle. They’ve been given what they did not earn, and as is the way with unexpected gifts, the surprise carries an emotional blessing. (Adams 1994: 15)

This parallels what Szarkowski has written about Kertesz having an awareness 'of the sweetness of life, a free and childlike pleasure in the beauty of the world and the preciousness of sight' (Szarkowski 1980: 92). In my experience, the intensity of engagement with photographic seeing can be 'intoxicating', there have been occasions when my eyes have filled with tears and my heart feels as though it will burst as I am overcome with emotion because of the joy of seeing and the preciousness of sight, when I do feel as if I've been given a 'gift'. I have, as Hillman urges, risked 'gorgeous' and 'exquisite intensity' and the beauty of the world does sometimes feel like a miracle. Discussing the experience of flow in connection with intellectual pursuits Csikszentmihalyi points out that 'As Sir Francis Bacon noted almost four hundred years ago, wonder – which is the seed of knowledge – is the reflection of the purest form of pleasure' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:117). My photographic work is pure pleasure, based on a sense of wonder and the simple joy of seeing new things that are all around as part of everyday life.

Csikszentmihalyi quotes a man who takes the elevated train from the Chicago suburbs to work each day, as follows:

On a day like this, or days when it's crystal clear, I just sit in the train and look over the roofs of the city, because it's so fascinating to see the city, to be above it, to be there but not part of it... It often happens that someone who's totally wrapped up in a means of visual expression sees the world in those terms. Like a photographer looks at a sky and says, "This is a Kodachrome sky. Way to go, God. You're almost as good as Kodak." Csikszentmihalyi adds that 'Clearly it takes training to be able to derive this degree of sensory delight from seeing. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 108)

Here Csikszentmihalyi is suggesting that a photographer may see the world in terms of the images that can be created from it. That a photographer may

compare the real world to the artificial replication of that world contained within a photograph, comparing the real sky with the heightened colours of a Kodachrome rendition of a brilliant blue sky. Kodak becomes the benchmark against which the real world is measured. 'God', and the real world are '*almost*' but not quite, 'as good' as Kodak's representation of the world. While the experience of a 'perfect' sky may induce a sense of heightened intensity, it also suggests that any sky which is not a 'Kodachrome sky', that is, any real world sky, is not quite good enough to be photographed. This links back to the sort of aesthetic employed by Ansel Adams, his removal and denial of anything 'undesirable', anything not quite good enough to be photographed. In the ordinary world, 'Kodachrome skies' do exist, but they are not the only skies that are 'worth' photographing. To photograph only Kodachrome skies would be extremely limiting and repetitive in the way that to photograph only a manufactured vision of 'wilderness' is limiting and repetitive. The idea of attributing value only to a 'Kodachrome sky' is not dissimilar from the dichotomy expressed by Power which was referred to in the first chapter, in relation to the representations of Poland offered by the tourist books. Power states that he developed his 'Sound of Two Songs' body of work, as a 'reaction to the kind of tourist books you could buy there - always of pretty castles and lakes, shot in bright sunshine - which was the antithesis of what I was seeing myself' (Land 2012: 332). Photographing within a narrow framework of what is already known to the photographer, or what is considered 'good enough' to be photographed offers nothing new. Stewart suggests, 'A still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance. A quivering in the stability of a category or a trajectory, it gives the ordinary a charge of an unfolding' (Stewart 2007: 19). Paying attention only to 'Kodachrome skies' does not value the 'vibratory motion and resonance' the 'quivering in the stability' it ignores the possibilities of the ordinary, and the 'charge of an unfolding.' It excludes chance discoveries, there can be no new ways of looking at a multifaceted world, no new insights.

Above Csikszentmihalyi comments 'Clearly it takes training to be able to derive

this degree of sensory delight from seeing' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:108). Presumably he is referring to repeatedly engaging with optimal experience, or the sort of mindfulness-based training advocated by Crane, which is involved in keeping an open mind, alert to the visual possibilities in the world around rather than formal artistic training. With reference to music he points out that 'It is not the *hearing* that improves life, it is the *listening*' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 108). In the same way great photographs are not always about technical skill, but about being alive to the possibility of seeing things that others might overlook: it's not the *looking*, but the *seeing*. As Leggo suggests, 'We need imagination to break out of stereotypes and to create other possibilities' (Leggo in Knowles and Cole 2008: 168). Minor White is quoted as saying of his teaching career, 'I'm teaching seeing, not photography' (Campbell 1981: 17). Thus, through the 'seeing' of the overlooked a photograph opens up the world to new perspectives and offers the viewer an experience that they might, in turn, employ to enhance, expand and challenge their own perception of things.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that

We don't usually notice how little control we have over the mind, because habits channel psychic energy so well that thoughts seem to follow each other by themselves without a hitch. After sleeping we regain consciousness in the morning when the alarm rings, and then walk to the bathroom and brush our teeth. The social roles culture prescribes then take care of shaping our minds for us, and we generally place ourselves on automatic pilot till the end of the day, when it's time again to lose consciousness in sleep. But when we are left alone, with no demands on attention, the basic disorder of the mind reveals itself. With nothing to do, it begins to follow random patterns, usually stopping to consider something painful or disturbing. Unless a person knows how to give order to his or her thoughts, attention will be attracted to whatever is most problematic at the moment: it will focus on some real or imaginary pain, on recent grudges or long-term frustration. Entropy is the normal state of

consciousness – a condition that is neither useful nor enjoyable.

(Csikszentmihalyi 2002:119)

While I question whether ‘the social roles culture prescribes ...take care of shaping our minds for us’ and whether the tendency for negative thoughts to creep into consciousness denotes a basic ‘disorder’ in the human mind, rather I presume that this serves some reflective, problem solving function, however I agree that getting locked in a downward spiral of negative thought is not a helpful or pleasant state to be in. There are links here with elements of optimal experience, mindfulness and engagement in creative practice that have been discussed throughout this thesis, as means of overcoming entropy, engaging the mind, and creating a stimulating awareness of everyday life.

## **HEALTH ISSUES**

Because my interest in this area of research developed as a direct result of my own experiences of engagement with photographic practice in relation to ill health, in particular the debilitating constraints of the chronic condition of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, it is useful to explore Csikszentmihalyi’s research regarding the achievement of optimal experience in relation to adversity. Contextualising the ideas in this section will necessarily be personal.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that

Many lives are disrupted by tragic accidents, and even the most fortunate are subjected to stresses of various kinds. Yet such blows do not necessarily reduce happiness. It is how people respond to stress that determines whether they will profit from misfortune or be miserable.

(Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 7)

Adding that

There are two main strategies we can adopt to improve the quality of life. The first is to try making external conditions match our goals. The second is to change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals better. (ibid.: 43)

Having initially attempted to 'fight' against my illness, which obviously remains counterproductive, over the twenty-five years I have lived with the condition I have grown to experience the world differently. I have learned to adapt my experience of life, to a large extent through my photographic practice, in order to change how I experience external conditions make them 'fit' *me* 'better', not in terms of the 'goals' which Csikszentmihalyi describes, but as a way of living. Before I became ill I was at the beginning of a fulfilling career, while the adversity of ill health made me unable to continue with the 'goals' of this path, I have eventually developed the strategies detailed previously through this thesis to enable me to develop both my photographic practice and my 'self' through engagement with optimal experience. This has also had the unexpected benefit of assisting with pain management. My experience relates directly to the suggestion made by Csikszentmihalyi that 'When adversity threatens to paralyze us, we need to reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy, a direction that lies outside of external forces' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 92). Csikszentmihalyi comment defines the link between my own experience of the lack of control brought about as a result of living with the 'external force' of the debilitating effects of a chronic health condition and my motivation to achieve a deep state of flow as often as possible through my engagement with photographic practice in order to regain a sense of control over at least some elements of my life. Sontag suggests, 'People robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers' (Sontag 1997: 10), which relates to my own experience of having both my past, present, and probably future, stolen away, or at least

compromised, by the effects of ill health. This can be contextualized by the following statement from Graham Higgs; 'In my own reflective practice I have found that writing poetry, drawing, painting and creating sculpture has enabled me to transcend difficulties, solve problems, and imagine a future when the reality of the world is difficult' (Higgs in Knowles and Cole 2008: 545). For me, engaging with photographic practice enables me to 'imagine a future when the reality of the world is difficult'.

In respect of health issues and achieving a state of flow, in a chapter aptly entitled 'Cheating Chaos' Csikszentmihalyi writes,

Health, money, and other material advantages may or may not improve life. Unless a person has learned to control psychic energy, chances are such advantages will be useless. Conversely, many individuals who have suffered harshly end up not only surviving, but also thoroughly enjoying their lives. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 193)

Csikszentmihalyi cites a research project carried out by Professor Fausto Massimini in the psychology department of the University of Milan detailing examples of how 'despite extreme handicaps' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:193) people achieve a state of flow. It seems odd that Csikszentmihalyi should suggest that facing adversity should make it harder for a person to achieve a state of flow. Conversely I would suggest that limitations placed upon the body, whether created as a result of physical disability, or, for example, imprisonment, would be the very sort of conditions that would lead a person to actively seek out ways to engage more fully with the power of their minds, in ways such as achieving a state of flow in order to strengthen and develop an inner world that continues despite external constraints. Working with this inner world offers some sense of control over at least one aspect of life in circumstances where the sort of control that is taken for granted by many is denied to the individual. Certainly in my own practice I am aware of the

strength of my own motivation to engage in creating photographic images, both to capture my creative vision of the world, and also to enter into and to prolong a state of flow which takes me both deeper into myself, and also outside myself, in the way that Csikszentmihalyi has discussed. This allows me the freedom to share my creative vision and to grow as a person, despite health issues. But I make a positive decision to do this, and the resolve is strengthened as a result of, rather than despite, ill health. The achievement of a state of flow not only enables me to produce better work, but engaging totally also allows me to temporarily overcome the constraints imposed on my life as a result of the limitations of my health.

Csikszentmihalyi states that ‘Philosophers have frequently been regarded as “absentminded”, which of course means not that their minds were lost, but that they had temporarily tuned out of everyday reality’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:127). He goes on to draw attention to ‘the enjoyment one obtains from creating a new way to describe reality’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:127), which relates to the way that my photographic practice creates a new awareness of everyday beauty. Csikszentmihalyi adds that

A person who becomes familiar with the conventions of poetry, or the rules of calculus, can subsequently grow independent of external stimulation. She can generate ordered trains of thought regardless of what is happening in external reality. When a person has learned a symbolic system well enough to use it, she has established a portable, self-contained world within the mind. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:127)

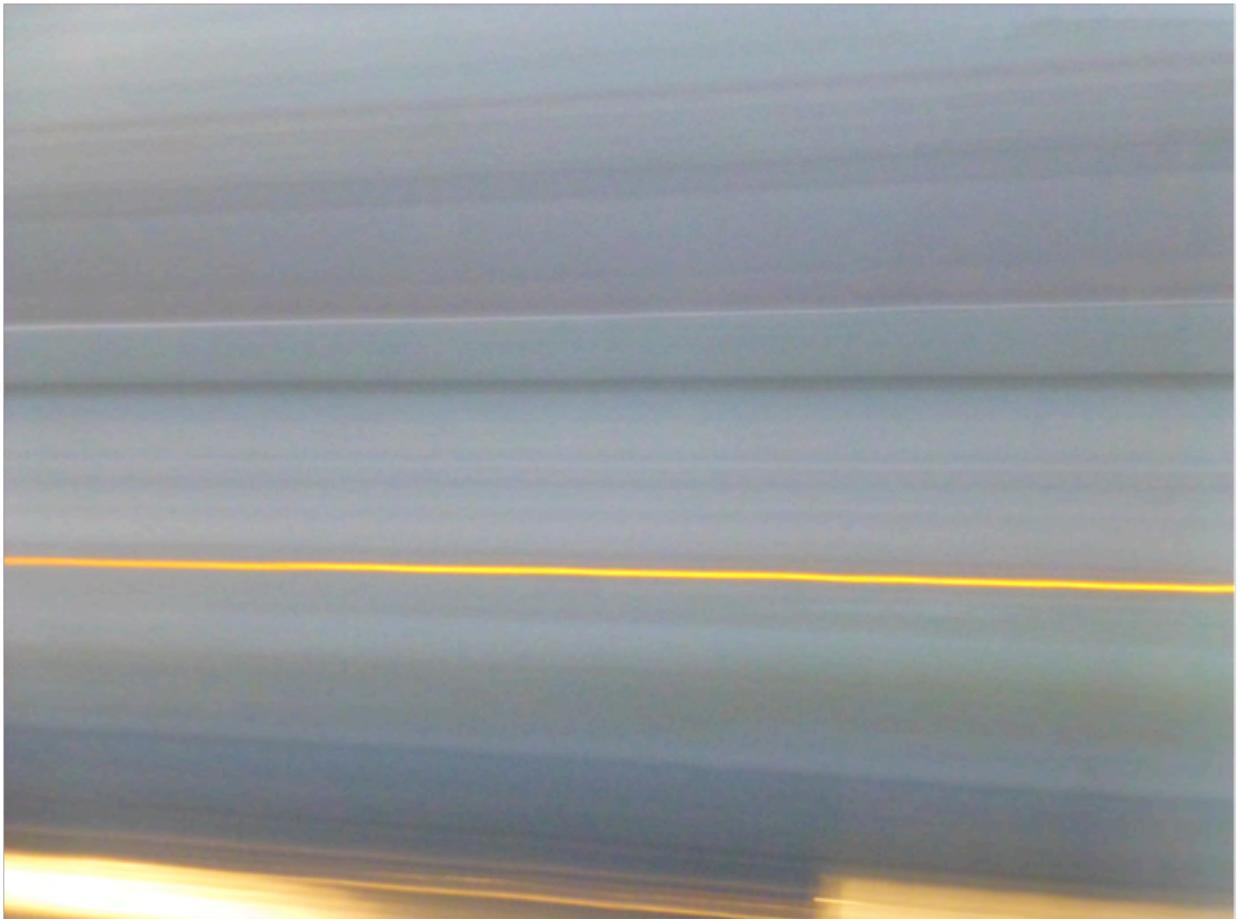
The self-contained ‘symbolic system’ that I have developed and which I carry with me, regardless of external reality, is my attunement to the possibilities of the world and my motivation to translate that attunement via my photographic practice. The state of flow achieved when I am engaged in creating photographic images is not merely a therapeutic tool, although there are

benefits to my health and happiness which are derived from my engagement with photography, the images which result from each encounter and from the experience of seeing deeply, and differently, offer a new understanding which enables the sort of personal growth that Csikszentmihalyi has previously described, and also a new understanding of the world, not just on a personal level, but also in terms of a creative practitioner offering their vision of the world to others, and that vision taking on an existence independent of its creator through the connections that it may encourage within the viewer, both connections with the viewers own experiences, and with the possibility of enriching their future experience of the world. As Robert Adams suggests ‘... the pictures reflect my continuing conviction that, no matter how hard life is, the landscape is beautiful. The light. Even over a shopping center’ (Adams 2006: 24). The following image illustrates that ‘no matter how hard life is’ there is value in paying attention to the light, to the ‘ordinary’ details of the landscape, the ‘everyday beauties that let us know we’re home’.



