

# PRESENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of this project, which included many false starts and dead ends, I finally settled on exploring my relationship to, and continued learning of presence. The project itself became more than the final piece; it was also a realization of a transformation that had silently been taking place over the past few years.

My final project is a book of film photographs serving as a representation of my own path to presence, while inviting the viewer to experience the same calmness and peace I found. The book is the final visual record of what I have come to understand as presence, and represents all that I was seeing, feeling, and noticing while taking the photos, processing the film, sequencing the images, and reflecting. I am looking to create an experience for the viewer that invites them into this same state of presence, but also remains with them, and helps them to question both what presence means to them, and also how to find their own presence in everyday life. Presence focuses on the search and understanding of what it means to be truly present. It is a collection of film photographs responding to and acknowledging the location and emotion of the situation at hand, while observing and capturing the stillness and details of moments we are often too distracted to notice.

## CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

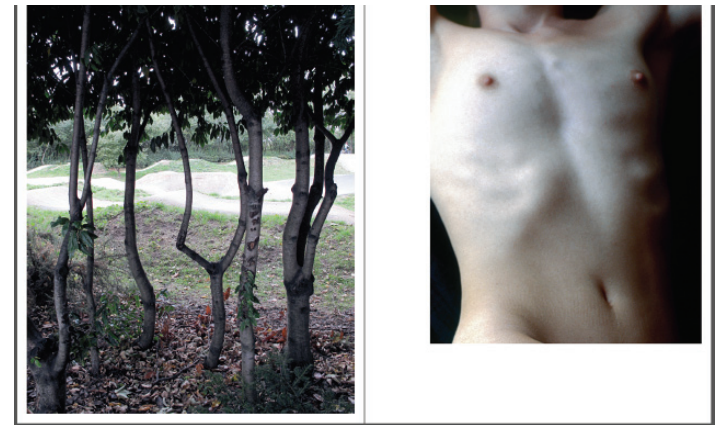
I have always questioned the reason artists create, but more specifically, why I myself was making art. Though there are many reasons, I find the most purpose and relevance in the idea that art is not only expression, but also a necessary part of human nature. According to Ellen Dissanayake, scholar on art and evolutionary ethnology, art and art making is not only “an artifact of society, culture, or even individual psychology”, but also “a universal biological activity”, or in other words, human nature. We make art to react, cope, celebrate, and process. Art builds relationships, and can create interactions that are not possible through words or actions. This is what I want my art to be: something that represents my thinking, process, and experience, while also letting the viewer in to create his or her own definition of presence through connection with my images.

The choice to use film went beyond the novelty of a disappearing medium. In terms of aesthetics, a film photo is simply different from its digital counterpart. All of the most influential photographers in my life shoot on film. Anton Corbijn, Mary Ellen Mark, Ralph Gibson... I had to wonder what I was drawn to and what set their images apart from the rest. Looking beyond composition and subject matter, there is always a richness in depth and color. The blacks and deeper, the colors unique to the film stock and speed. There is also the fact that the results of film cannot be duplicated by a digital image straight from the camera.

It could be argued that edits like of color, exposure, and contrast could be done with post editing programs like Photoshop. This begins to take the skill and process out of photography and getting an image the first time and was something I wanted to get better at. There are also certain elements that film adds to a photograph that cannot be duplicated digitally. Grain is a naturally occurring texture found throughout film photographs, but is often confused for noise, which is only found in digital photographs. Grain is a result of random silver particles or dye clouds on the film. With a higher ISO rating, the particles of metallic silver are larger, allowing for lower light scenarios, but also creating more grain. It is a result of the film and a result that cannot be created within a digital image file. Quantization noise occurs in digital photographs and is essentially uniform. It is also a result of low light. The noise looked nothing like the grain because it is uniform and calculated. Overall, this creates a different, imitated look and feel to the photos because of this one element.

