

**Where Do I Begin? an examination of memory through the environment**

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## Abstract

This MFA thesis discusses the literary, photographic, and philosophical artists that influenced the creative work culminating in the three-volume artist book *The Kibbutz of Desire*. The visual work, *The Kibbutz of Desire*, combines photography, creative nonfiction prose, and bookmaking as a means of exploring environmental aspects triggering memory and experiences of time. The written thesis discusses the artistic influences, visual and literary, and the process that culminated in the creation of the books.

## Keywords

photography, color, slide film, negatives, film, square format, 6x6, Hasselblad, narrative, film, photographs, inkjet, pigment, Alec Soth, Alejandro Cartagena, Julio Cortazar, Saul Leiter, Walter Benjamin, Gaston Bachelard, Rinko Kawauchi, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, non-place, non-space, kibbutz, desire, street photography, cityscape, landscape, environment, environmental, biker, Hell's Angels, The Last Resort Bar, creative nonfiction, book, artist book, bookmaking, natural light, available light, literary, prose, poetic, tanka.

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# Where do I begin?

an examination of memory through the environment



James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire*

You must have a little patience. I have undertaken, you see, to write not only my life, but my opinions also; hoping and expecting that your knowledge of my character, and of what kind of a mortal I am, by the one, would give you a better relish of the other: As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship...Therefore, my dear friend and companion...if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road, — or should sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along, — don't fly off, — but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside; — and as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing, — only keep you temper.

— Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

You are walking down the street feeling the cool wintry breeze sink through the too thin jacket you chose this morning when you left the house before checking the weather report which would've prepared you for the frigid rain arriving around one in the afternoon and walking along the sidewalk, looking ahead, hoping that guy at the corner does not ask you for the fifteenth time if you'd like to buy one of his American flags to help support veterans, wondering if he had a home, a job, was on drugs, ever had a regular job, would just leave you alone finally remembering he has previously asked you fifteen times to buy a flag receiving a negative each previous time; defending yourself, mentally projecting a barrier so everyone will simply leave you alone, if for only this walk today, but then what would that corner be without this occurrence?

The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object... which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.

– Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

The ‘kibbutz of desire,’ a completely malleable notion, a semi-indiscernible phrase, surrounds the basic premise of finding the community for which I yearn, feeling secure and supported within it, without forgoing individuality. Amending this premise, I add the notion of accepting my environment in its totality including the negative attributes, physical and otherwise, rather than fighting, complaining, and ridiculing those attributes, I accept them, while reimagining the space or redefining the space’s poetics, these elements that provide identity, history, and personality. Why limit poetics to the literary or any other epistemology? Apply it to the immediate surroundings, everyday, instead of leaving it in one sole realm, allow the self to oscillate, to be approachable and receptive; then how would you redefine yourself relative to the spaces you regularly occupy, what would they show you, what would you add to these spaces? This is not about knowing or realizing what you have, it is attempt to comprehend what you’ll never be able to verbalize with complete assurance in our daily epiphanic experiences, or as Wordsworth referred to them, “spots of time.”

My this work is shaped by a multitude of influences, philosophy, literature, creative nonfiction, consciousness-based hip-hop, Japanese literature, Tanka & Haiku, and personal experience and epiphanies, but then most people can speak that way about their work. This written thesis contains substantial quotes from artists and authors that were influential and inspirational during my research. I did not want the impact of the authors’ original thoughts to be lessened by my summarizations. Ultimately,



Rinko Kawauchi, *Utatane*

at its most basic, this work is about personal and artistic growth. It utilizes the public environment as compositional material to analyze the conditions that influence daily life and simultaneously manipulate the manner in which memories affect human interaction and relationships.

The world is getting too small to stand in one place.

– Brother Ali, *Us*

Overall, photographers exploring narratives within the book format, Saul Leiter, Alec Soth, Alejandro Cartegena, and Rinko Kawauchi, have been important inspirations. The work of Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi has been significantly influential on my photographic identity. Specifically, Kawauchi's subject matter and editing style within the book format have been a guiding force as I examine my work. She has a personal style that frames seemingly mundane subject matter into an intimate moment. Through her lens, her eye, her way of seeing and framing, life becomes a bit more interesting, brighter. Strung together, these moments become a story or personal conversation shared by the photographer with the viewer. Fragmentation, ambiguity, and tangential relation were used as directives for the acquisition of visual material leading to a situation designed for conversation.

Similar to Kawauchi, Cartegena and Soth, utilize photographs that at first glance appearing mundane and ambiguous, however, once compounded with other more informative photographs and effective editing, they form a thoughtful narrative. Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and Cartegena's *Suburbia Mexicana* are examples of works that embrace the evidentiary nature of the photographs to mix together somewhat disparate images that compound into a strong narrative to examine contemporary human existence within a defined physical environment; Soth travels along the Mississippi River while Cartegena examines his home of Monterrey, Mexico.