Rachel White, *Condensation*, 2015

**CONCLUSION**  
**UGLINESS COSTS MORE: GLARING LIGHTS AND SPLOTCHED CARPETS**



Rachel White, *Bypass*, 2015

## UGLINESS COSTS MORE: GLARING LIGHTS AND SPLOTCHED CARPETS

This thesis, which forms part of an ongoing reflexive process contextualizing my own photographic practice, concludes by drawing together some of the interlinked threads and discoveries made during the research process in order to present a new perspective on the relationship between image-making and the everyday. However, the conclusion of this thesis does not denote a full stop, but rather a comma, within the research process. The research has developed beyond the confines of the PhD as I suspected it would, particularly given the diverse, inter connected, areas of study. In the words of Stewart, it

doesn't mean to come to a finish. It wants to spread out into too many possible scenes with too many links between them. It leaves me – my experiment – with a sense of force and texture and the sure knowledge that every scene I spy has tendrils stretching into things I can barely, or not quite, imagine. But I already knew that. The world is still tentative, charged, overwhelming, and alive. (Stewart 2007: 128)

As I suspected when I began, engaging with this study has led to the start of many of the sort of 'tendrils' Stewart describes, which stretch 'into things I can barely, or not quite, imagine.' As she states, the 'world is ... charged ... and alive', so rather than completing my research, the study has alerted me to further possibilities.

Because of the diverse and interconnected nature of this study there is so much more to investigate within each of the areas that this work has referred to. Some of the tendrils leading out of this study may include further research in respect of the relationship between photographic images of ordinary, everyday landscapes and photographic images of remote, pristine landscapes. I remain fascinated by the alchemical properties of light, and anticipate that both my photographic practice and academic research will continue to explore

these areas in conjunction with one another. Additionally, there is room for further research regarding the connection between engaging in photographic practice and achieving a state of optimal experience and possible ways in which this could be applied in a therapeutic environment. As I am approaching this as a creative practitioner rather than from a therapeutic or health care background, my research provides a unique understanding of the benefits of creative engagement that values the outcome of that engagement in addition to the therapeutic benefits to health and wellbeing. Some of these tendrils I have discussed may be explored visually, while others may have a more theoretical element, and there are possibilities for practical applications in respect of the therapeutic aspects of engaging with photographic practice. It may also be valuable to share the photographic work that has been created as a result of engagement with this study and I intend to approach a number of galleries to establish whether there is an interest in exhibiting this work.

However, in the context of concluding the specific concerns of this thesis, the following quotation from Hillman may help to explain the importance of noticing beauty in the ordinary of everyday life rather than attributing it only to some notional remote and pristine 'Wilderness' landscape.

... usually beauty is imagined as an accessory, a luxury, beyond the scope of economics. ...Contrary to this usual view, ugliness costs more. What are the economics of ugliness: What is the cost to physical wellbeing and psychological balance of careless design, cheap dyes, of inane sounds, structures and spaces? To pass a day in an office under direct glaring light, in bad chairs, victim of constant monotonous hum of machine noise, looking down at a worn, splotched floor cover, among artificial plants, making motions that are un-directional, push-button, sagittal in and out that repress the gestures of the body - and then, at day's end, to enter the traffic system or the public transport system, fast food, project housing - what does this cost? What does it cost in absenteeism; in sexual

obsession, school drop-out rates, overeating and short attention span; in pharmaceutical remedies and the gigantic escapism industries of wasteful shopping, chemical dependency, sports violence, and the disguised colonialism of tourism. Could the causes of major social, political, and economic issues of our time also be found in the repression of beauty' (Hillman 1998: 263 - 264).

What Hillman is suggesting is that most of our lives are blighted by the need to repeatedly endure ugly environments, and that such monotony can have a detrimental effect on health and emotional welfare, which has repercussions not only for the individual but also in terms of social and political issues and economics. This view could, in part, account for the continuing popularity of the sort of escapism offered by pristine images of an undefiled landscape such as those created by Ansel Adams, which actively seek to mythologize 'the rural' (Wells 1994: 5) by employing what Wells describes as 'a system of visual editing' (Wells 1994: 48). While Jurovics refers to the 'potent need many people still have for landscape photographs that portray the appearance of untouched wilderness' (Jurovics in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 12), Haip suggests that the sort of wilderness landscape depicted by Ansel Adams, and more recently by photographers such as Joe Cornish and their derivatives, 'present an ideal; they build expectations within us' (Haip, in Read 1993: 75). That is, we have the expectation of wilderness as being pristine and 'undefiled'; an expectation which has in part, been created by the selective aesthetic employed by photographers such as Ansel Adams. However, as Klett asserts, 'anyone who has visited the site of one of Adams's photographs knows that the romance of his landscapes is often best experienced in the photographs themselves. The reality of the place is quite different' (Klett: 1990). While Adams' images of depopulated wilderness may not be strictly accurate depictions of the places he photographed these sort of images offer an idealized landscape which is the antithesis of the ordinary experience described by Hillman, which makes them an appealing antidote to the ugliness we

perceive in our daily lives. Jurovics draws attention to this discrepancy by referring to New Topographics photographer, Frank Gohlke, describing the conflict between ‘the world you would like to see and the world you have to look at’ (Jurovics in Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2013: 12).



Max Regenberg, *Tor*, 1996

The image above, which is part of a series detailing billboards by Max Regenberg, addresses this dichotomy. Regenberg juxtaposes an inviting, warm, golden imagined wilderness landscape called ‘Marlboro Country’, which is depicted as a place of freedom, open skies and open gateways, with the reality of a cold, drab enclosed landscape; the way out into the sun light is blocked, the closed metal gates keep nature shut out, and even the skies are criss-crossed with wires. The imagined wilderness landscape of ‘Marlboro Country’ could be aligned with the sort of idealized landscape evoked by photographers such as Ansel Adams and Joe Cornish, while the ‘real’ landscape depicted by the ‘selective aesthetic’ of Regenberg’s image has more in common with the ordinary landscape that surrounds most of us everyday.