An early progenitor to this method is Saul Leiter. At the time, Leiter, along with and preceding William Eggleston, who helped pioneer the use



Alejandro Cartegena, *Suburbia Mexicana: Lost Rivers*



Alec Soth, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*



of color slide and negative film in the fine art world. First beginning his career as a painter, Leiter moved to photography in the late 1940s and early 1950s with his main focus seeming to be color itself. His photographs were previsualized and composed with a strong and purposeful intent utilizing color and form as the dominant subject. Inescapable is the camera's nature to capture the world, as it was in front of the camera, the moment the shutter was opened instantaneously providing evidence of a time while removing it; Leiter's photographs encapsulate a period of cultural and personal history. The elements within his photographs speak of the period within which the photographs snatched time and the personal way in which Leiter examined the world through his camera.

I spent a great deal of my life being ignored. I was always very happy that way. Being ignored is a great privilege. That is how I think I learnt to see what others do not see and to react to situations differently. I simply looked at the world, not really prepared for anything.

– Saul Leiter

There are so many diverging angles and perspectives it is easy to run in circles. Information abounds and is a gluttonous distraction. But it is about seeing that these circles are not really circles but spirals, like Yeats' gyres. These spirals comprised of moments composing days compounding until a symphony that is a life that progresses around in this spiraling way just above the previous spiral as experience stacks upon itself repeating similarly with compounding variations. My textual narrative relates the memories experienced during childhood while the visual narrative approximates the mental state of the child experienced now remembered as an adult. The combination is a means of expressing the spiraling of thoughts and experiences, and the best way to communicate these ideas was through images captured from the daily environment. In some way, they are connected to me whether by daily travel, proximity to home, direct relation to past experiences, or simply visual appeal. They were inspiring thoughts beyond the objective existence at that moment.



Saul Leiter, *Early Color*



Saul Leiter, *Early Color*



James Rotz, *Immure*

Lemons: all freedom, all ego, all vanity, fragrant with scent we can't help but imagine when we look at them, the little pucker in the mouth. And redolent, too, of strut and style. Yet somehow they remain intimate, every single one of them: only lemons, only that lovely, perishable, ordinary thing, held to scrutiny's light, fixed in a moment of fierce attention. As if here our desire to be unique, unmistakable, and our desire to be of a piece were reconciled. Isn't that it, to be yourself and somehow, to belong? For a moment, held in balance.

– Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*

With this in mind, I took from my environments to collect and create a visual lexicon complimented by a written narration, and together this formed the three books that are my thesis project. I captured images from the cityscapes of Chicago, Gary and the surrounding Northwest Indiana area, Bloomington, Indiana, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Detroit. These areas are all places that I have lived, and therefore they have been the context for my life and the perfect choice to extract visual imagery. The photographs that compose this project range across a variety of visual tropes with the primary goal of using them to create a self-reflexive examination through the exploration of environment and memory. The books and their stories are the result and the means to converse with you. Rather than relying solely on visual material for the story, a verbal narration works as a compliment to the photographs offering more information for the viewer to use for interpretation. Along with the conversation between artist and viewer, a secondary goal is to challenge the viewer's notion of environment and the potential it offers during daily travels.

I argue that it is impossible and negligent to remain neutral on the evolution of the contemporary world and our ever-growing global society. While global problems exist on a scale that individuals cannot make a significant difference, together, large numbers of people altering their daily behavior will create grand effects. Within this notion is where I place my work along with other similar artistic endeavors that are meant as

inspiration for conversations regarding larger issues.

Private individual time has become scarcer as days are filled with tasks and information to be sifted. This work is a creation that reflects an attempt at accepting life around me; it is also a discussion about possibilities. And one of the most important means of change is the ability to pause, contemplate, and reimagine. I formed the books, which constitute my MFA thesis, with this intent in mind. Through thoughtful editing, careful photographing, and time for the work to evolve, the visual and verbal narration grew together. The work is also about honesty and openness, equally necessary as a means for change. And this change needs to happen through conversation, and honest conversation arises through situations that are welcoming and entrancing.

For this conversation, I have chosen to use the attributes of forms, color, balanced organization, and simplicity. It is not necessary for an image to be ugly to speak of ugliness. In order to speak about childhood abuse, an image does not need to blatantly show the results of abuse. It needs to house and express emotion. Beauty and ambiguity are allowable. Why must life and our surroundings be accepted merely for what is already there? Why not push for more? Why not push for more through beauty as a means of entrapment and engagement? Beauty and emotion and narration will naturally coalesce into a conversation. Then from here change is possible.