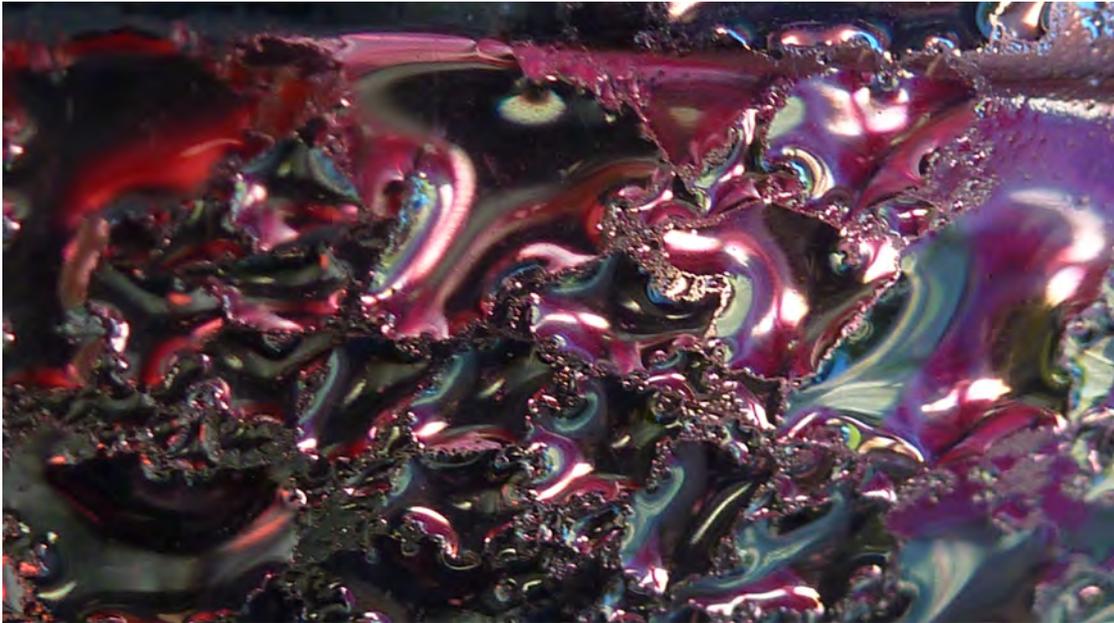
While there is a value in images of undefiled wilderness, as we have seen in the previous chapters, appreciating *only* the constructed landscape of the ‘rural

idyll' can have the effect of making us powerfully reject the ugliness perceived within our own environment. Conniff expresses his 'regret' about the concerns of Adams' work, stating that 'in drawing our eyes toward sublime wilderness and away from the places of our daily lives, his photographs make an argument that beauty is *elsewhere*'. He describes the 'tension' involved as 'we come to regard the places where we live as ruined by human presence - and yet also as home' (Conniff in Read 1993: 90). Conniff 's views are echoed by Waldie's belief that we 'all live on land we've wounded by our living on it. Yet we must be here or be nowhere ... we hunger for a home but doubt its worth when we have it' (Waldie 2005: 189). Or, as Robert Adams puts it, 'Attention only to perfection ... invites eventually for urban viewers - which means most of us - a crippling disgust; our world is in most places, far from clean' (Adams 1996:104). It seems that the majority of people close their eyes to the kind of ugliness that Hillman describes, 'of careless design, cheap dyes, of inane sounds, structures and spaces ... direct glaring light, ... bad chairs, victim of constant monotonous hum of machine noise, looking down at a worn, splotched floor cover, among artificial plants' (Hillman 1998: 263 - 264). As Conniff suggests, the majority of people look 'elsewhere' for beauty rather than finding a value in their ordinary, everyday environment. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi note that, 'As the studies of experience of everyday life clearly show ... most people sink into a state of apathy that brings no joy and leads to no awakening' (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1998: 383).

However there is an alternative to turning a 'blind eye' to these draining aspects of life. As well as referring to the ugliness of the everyday, Hillman also suggests, '... suppose we were to imagine that beauty is permanently given, inherent to the world in its data, there always on display...' (Hillman 1998: 267). Hillman's idea that beauty is 'there always on display' means that beauty is available not just within the remote, perfected landscapes of Adams and Cornish with all its presupposed expectations, but also in our ordinary everyday experiences. As Green proposes, 'it is our state of consciousness, the way we

look at the world, that determines the experience we have' (Green 1987: 144). By learning to engage with what Stewart refers to as the 'rogue intensities' that 'roam the streets of the ordinary' (Stewart 2007: 44), and developing an 'attunement to what might rind up or snap into place' (Stewart 2011: 446) as part of our experience of our everyday life, we can begin to notice and engage with 'the small beauties and pleasures of life' (Crane 2010: 38) within our own environment. By developing an appreciation of what Klett refers to as 'quiet, less monumental landscapes' and by learning 'to appreciate them in spite of our human presence, to see we have a place on the land' (Klett: 1990), rather than being 'sealed off' from daily life we can learn to be 'open' to opportunities for 'joy' and 'awakening' even within the ugly environments we are often forced to endure. Our 'state of consciousness' allows us to alter our experience of our ordinary everyday world and to rethink our place within it. The distance and remoteness so often associated with Ansel Adams' pristine work is contradicted by the proximity of the everyday and the immediacy of the often overlooked within our ordinary lives.

As Csikszentmihalyi puts it, 'How we feel about ourselves, the joy we get from living, ultimately depend directly on how the mind filters and interprets everyday experiences' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 9). As our 'state of consciousness' allows us to 'filter' and 'interpret' our experiences, it could be argued that to a certain extent, the opportunities for finding 'joy' can also be controlled by the individual. As Berleant attests, '... aesthetic involvement need not be a rare or restricted event. It is limited only by our capabilities and willingness to participate' (Berleant, in Light and Smith 2005: 29). That is, the more often that we are willing to 'participate' in responding to 'the small beauties and pleasures of life' within our own 'everyday experiences' the more 'joy we get from living'. Photography has a role in the experience such 'joy'. By helping us to participate, both as photographer, and also as viewer of images, photography can help us to notice, to 'see', to pay attention to the often overlooked within our own 'everyday experiences'.



Rachel White, Melted Wrapper, 2014

By paying attention to what Stewart describes as ‘the charged rhythms of the ordinary’ (Stewart 2011: 446) we can begin to create a way of living that cultivates an awareness of the aesthetic potential of our everyday surroundings. This awareness offers opportunities to engage fully with the moment by entering into the state of intense concentration and present moment awareness that Csikszentmihalyi refers to as optimal experience, and which his research indicates as being beneficial by generating happiness and a sense of inner peace. Engaging with optimal experience as part of our ordinary experience of the everyday therefore begins to address some of the repercussions for ‘physical wellbeing and psychological balance’ that Hillman refers to in connection with our experience of ‘ugliness’. Deeper engagement with optimal experience ultimately leads to a more fulfilling experience, which leads to personal growth. Csikszentmihalyi explains that when a person is engaged in optimal experience or flow she

doesn’t have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self - if she did allow herself to become self-conscious the experience would not have been very deep. But afterwards, when the activity is over

self-consciousness has a chance to resume, the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh activities. (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 66)

Rather than rejecting the perceived 'ugliness' of 'home' by seeking only the purity of an idealized form of beauty that can only be found 'elsewhere', by engaging with the 'the small beauties and pleasures of life' (Crane 2010: 38) in our own ordinary environment we can gain a more fulfilling experience of daily life, and create opportunities for joy and personal growth within the 'commonplace'.

## **CREATIVE PRACTICE: RESPONDING TO THE INHERENT RADIANCE OF THINGS**

Further to his comments regarding beauty, Hillman proceeds,

... suppose we were to imagine that beauty is permanently given, inherent to the world in its data, there always on display, a display that evokes an aesthetic response. This inherent radiance lights up more translucently, more intensively within certain events, particularly those events that aim to seize it and reveal it, such as artworks. (Hillman 1998: 267)

Hillman is proposing that simply noticing the beauty that is 'always on display' within the world elicits an aesthetic response, however, he adds that the 'inherent radiance' of what is noticed, 'lights up more translucently, more intensively' when it becomes the subject of an artwork. That is, when a creative practitioner notices, and connects with, the beauty of an object or scene it becomes magnified through the work that is created as a result of that connection and is reflected back into the world with even greater

intensity.

So, to conclude the written element of this study: Hillman is right; ‘ugliness costs more’ (Hillman 1998: 263 - 264). It may be a miserable, cold, winter morning, you may be late for work, out of milk, stuck at the traffic lights, surrounded by exhaust fumes; but if you have developed an ‘attunement’ which recognizes ‘the charged rhythms of the ordinary’ (Stewart 2011: 446), the beauty of the ‘green jewel shining among the twigs’, life will be richer for the experience of having engaged with the moment rather than having endured it. By being ‘open’ to connecting with the ‘splendour of the insignificant’ (Ranci re in Highmore 2011: 51), the alchemy of light, even artificial light, transforms what could be perceived as a mundane landscape into something sacred, bringing the chance for ‘joy’ and ‘awakening’. And if you can photograph the preciousness of the green traffic light the connection you have made will result in one of those moments when the photographer; that is you, ‘goes “yes”’, and the resulting image will reflect the resonance of that euphoric ‘yes’ back into the world, ultimately inspiring others to recognize the beauty of similar jewels within their own ordinary lives.

‘This smoky winter morning –  
do not despise the green jewel shining among the twigs  
because it is a traffic light.’

Charles Reznikoff (Summerfield 1970: 48)



Rachel White, *Coach Trip*, 2015

**THE SURFACE GLITTERED OUT OF HEART OF LIGHT:  
REFLECTIONS ON EXHIBITING THE VISUAL RESEARCH ELEMENT**



'The surface glittered out of heart of light'  
(Eliot 1982: 172)

## THE SURFACE GLITTERED OUT OF HEART OF LIGHT: REFLECTIONS ON EXHIBITING THE VISUAL RESEARCH ELEMENT

This chapter concerns the details of the exhibition mounted within the University for the duration of the *viva voce*. While the written thesis accounts for 20% of this study the remaining 80% takes the form of practice-based visual research. The interlinked visual and textual elements have a symbiotic relationship with each element informing the development of the other. Although a number of images are represented within the body of the thesis the main component of the practice-based element of the study was disseminated through an exhibition held at the time of the *viva voce*. The purpose of exhibiting work during the *viva voce* was to disseminate the visual research findings specifically in the context of the thesis.

As the room was only available for the duration of the *viva voce*, the exhibition parallels the fleeting, alchemical, transformation of light within the everyday landscape. As T.S. Eliot puts it; ‘The surface glittered out of heart of light ... Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty’ (Eliot 1982: 172).



Taking the 'ugliness' of the 'splotched floor' and 'glaring light' (Hillman 1998: 263-264) of the room offered by the university to present my images which concern the alchemy of light, offers a momentary glimpse into my experience of a world of 'incontrovertible brilliance' (Adams 1996: 25), a world that is 'charged, overwhelming, and alive' (Stewart 2007: 128). The aim of the exhibition was to create 'a force field in which people find themselves' (Stewart 2011: 452), by generating an experience that pulls 'the senses into alert' (Stewart 2011: 445), and which ultimately 'stirs the heart' (Hillman 1998: 274).

The images draw attention to the 'significance in quiet, less monumental landscapes', appreciating them 'in spite of our human presence' (Klett 1990). Revealing the 'inherent splendor of the insignificant' (Ranciere in Highmore 2001: 51) and the 'tenderness' (Waldie 2005: 190) of my encounters with the 'common place beauties' (Conniff in Read 1993: 90) of the world. By connecting with 'the charged rhythms of the ordinary' (Stewart 2011: 446) and drawing attention to the 'lacerating emphasis' (Barthes 200: 96) that can exist within the everyday, the exhibition invites the viewer to stop and look, to engage with the images and to inhabit 'the still point of the turning world' (Eliot 1982: 175) just as I have done when creating each of the images. Photographer and viewer 'mentally alert and aware, but too absorbed in the moment to be running any mental gossip' (Green 1987: 25); not 'caught in a maze of preoccupations' (Highmore 2011: 3) but engaged in a 'powerful act of participatory observation' (Crane 2010: 4).

Each of the images shares an aspect of my experience of the world, hopefully generating a sense of recognition within the viewer of those moments when things 'rind up or snap into place' (Stewart 2011: 446), the moment when the photographer, and, hopefully the viewer, go 'Yes!' (Wessel: on line). The images concern the transformative power of light, detailing collisions between the sacred and mundane, investigating moments of alchemy when the ordinary

become extraordinary by capturing the moment when dramatic or strange light creates a dynamic aesthetic that stimulates a new awareness of the familiar. By sharing my experience of that intensity with the viewer the images invite the viewer to 'allow the self to be temporarily dissolved' (Milner in Maclagan 2001: 43) and to challenge the 'presumptions of approximate and habitual seeing' (Szarkowski 1980: 192) by suggesting new ways of connecting with the world. Participation with the images also creates an opportunity for the viewer to engage with what Csikzentmihalyi refers to as a state of optimal experience or flow; the stilled moment of deep concentration, and later contemplation, which leads to 'joy' and ultimately 'awakening' (Csikzentmihalyi and Csikzentmihalyi 1998: 383); to a new awareness of the familiar and to new knowledge. For, as Weber puts it, 'The discourse of academy is all about persuading others to see what we see.' (Weber, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 42)

## THE EXHIBITION

The aim of the exhibition relates to the final concept discussed in the main body of the thesis by attributing value to the jewel like qualities of the everyday rather than despising the 'green jewel shining among the twigs because it is a traffic light' (Reznikoff in Summerfield (1970:48). My aim was to create a 'jewel box' of images inside an 'ugly', drab, windowless room.

The experience of the exhibition began outside the door with an image, photographed from a moving car, of a large metal giraffe with an 'open' sign hanging around his neck, which hopefully set the scene for what lay inside.