Taking from my environments elements that can be seen as ugly and distracting, I utilized graffiti and advertisement as a useful trope to prod viewers with obvious signifiers then influencing the next spread, image, or accompanying text while simultaneously altering the intent of what was found in my environment. The original purposes of the found imagery I subverted for personal examination and as clues for interpreting the presented material.

The judgment regarding conversation in our Society is usually two-fold: we don't value it and we're not good at it. "If it has no value," complained



James Rotz, *Abattoir*

Wordsworth, “good, lively talk is often contemptuously dismissed as talking for talking’s sake.” As to our skills, Tibor Scitovsky [an American economist] noted that our gambit for a chat is “halfhearted and...we have failed to develop the locale and the facilities for idle talk. We lack the stuff of which conversations are made.” In our low estimation of idle talk, we Americans have correctly assessed the worth of much of what we hear. It is witless, trite, self-centered, and unreflective.

– Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*

Together the text and images are their own conversation; together they communicate a grander complexity to the viewer. The books become a world composed of memories printed photographically and textually. Similar to Saul Leiter and Rinko Kawauchi, I am using my environment through the lens of color, light, and composition to create a narrative.

I’m noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows. ... It’s an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind – what Emerson called “alienated majesty.”

– Jerry Saltz, “Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out,” *New Yorker Magazine*, 27 May 2010

With this body of work, I embraced beauty as I found it whether due to form, color, or light. Discovered through editing, found textual elements within photographs arose as a common photographic motif. The use of this visual component assisted in the decision to include a written personal narrative along with the visual elements. The purpose of the written is to complement the photographs and to provide hints for the viewer for possible interpretations of the visual elements. The stitching together



James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire*



Justin James Reed, *New Cities*

of the literary and the photographic is to communicate in a manner more thorough than the two forms can separately. This is a way to move beyond the urban anxiety communicated in contemporary photography as germinated by the works of Walker Evans and Robert Frank and continued by Brian Ulrich and Justin James Reed.

I must admit that I am not a member of the ugly school. I have a great regard for certain notions of beauty even though to some it is an old fashioned idea. Some photographers think that by taking pictures of human misery, they are addressing a serious problem. I do not think that misery is more profound than happiness.

– Saul Leiter

As the narrative aspect of my work developed, my research into narrative techniques increased. In the early stages of this project, I looked to authors like William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau who similarly examined local environments for inspiration. And from these progenitors, I began examining the creative nonfiction works of Annie Dillard and Joan Didion. Both were inspirational for how they utilize the world around them simultaneously for self-examination and for a deeper understanding of society in general. I then created a work that is a conversation with their readers rather than talking to and/or down to them.

Alongside these English language readings, I delved into Chinese and Japanese authors that work with smaller spaces for their ideas. An initial exploration led to Tanka, a Japanese poetic form with each poem and/or stanza consisting of 31 syllables split between 5 lines with a 5-7-5-7-7 format for each. Mokichi Saito's Tanka writings were inspirational for his sequencing of Tankas forming longer songs approximating short stories. Similar to Saito, the short stories of Pu Songling from *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* were inspirational for the way he used his short tales, most no longer than two pages, examining the life of commoners through stories of the fantastic to examine society and government. The novelist Yasunari



James Rotz, *Abattoir*

Kawabata was inspirational for his framing techniques. Enveloping his core ideas with specific simple outward situations; for *Thousand Cranes* the tea ceremony, *Master of Go* a semi-fictional recounting of an important match, *The Sound of the Mountain* following the aging of a family's patriarch with the novels examining aspects of cultural changes throughout Japan leading up to and after World War II. Kawabata uses sparse prose densely composed to effectively explore cultural and societal changes.

The final two authors that I researched and referenced, Julio Cortazar and Fernando Pessoa, were influential due to their narrative works and also the manner in which their books were self-reflexive, examining aspects of their personal character through the novel's characters who are examining themselves and those around them as a means of understanding self and society.

For me humanity is one vast decorative motif, existing through one's eyes and ears and through psychological emotion. I demand nothing more from life than to be a spectator of it. I demand nothing more from myself than to be a spectator of life.

I'm like a being from another existence who passes, endlessly curious, through this one to which I am in every way alien. A sheet of glass stands between it and me. I always try to keep that glass as clean as possible so I can examine this other existence without smudges or smears spoiling my view; but I choose to keep that glass between us.

– Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

I am attempting to piece together theory as I do photographs. The ultimate end is to add to a grand collective conversation, history and memory, that threads through life as people live, evolve over the short- and long-term along the way towards death as the remnants of our memory is all that we leave to those remaining. As with photography, I am attempting to create a manipulated version of the world in which I exist and present it in a relatable manner through the mixing of contradictions and compliments



James Rotz, *Immure*

housed in my photographs, words, and artist books. In the same vain as my books, I have utilized inspirational quotes from authors that have influenced this artistic endeavor. My objective has been to apply the lessons learned and the knowledge gained through my research. The insights gained are displayed through the material in this written thesis and my books.