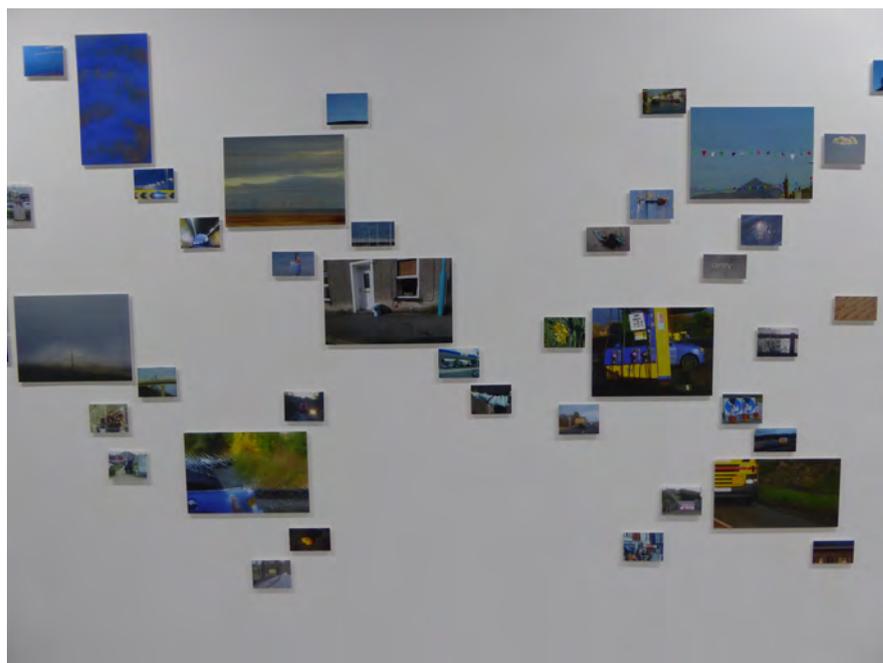


One end of the large windowless room was hung with prints, with a circular white table in the centre with two books on it. The other end of the room held a large television screen that played a slideshow of images on a continuous loop. Two chairs and a low table were placed in front of the television. Scattered around the television and chairs and cascading from the low table were numerous mini images printed onto flimsy, disposable, multi-purpose printer paper.

## WALL MOUNTED PRINTS

The prints to the left of the room were hung around the wall radiating outwards from a notional horizon approximating eye level. They were printed on a matt paper so that attention was focused on the images themselves rather than any reflective quality of the print surface. The images were unframed, mounted on foam display board, which was attached directly onto the wall with Velcro in order not to detract from the content of the images themselves. Parallels may be drawn between the method I chose for displaying the wall mounted images and the way that Tillmans has exhibited his work.

My aim was to present the viewer with an opportunity to concentrate on the content of the images rather than having attention deflected by the way the work was hung. The images varied in size in order to represent the varied nature and duration of glimpses of the world. Each individual image like a jewel, waiting to be discovered by the viewer, hidden within the drabness of a room which enclosed it like a sparkling jewel within the dark interior of a jewellery box; once opened/entered, full of surprising sparkle. Although my approach to hanging the images may have appeared random, as was my intention, there was an order to the rhythmic pattern that was created. The sense of randomness of subject matter, size and placement of the images deliberately referenced the seemingly random visual stimulation available by connecting with the commonplace beauties of the world. The aim was also to replicate a sense of the intangible glinting rainbows caused when light catches a water droplet, or a shard of crystal, reflecting and refracting the light and bringing it to life with a myriad of colours in the way that the images themselves are concerned with the alchemy of light animating inanimate objects.



There were a total of 342 images mounted on the walls, which had been selected from the thousands created during the course of the study. The images varied in size from approximately A1 to 10 x 7 cm. As my images are

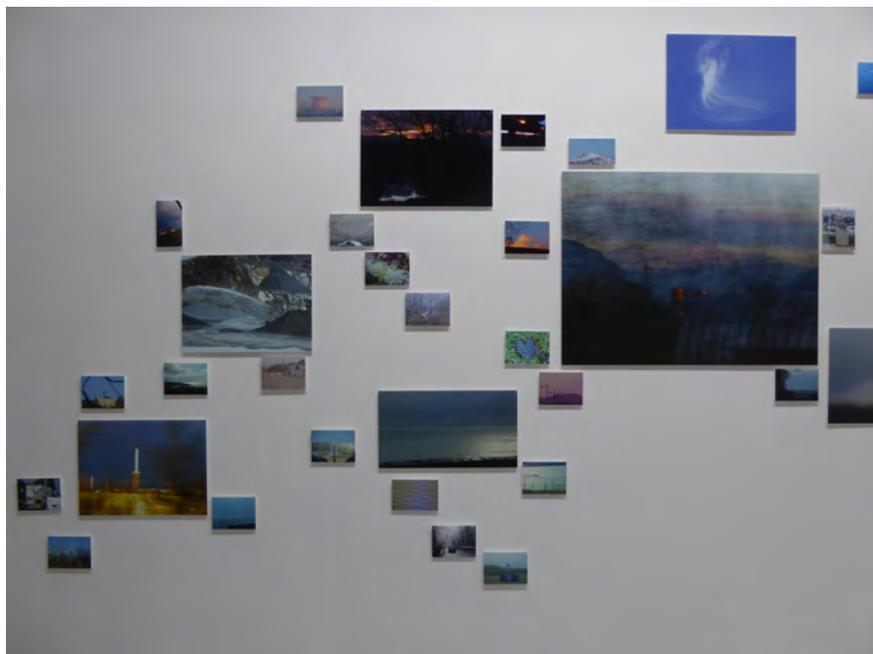
never cropped the exact dimensions of each image was governed by the camera and format used to create the image. By selecting so many images it was my intention to represent the sense I have of there being so much going on in the world at any given moment. It concerns my endless fascination and sense of wonder, there is always so much to see and so much to photograph.

There were five main images, reproduced up to approximately A1 in size, in-filled with a further 55 images printed to approximately A4, with 282 mini images, of approximately 10 x 7 cm, floating around them.

The images were set out to give a strong sense of rhythmic flow to the selection. Adjacent images had echoes of each other, through a juxtaposition of colour, texture, shape or atmosphere within the images, the seemingly diverse subject matter of the images drawing attention to the interconnectedness of the world.

The five central images were selected to represent some of the areas of the everyday that offer opportunities for me to connect with the world. Two were created from a moving car, one with motion blur, the other detailing a more conventional aesthetic, another images was created while out walking in the landscape, one from my window, and one within the confines of the house. These five images were selected to display different aspects of my engagement with photographic seeing.

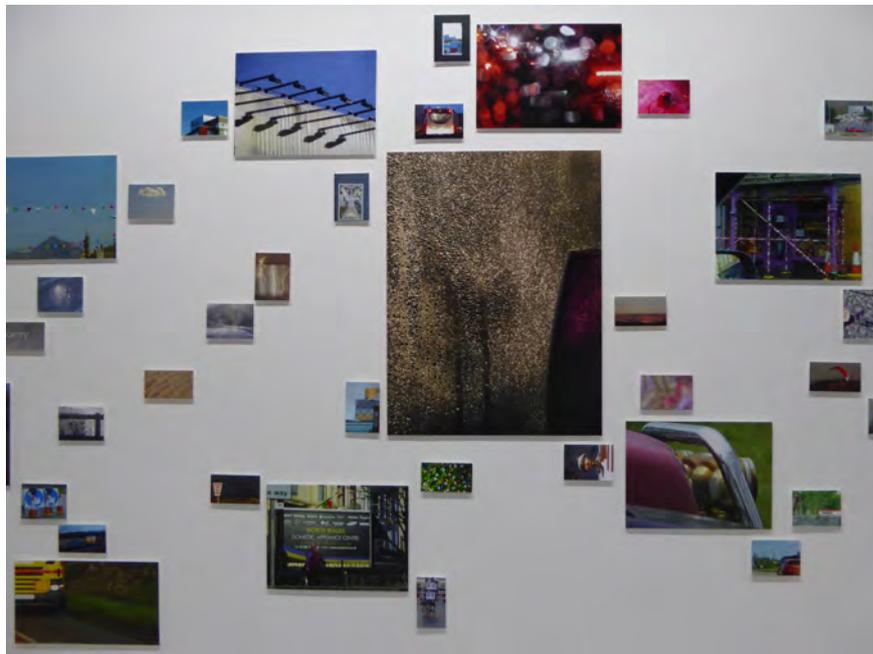
One image was created from a moving car, with an element of motion blur and two metal 'chimneys' glimpsed through the bare trees, against a backdrop of snowy mountains. These two stainless steel tubes glow like burnished copper as the golden light of the setting winter sun catches the polished surface creating an alchemical re-action that turns base metal into gold.



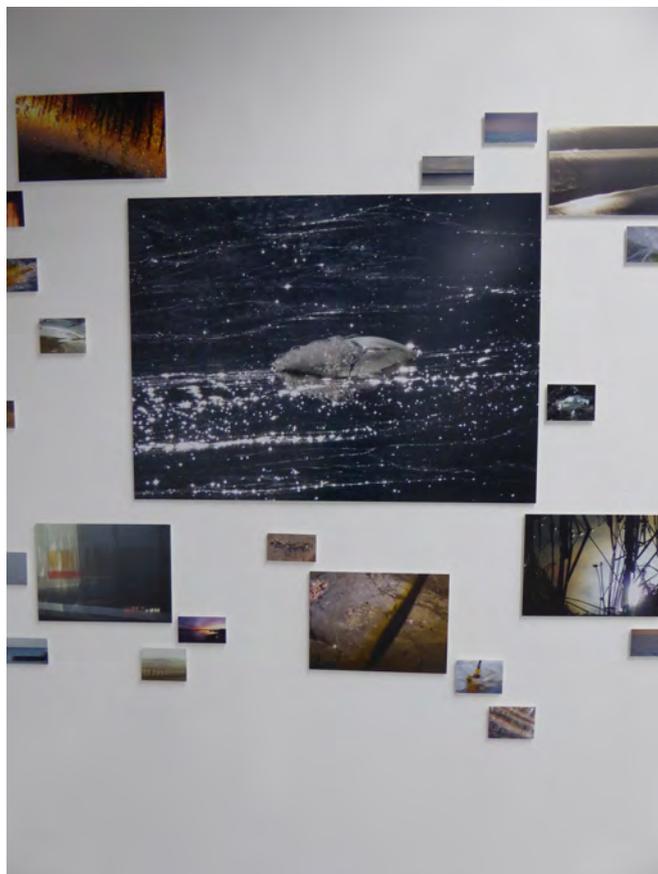
Another of the large images features a glowing section of railway track, again, glimpsed from a moving car. The incandescent track snakes off into the distance, floating through a soft haze of palest green. Because this image concerns the sort of the 'pictorial' subject matter that may be the focus of camera club type competitions, I hesitated about featuring it so prominently. However, had the image been created as a result of a deliberate, premeditated, pre visualized, act, the photographer may have noticed the railway lines and then returned to the scene to wait for the moment when the light was 'right'. My image was created as a result of a spontaneous act. By being 'open' to the possibilities of the everyday I was aware of the light and as we drove past I saw how it was animating the rails and, very, very, rapidly, took a few pictures as we drove over the bridge.



Another of the large images features a vase and a window streaming with condensation. This easily overlooked, uninspiring, scene may hold little interest without the transformative alchemy of light that heightens the colour of the vase and draws attention to the detailed patterns and textural qualities of the condensation. I selected this image because it relates specifically to the days when my health condition prevents me from leaving home. On days when I am housebound, in addition to taking pictures of the outside world from my window, details of more usually overlooked elements of the everyday such as this, can be recognised as worth noticing and recording. This image absolutely concerns the sort of everyday beauty that is available to everyone if they are willing to be 'open' and to engage with the world. As Green puts it 'it is our state of consciousness, the way we look at the world, that determines the experience we have of it' (Green 1987: 144). In the words of Csikszentmihalyi, 'People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can become to being happy' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 2). While there are some days when I am not physically capable of creating images, however this image concerns my commitment to controlling my 'inner experience', the way that I 'look at the world' in order to determine the quality of my life as much as I possibly can.



The large image of the goose feather floating on a pool of scum also concerns being open to really connecting with the world in order to determine the quality of my life. The image was created while walking round our property with the dogs, and it illustrates the importance of having a camera available at all times. It was one of those moments when, as Dorothea Lange explains, 'I knew I was looking at something. You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you can do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you' (Haworth-Booth 1983: 124). The elements are perfectly aligned. The way that the light catches the water and the tension across the surface of the liquid which holds the delicate feather almost levitating on the pattern created by the slick of scum. The image perfectly captures the subtle colours and atmosphere of the morning.



The large image of Ifor's barn is a prime example of the transformative alchemy of light. I have photographed this structure from my window many times in varying light and weather conditions. In flat light the barn is constructed of dark green painted metal, however in differing light it takes on a whole range of shimmering greens and silvers. In this image it glows, jewel-like, and 'incontrovertibly brilliant' (Adams 1996: 25), animated by the evening light.



The wall mounted printed were built up in sequence around these five large prints. The large prints were hung first, followed by the medium sized prints and finally the mini prints. They were hung to a plan which had been carefully thought through, pre-determined, and pre-photographed to assist the hanging process, prior to leaving home. The sequence of the elements within the images, such as size, colour and atmosphere were carefully orchestrated to achieve a sense of balance and to draw attention to the echoes of each print in

those that surrounded it. The aim of exhibiting the work in this way was to draw in and hold the viewer's attention, allowing them time to consider the images and to make the connections that I have highlighted by hanging the work in this way.



## BOOKS

The round white table set in the middle of the area surrounded by the prints was deliberately selected for its neutrality. This table held two books of images. There were chairs at the table to facilitate the viewer in taking time to explore the images contained within the books.



The books themselves are 'precious' and tactile objects that invite the viewer to engage with the images and study them at their own pace. This is in direct contrast to my experience of the sudden glimpses of alignments within the everyday world that have resulted in the images. There is minimal text within the books. The images form the heart of the books; text is not required.



One of the books is entitled 'Cherish' because the images describe the 'tenderness' of my encounters (Waldie 2005: 190) with the 'aesthetic smile' (Hillman 1998: 267-268) of everyday 'commonplace beauties' (Coniff 1993: 30) which deserve to be cherished. The other is entitled 'Book of Hours' which references the medieval practice of carrying a 'book of hours' as a highly prized devotional object, a spiritual tool to direct the owner to prayer throughout the months, days and hours of life. The glowing, highly detailed and brightly coloured illuminated manuscript which comprises a medieval 'book of hours' often depicts scenes from everyday life throughout the changing seasons. This is not dissimilar in concept from the purpose of my images which visually describe the 'outbreaks of intensity' (Highmore 2011: 7) that are part of my everyday life throughout the changing seasons; the months, days and hours of my life. My images also have a devotional dimension, defining my response to, and reverence for, the 'sacred' nature of the 'splendor of the insignificant' (Ranciere in Highmore 2001: 51). As just as Waldie describes in his book *'Holy Land A Suburban Memoir'*, 'the pedestrian and the sacred are both there' (Waldie 2005: 186).