Intimacy, says the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, is the highest value. I resist this statement at first. What about artistic achievement, or moral courage, or heroism, or altruistic acts, or work in the cause of social change? What about wealth or accomplishment? And yet something about it rings true, finally—that what we want is to be brought into relation, to be inside, within. Perhaps it's true that nothing matters more to us than that.

The question is not only of preserving a flesh which ought to “provide the materiality that supports both vision and thought” but of entering an other relation between flesh, vision, and thought. That is to say of reaching a fleshy or carnal seeing and thinking, a way of seeing and thinking which obeys an other logic than the traditional Western logic.

– Luce Irigaray, *To paint the invisible*, internal quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Where do I begin? Perhaps, the vague moment in childhood when I knew I wanted to be an artist. Or the day, when my oldest son, then six months, was asleep on my chest in the baby Bjorn carrier as we walked down Kirkwood Avenue in Bloomington, that day deciding graduate school to study literature was not the correct choice, but beginning my second undergraduate degree, this time in art, would be the correct path. I could start on the day I received the phone call from my future ex-wife informing me that I was to be a father for the first of my 3 boys. Perhaps the day I realized my mother forwent a free ride in art school at the Art Institute of Chicago due to my father's imprisonment and her pregnancy with me. I felt the struggles of my parents placed squarely on my shoulders strengthening the idea that I was not an opportunity but an obligation. Perhaps that is the



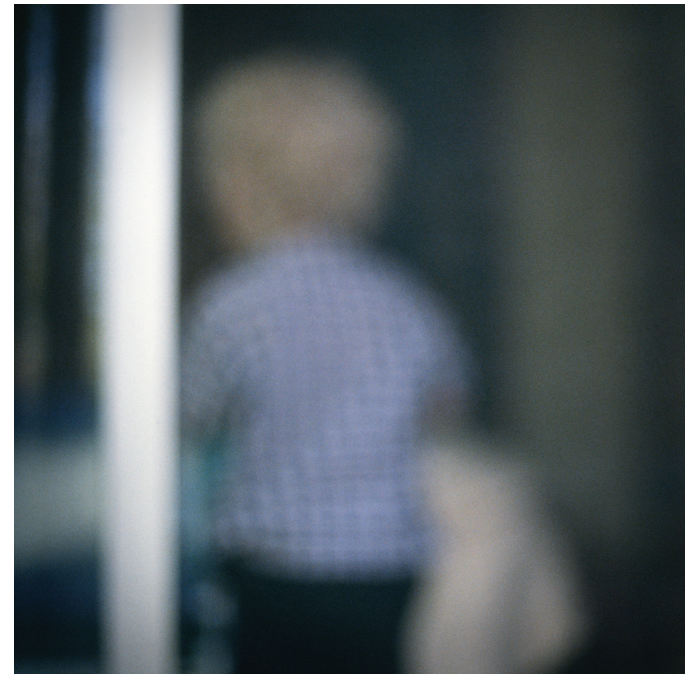
James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire*

correct analogy that shapes my life, the child obligation being dragged from bar to bar throughout their life. The nuisance trained to be seen and not heard.

What is laid aside in the unconscious memory...in which the things that barely touch us succeed in carving an impression, also, “This enormous labor undertaken is the shadows comes to light in dreams thoughts, decisions, and above all at moments of crisis...”

– Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

I have one story that encapsulates fairly well the absurdity of my childhood. Around kindergarten, my parents, as far as I can remember, left me with no explanation or farewell, to live in Florida while I remained in Indiana with my grandparents. I have asked of my mother why they chose this path, but I have never received a forthright, honest response. I would periodically see them over the next four years, as my grandparents would drive us to visit them in Florida. After four years of living with my grandparents, I was left to my parents, as unceremoniously as they originally left me. Upon my arrival, I was essentially pushed into my parent’s home, walking through this strange place, finding my father asleep on the bed, and barely waking to greet me. Perhaps, my memory has clouded that day, but based on all my other experiences, I doubt my recollection is far off. I don’t remember relief or happiness only that this was my new strange existence as I was now dragged from bar to bar somehow surviving my father drunkenly driving home at two or three in the morning and then going to school early in the day. The bar they frequented the most was “The Last Resort” and as the name implies, it was never the first choice for most people. The clientele were white, racist bikers of various motorcycle gang affiliations, mostly Hells Angels, thieves, murderers, drug dealers, and a range of alcoholics, those that were full-time alcoholics “camping” out back in buses to those that drank to the point of blood poisoning only on the weekend. The back area behind the bar was for the “buses,” the fire pit,



James Rotz, *Immure*



and the “hanging tree.” The hanging tree was for the biker who ignorantly rode a motorcycle to the bar that was not a Harley-Davidson. For those unfortunate riders, their “rice rocket” was forever hung from that tree to slowly rot. I had the unique experience of being the only child floating around this establishment at all hours.

...these days, surely, it was in these crowded places where...itineraries converged for a moment, unaware of one another certain of the waste lands, the yards and building sites, the station platforms and waiting rooms where travelers break step, of all the chance meeting places where fugitive feelings occur of the possibility of continuing adventure, the feeling that all there is to do is to “see what happens.”

– Marc Auge, *Non-Places: an Introduction to Supermodernity*

Later in life after viewing the movie *Monster*, in which Charlize Theron won an Oscar for her performance, where the filming took place at the Last Resort, I discovered that I often spent nights shooting pool and sitting at the bar that Ailen Wuornos frequented. She is viewed as the first woman serial killer in the US and the first woman executed in Florida. Unfortunately, she was seen primarily as a killer rather than as a woman suffering from her childhood abuses and attacked and abused by her male clients. This and other stories from my nights at the Last Resort have shaped my perception of the world forming quite an idiosyncratic lens.

Home was where hope did not exist. It was learning to survive in situations most adults neither see nor experience. Existence was shaped by my father’s imaginative predilections, by the desire to live outside the system, to allow emotion and whims decide our fate. My mother’s notion of life was to exist for him to support his desires at expense of the complete erosion of her being. There was hope at various times, but in each case, she decided to return to his arms and the façade of security he offered with his bravado. She did not believe enough in herself to survive even though happiness was truly know during the times she excommunicated us from his determination.



James Rotz, *Immure*



James Rotz, *Thoughts*

How many numerous lives, stories, contain an element of childhood neglect and/or abuse? Every weekend with them I knew children existing with a similar if not worse situation. The memories of kids secretly sexually assaulted by their fathers. The abuse they and their mothers suffered. Now I have no notion of the existence they created post childhood. I hope they rose up to some level of normalcy. The bits I have learned through my parents are that their existence is nothing but a continuation of their family history. Recycling the past and the abuse continuously. My mother was right when I was told, "It could be worse. At least you have food, shelter, and clothing." Those words resolved her guilty conscience, but it did nothing for me.

The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object...which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.

– Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

Eight years into fatherhood and marriage, I arrive at her office with my story and the response is, "I cannot believe you are here." Did she mean merely alive? I still do not understand that phrase, nor have I ever asked for a clarification as this phrase has taken hold to reshape my perception. It is a powerful phrase underscoring the determination to simply exist claiming the opportunities available. It is in complete opposition to my upbringing with the phrase's allowance for and embracing of hope.

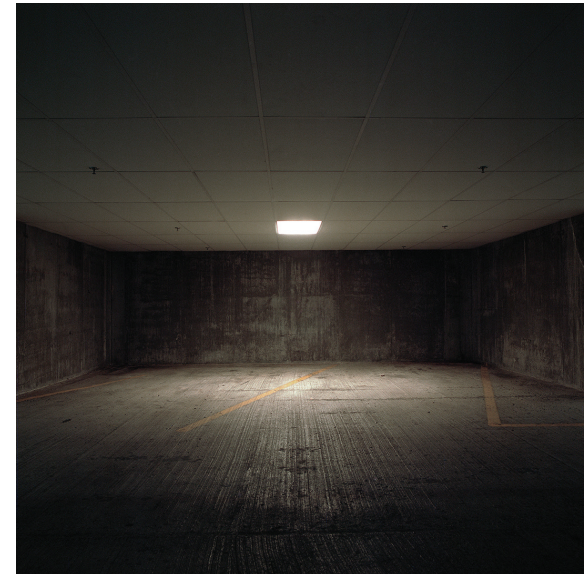
The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it lie the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lighting rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

– Italo Calvino, *Invisible cities*

My first attempt at putting my memories and images together was a project that explored the arrangement of photographs to form triptychs with bits of written narratives inked onto the combined images constituting triptychs. The problems encountered in the project dealt with the format and the placement of the text on top of the imagery. The triptychs range in size on the longest edge from 3 to 6 feet. The scale of the work functioned in opposition to the intimacy of the subject matter instead of complementing it. At this point, I took a break from the work to move onto different subject matter and to allow time to ruminate on the functioning and significance of this exploration of memory through the combination of text and imagery.

Following the series of triptychs was a body of images examining parking garages, this being my first conscious and informed exploration of non-space and alienation within a modern building type. The original premise was exploring the space as an underutilized structure existing as a hub within the city network of streets and highways, and then metaphorically using the images to reflect the aspirations of the entire system relating to culture and society in the United States. The space is a place that is recognized, passed through, and when it is addressed beyond its utilitarian function it is viewed as a place to be wary of danger.