Because of the connection with the medieval 'book of hours' I considered making my Book of Hours small enough to be carried as I understand this to be the purpose of the medieval books, however I wanted to make both of my books substantial, of a size which did not compromised the images and to give a solidity to them. I choose to have as many pages as the suppliers could put into the book while maintaining the quality and weight of the paper. In the case of the Book of Hours this involved a total of 121 pages. Both books are hard backed and both are printed on pearl paper to give a lustrous surface to the images without being highly reflective. The thickness of the paper was also selected to maintain the quality feel of the books, to emphasise that they are not intended as ephemera to be discarded.



Choosing the images to go into, and onto, the books was a highly detailed and time-consuming process. It was not simply a case of selecting one image per page, but also of considering how two images would interact across a double page spread. I wanted to keep to one image per page to establish a rhythm. Also I was keen not to compromise the quality and meaning of an image by running it across the centre fold. Having two images on display opposite each other at the same time sets up a relationship between those two images. As with the wall mounted prints selection of images for the books involved a highly considered process, after initial selection of possible images and considerable editing to refine that selection, images were viewed on screen, then printed out to juxtapose two images against each other. Once the two images per spread had been selected I had to establish which worked best as the left and which the right hand page, this depended on the meaning of the images and the echoes which were set up within the images. Once the series of images had been decided, the sequencing of the selected images was important so that one double page spread lead meaningfully into another. There are no 'right' answers and each combination offered different contexts

to the images. The books could have contained the same images in a different order and the sense and flow of them would have changed. The selection process was arduous, but extremely enjoyable. For me the tactile qualities and interactive nature of the books gives them a preciousness that relates directly to the preciousness of the moments that they contain.



## SLIDESHOW

A large television was positioned at the opposite end of the room to the wall mounted prints and books. There were two comfortable chairs and a low table in front of the television to allow viewers to sit and concentrate on the 1,074 images that made up the slideshow. I decided to present images in the dynamic form of a slideshow, in addition to the more static nature of the prints and books at the other end of the room, as the images themselves are often created in non-static situations, such as from a moving car, or of the fleeting effects of light that can animate inanimate objects. I found it extremely difficult to edit the images down to so few from the thousands I have created during this study. They are not necessarily technically the ‘best’ images, nor

even particular favourites, they were selected on the basis that they offer something new and interesting. The slideshow was set onto a continuous loop to replicate the fact that, for me, the world does not stop, there is always something worth noticing, something that pulls ‘the senses into alert’ (Stewart 2011: 445). Each image lasted for two seconds requiring the viewer to participate, to pay attention and to concentrate in order to catch a glimpse of each image in the way that I pay attention to the momentary glimpses I catch and record within the world. The fact that the images were on a continuous loop also relates to the concept that, for me, the world does not stop, the visual stimulation encountered within the world is endless.



I had considered incorporating a ‘soundtrack’ to accompany the slideshow. I tried several different ideas, including Gregorio Allegri’s wonderful Miserere to further link with the reverential aspects of these images. In complete contrast I also commissioned a ‘soundscape’ from the University Music Department. Nothing was right. Silence. When I am creating images I concentrate so hard, entering so deeply into a state of flow, that I am not aware of external forces, or sounds, my ‘attention is completely absorbed by the activity. There is no psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 53). To replicate this state I decided that the

slideshow should simply be a visual presentation as this most accurately describes my experience of creating images at ‘the still point of the turning world’ (Eliot 1982: 175).



## PAPER PRINTS

Scattered around the television and chairs and cascading from the low table were numerous mini images printed onto flimsy, disposable, multi-purpose printer paper. These images were printed onto poor quality paper to physically represent the sheer volume of images involved in the editing process. Although it would not have been possible given the constraints of the presentation, to represent each image I have created during this study I decided to utilize some of the images that had been considered during the editing process. The placement of images was completely random. I knew that I wanted them to be around the slideshow. The slideshow gives fleeting glimpses of individual images in succession, while the paper prints describes the volume of images all at once. I slightly bent and curled each image so that they did not stick

together, and then I simply threw them up high into the air and left them where they fell, turning all images to face upwards.



## CONCLUSION

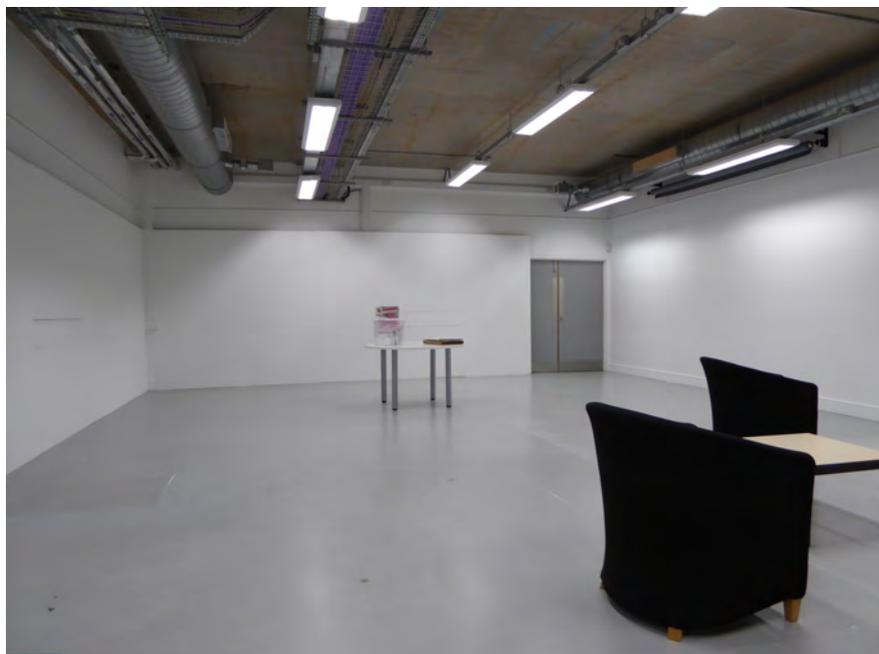
When the visual research was disseminated in these different formats I felt satisfied with the overall effect as a representation of the varying aspects of my image making in the context of this study. I consider that I achieved my aim of creating a jewel box from a drab uninspiring room. Much of the work I had created fell by the wayside during the intensive editing process, however this presentation successfully represented the distillation of my ideas. I hope that the viewers gained a sense of connection with my experience of the world as a result of interacting with the images and that maybe their world will have been enriched because of the experience.

Due to the feedback I received from people who viewed the work in this context I believe that the exhibition fulfilled the aims I had set out to achieve. Because, as Weber suggests, 'The discourse of academy is all about persuading others to see what we see' (Weber, in Knowles and Cole (2008: 42), I hope

that by sharing my experience of the world I have stirred 'the heart' (Hillman 1998: 274) of the viewers. Hopefully some of the images will have resonated with the viewers. Maybe the experience has led to at least an element of 'joy' and 'awakening' (Csikzentmihalyi and Csikzentmihalyi 1998: 383), possibly generating a new awareness and appreciation of the familiar within the viewers, and giving rise to a new way of viewing the world, to a new understanding of the world and to new knowledge about the world.



‘The surface glittered out of heart of light...  
...Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.’  
(Eliot 1982: 172)



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