From this point where the analysis of the parking garage work stayed within the framework boundaries of alienation, temporality (passed through), and danger, I began questioning my involvement in the work. How to describe my interest in this project and structure beyond these basic quotidian elements? Why did I seek out environments that encompass those ideas of alienation, temporality, and danger? The ultimate answer circled around to my being the one that continually sought these environments, especially at night and in the early morning hours. From here, I quickly realized the connection to my childhood. An important transition point, the overlap of when I existed as the only kid playing in a biker bar until 3am as the adults carried on with their lives; now, I silently explore cities at night finding scenes to photograph.



James Rotz, *Parking*

Something of our poor, brief childhood is in it, something of lost happiness which can never be found again, but also something of active present-day life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet real and unquenchable.

– Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

By taking a step back, similarities in purpose and intent arose between the parking garages and the triptych series. The imagery is both literally and figuratively reflected back towards myself intoning the idea of a self-portrait, the interior structured mirrored memories and the resulting emptiness was their effect. Now the problem was to better understand how the environmental photographs were reflective of my internal conversations.

How to find my self now with an ex-wife after 10 years of marriage and 3 beautiful boys? My photographic and narrative work is a documentation of an awakening from a 25-year dream that I refer to as an “empty interval.” My childhood was spent being as invisible as possible to not incur the wrath of my caregivers, specifically connoting my relationship with my parents and grandparents. The result of this coping strategy allowed for limited physical abuse, room for massive amounts of psychological abuse, and an adult not quite ready to operate in the world while being surprisingly mentally healthy given the abuse endured. Now finally moving beyond this empty interval as an adult and father and exiting my first marriage, this imagery is a reflection of the desire for a healthier mental state before knowing where the work and I were headed. It is a biographical representation, a creative nonfiction narrative, reflecting my path from childhood into adulthood alluding to the coping strategy used in childhood, now a detriment, a deterrent to participating in the environment and with people, a deterrent to being a healthy person and father.

The functionality of my artist book, my thesis work, is three-fold. The book is a conversation with myself, a record of this time period in my life, and an attempt at a conversation with the viewer. With most photographic-based artist books, the imagery is the sole method used to discuss the



James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire*

artist's inspiration and intent. This will be occasionally supplemented by an interpretive text of the imagery by a curator, critic, or literary artist, basically, any wordsmith will speak about the work rather than the artist. My purpose with including a personal written narrative is to be forthright rather than circumspect concerning the metaphorical meaning of my images and their sequencing, while leaving just enough interpretive space for the viewer to add their personal thoughts and memories and/or relate to the story. I did not want to directly address issues of child abuse in a journalistic or documentary approach. Images recording physical abuse would create too much of an emotional response in which the viewer could only relate with sympathy for the child and disgust for his/her abuser. My book is an attempt to examine the long lasting mental effects of abuse; it places the viewer in a similar position as the narrator/artist/myself. In effect, the book's purpose is to evoke empathy and an attempt at creating, however temporary, an intimate relationship with the viewer/reader.

Strange that all of a sudden an expression should come up like that, one that has no meaning, a kibbutz of desire, until the third time around it begins to take on some meaning little by little and suddenly the expression doesn't seem so absurd any more, like a sentence such as: "Hope, that lush Palmyra," a completely absurd phrase, a sonorous rumbling of the bowels, while the kibbutz of desire is not absurd at all, it's a way of summing up closed in tight this wandering around from promenade to promenade. Kibbutz; colony, settlement, taking root, the chosen place in which to raise the final tent, where you can walk out into the night and have your face washed up by time, and join up with the world, with the Great Madness, with the Grand Stupidity, lay yourself bare to the crystallization of desire, of the meeting.

– Julio Cortazar, *Hopscotch*

The artist books are framed by three ideas: immure, abattoir, and the kibbutz of desire. Each idea is reflective of a state of mind [consciousness] experienced in which the viewer/reader is exposed to the exploration of the standard perceptions concerning masculinity, sexuality, fatherhood, family, abuse, and intimacy. The text directly explores these ideas while being



James Rotz, *Immure*

supported and complimented by the imagery. The images act as an agent, an active entity, housing memory, history, and physical evidence of a moment, of time, to express the intangible aspects, the mental state surrounding the words, and the ideas expressed within this creative nonfiction narrative.

In her book, *The Art of Fact*, Barbara Lounsberry offers four characteristics of creative nonfiction. The first is “Documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to ‘invented’ from the writer’s mind.” Second is exhaustive research allowing the writer/artist to describe “novel perspectives on their subjects” and “also permits them to establish the credibility of their narratives through verifiable references in their texts.” The third is “the scene” in which the writer brings the world to life rather than merely documenting it in a journalistic manner. Fourth is “Fine writing: a literary prose style.” While the text within my books does not quite fit the qualification of “literary prose style,” the writing is neither completely poetic, and fits readily in a nebulous zone between poetic and prosaic. Therefore, with the ideas explored, this work fits just enough within the definition of creative nonfiction as a person fits just enough under an umbrella to remain protected.

My thesis project falls inline with a perception provided by Joan Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, “I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead.” My book is an attempt to bury my childhood, that aspect of me that is dead; it represents the absence of what I never had and I am desperately and determinedly giving my boys. Mine is gone. It is finished, positive or negative, it has molded the person I am today. It is now my responsibility to push forward for my self and for my boys to demonstrate what it means to be a caring individual, to demonstrate that masculinity is much more than what will be displayed by others, and the need to remain confident in the personal choices they make as long as the choices are healthy and do not damage their health and safety of those around them.

Ah, there is no more painful longing than the long for things that never were!



James Rotz, *Immure*

What I feel when I think of the past I lived in real time, when I weep over the corpse of my lost childhood...even this does not compare with the painful, tremulous fervor with which I weep for the unreality of the humble figures who people my dreams, even minor characters I recall having glimpsed only once, by chance, in my false life, as they turned a corner in my imaginary scenario, entering a door on a street I had walked along during that dream

– Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

The bulk of my book's content is imagery based on the notions of memory, sensation, and mental immurement as way of coping. The details of my childhood can never be fully recreated visually or through a written narrative. All forms of communication will never ever truly place the viewer in my position. I use creative nonfiction as my guide to piece together enough information to convey my childhood feelings of loneliness and isolation. I recognize the limitations of photography and the limitations of my writing, but in combining the two I arrive at an output that exceeds what I could do with both art forms individually to place the viewer in my world. Each book utilizes a particular framing as a guide.

The first book, *Immure*, explores the idea of mental immurement, a mental barricade, as a protective measure, which is now problematic as an adult and a father. I exist in this temporal state outside of time secluded in a secure area of non-presence housed by non-space. Where and what is home? This is a constant question defining an area of security unknown throughout the majority of my life as I attempt to circumnavigate what is now an obstacle to raise my boys promoting their sense of safety, security, and confidence. I cannot fake what I do not possess, and my childhood device for coping has created social and communicative limitations especially when trying to exude the person I want to be and I want my boys to be better than. I cannot pretend in front of them when they see everything that I never take notice of; instead, I learn with them. It is a bit of me guiding them while they help to keep me honest as I respect their view of me as a person and father. A new definition of fatherhood unlike the one I knew — “Do as I say, not as I do.”



James Rotz, *Immure*



James Rotz, *Abattoir*

The second book, *Abattoir*, explores my childhood example of masculinity, a biker in the Hell's Angel sense of the word. He was a classic alpha male character. Tattoos adorned his body. A black t-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots composed the daily outfit unless he was in court. Limited intimate verbal communication between father and son was the norm. Violence, anger, outrage, disgust, threats, and fear were the tools. Everything I create and do is in the service of countering those influential aspects of childhood. In this sense, childhood was similar to an abattoir, a slaughterhouse, that period, childhood, which is normally a base of experiences leading up to adulthood, was strangled by the abuses experienced.

The third book, *Kibbutz of Desire*, is closely related to the quote from Julio Cortazar: "the chosen place in which to raise the final tent, where you can walk out into the night and have your face washed up by time, and join up with the world, with the Great Madness, with the Grand Stupidity, lay yourself bare to the crystallization of desire, of the meeting." This book embodies my path, exiting parental influence, individuating a self, becoming a parent, and along the way is the search for family, for place, and for peace.

The useless is beautiful because it is less real than the useful, which enjoys a continuing and lasting existence; while the marvelously useless, the gloriously infinitesimal remains where it is, never goes beyond being what it is, and lives free and independent. The useless and the futile create intervals of humble static in our real lives. The mere insignificant existence of a pin stuck in a piece of ribbon provokes in my soul all manner of dreams and wondrous delights! I pity those who do not recognize the importance of such things!

– Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

My photographs examine the presence of absence as created in and around areas of non-place or nonspace. I am fascinated by the idea



of literal and figurative nonspace. I am interested in using the camera to eliminate a sense of time and a specific place. With this intent and technique, the physical environment captured on film is rendered for a new purpose opening it to wider interpretation and metaphorical manipulation. The intent is skewing the images for narrative purposes while expanding the viewer's acceptance of reality – what is pictured is not the entire content of the image. Each photograph acts like a tiny mental prick sparking the viewer to question the artistic intent and question what they are viewing. With the combination of imagery and narration, the viewer will take their readings of the material out into their world and renew the process of questioning and reinterpretation of the spaces they pass through daily.

For the display of the project, I leaned towards simplicity as a means of not distracting the viewer from the books and placing him within an environment separate from the gallery, if only in his mind. Three photographs were extracted from the series to be printed at a large scale (framed size: 41"x41"). The framed photographs work as a objects of attraction drawing the viewer towards the books displayed on their stands.

In the gallery situation, the large mural scale images, which envelop one's vision, encourages one to step in closer to view, hold, and read the books. This is the moment where the viewer breaches the physical threshold of the public transitioning into an intimate space. The viewer is encouraged through the large photograph to enter into this intimate space; then holds the book looking down, focusing in on the spreads, the text, the imagery; the viewer is simultaneously ensconced by the large photographs that further enhance the notion of a defined space literally and metaphorically.

The moments and scenes captured on film are meant to highlight the sense of uselessness purposefully. A moment rendered by my exposure of light to film enhancing the beauty of what I've found to be useless nonspace. And because the photo has heightened this uselessness, the scene achieves a possibility overlooked during real time. The time within the photograph exists out of reality while simultaneously enhancing it. The enhanced



James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire* installation view



James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire*

moment via film approaches the reality I lived as a child existing within and outside of my family life as I now embrace this view/vantage point making sense of my current reality, attempting to understand the evolution of these times. A period in which information abundance is pollution distracting the average person's existence from themselves. An existence in which books are read and classes taken in order to meditate on ourselves without distraction because contemporary life is so very distracting. Distracting to the point where conversations continue via texting while driving, a detriment an individual's mortality and those nearby. This overload creates blocks, clutters pathways, so that understanding oneself through experience and memory has become so difficult for so many that what was once abhorred, seeking professional counseling, is now commonplace. Then from what is gained through counseling is funneled through various avenues. Daily lists of positive moments in a day, diaries used to fight our cognitive biases, yoga to return to our bodies, meditation to return to ourselves. This project is an attempt at using the environment and its distractions in order to draw attention and comment on them.

The result is a poetic analysis of my childhood encompassing experiences of abandonment, drug abuse, mental & physical abuse, extreme violence, and other horrific experiences that have shaped my perception of this world and interactions within it. The environment photographed becomes the language, the metaphors, used to explore memory and the lasting effect of these experiences. Barriers, windows, doors, and impediments are used symbolically to connote a mental barrier or state that defines, prevents, and defends the self from everyday interactions. Innocuous and noxious spaces serenely photographed inviting examination while the physical details within the images and the long dark shadows express caution, they encourage trepidation. The light effects ideas of hope and escape, personifying the narrator, simultaneously encouraging the viewer to mentally enter the scene yet remain a safe distance observing the remnants of or imaging possible surreptitious events envired by sullen human artifices defining daily

public spaces.

God created me to be a child and left me to be a child forever. But why did he let life beat me and take away my toys and leave me alone at playtime, to crumple up in feeble hands the blue pinafore streaked with tearstains? Since I cannot live without affection, why was that affection taken from me? Whenever I see a child in the street crying, a child exiled from the others, it hurts me more than the sadness of the child I see in the unsuspected horror of my exhausted heart. I hurt in every inch of my lived life, and the hands crumpling the hem of the pinafore, the mouth twisted by real tears, the weakness and the solitude are all mine, and the laughter of passing adults is like the flame of a match stuck on the sensitive tinder of my own heart.

– Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

This work, the documentation of an awakening from a 25-year dream, is an attempt “to offer access to vanished realms of experience” (Fried 286). This experienced childhood, being seen and not heard, observing the world around me moving about as a ghost with no strong ties to the world. The imagery reflects the mental state of the narrator/photographer reflecting the negotiation of the self within the environment. This individual story reflects upon themes of abuse, neglect, and the designed environment’s effects on interpersonal communication specifically highlighting notions of fear. The work is an admission of powerlessness, over the past which cannot be changed, but by the acknowledgment and the act of reframing memory power transitions from the memory and placed in the artist’s hands for the viewer’s consumption.

The body of work has been a conversation with the past about the present looking towards the future present. It is about Pessoa’s “millimeters of infinitesimal things” communicating with us about our environment and the mystery of life related to the ancient present, ancient because everything when it did exist, existed in the present. By using photographs to examine pauses within time, the books, utilizing a filter, look through the experienced past informing interpretations of the current present.



James Rotz, *Kibbutz of Desire*

This essay is about expressing the path leading up to the books creating an introduction to the creative work while the works, the books, remain to be experience in their own way, ultimately, an intimate conversation with the viewer.

I would like to promise her (Quitana, Didion's daughter) that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins, of rivers, of her great-grandmother's teacups, would like to pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that. I give her a xylophone and a sundress from Madeira, and promise to tell her a funny story.

– Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*



James Rotz, *Abattoir*

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