A photo carries a strong sense of always being true, because technically an analog machine made the image without human interference. Today, with the use of digital, it is easier to Photoshop something, creating a less honest representation of the subject. As a society we have become used to expecting a cover or “professional” photo to be altered. The choice to use film was made to also establish a trust with the viewer, because film photographs are nearly impossible to alter convincingly.

The order of images, layout, and composition of the book itself proved to be not only vital, but also difficult to execute. The way in which the viewer sees each of these images will be affected by how her or she sees the previous and subsequent photos. While considering this, I started looking at other artist’s books. Two key books that helped tremendously were Harvey Benges’s *Some Things You Should Have Told Me* and Robert Frank’s *Paris*.



Benge's *Some Things You Should Have Told Me* really started to show me how seemingly unrelated images can be paired through formal elements like composition, shape, lighting, etc. Robert Frank's *Paris* seemed to have a narrative running throughout, so I studied how this was accomplished through image placement and pairing.

## METHODOLOGY

Elements of the creation of this piece were new and unexpected. I typically know what exactly I am going to make, make it, and am then done. However, I did not know what to make for the Integrative Project and took many trials and errors to arrive naturally at this book. I started taking photos while trying to avoid overthinking, allowing what felt right to come through; I gave up control to the situation and place, only to document what I saw and felt. Typically a roll would start with the wider, "whole picture" shot while I was getting used to a place and settling in. With time, and after having gotten the "tourist" shots out of the way, I was able to focus in on the feeling, and on the smallest details present.

Each shoot took time in order to fully immerse myself in the experience. I was shooting usually around 6am after walking or driving to unknown locations. I would go until I found somewhere I responded to. I was in the present, not focused on what I already had or what I needed, but rather where I was at that moment.

After shooting each roll of color film, I would process it, scan it, and cull down the number of images to a manageable amount. Then, I went through again to find what images truly represented my own feelings of presence. Pairing went through many rounds to find what actually felt right together. Overall, it was a very organic and natural process that allowed me to reflect, breathe and create in a new way.

Because this project has really come to be about reflection and transformation, anchored in the present, a semi-linear sequence of the photos made the most sense. To this end, I worked from "night" to "morning" (with respect to the feeling of the images, lighting quality, etc.). Within the context of this transition from night to day, I also worked with the physical and linear movement of the ink drops in water spaced throughout the book to provide breaks or resting points for the viewer, and to divide the "night", "half-light" or "waking", and "morning" sections of the book.

All images are a reflection of the presence I felt in that particular moment; however, some are more fragmented than others, drawing attention to the smallest details of a moment. Others are more expansive and open, reflecting on the presence felt in a certain place. One example of the details I was focusing in on was the horsehair. The horse himself was absolutely gorgeous and I took many shots of him as he was running in a wide-open field. However, when he stopped and came back over to me, with the steam



his warm body, I noticed his breathing and how his hair grew along his back. Horses are beautiful, but what did it mean to really appreciate the smallest details like the swirl of a cowlick in his hair? For me, it was meditative and a good exercise in being the observer.



On the opposite scale, I also used a few images of larger expanses, however they seemed to keep the same feeling of presence and peace. One example of this was on a frozen lake, mid-January. I was walking across the lake, but stopped to notice the trees on the opposite shore with the sun setting behind them. I was still the observer, taking in the whole place at once, while being mindful of my own place within the scene.





## CREATIVE PROCESS

The photos were scanned and printed into a book for the final show. After dozens of different layouts, it made the most sense to work from “night” to “morning”, representing not only the linear movement of time, but also the transformation I seemed to have felt through this project.

The book sat on top of a pedestal that allowed for it to be open and still have a border to frame it. On the wall in front of the pedestal and book hung three large-scale prints of photos from the book. Working from left to right, the frozen sand, an empty bed, and the silhouette of bare trees and crows. These three worked together the best on a visual level and started to represent the variety of the images in the book, while still being a body of its own.



## WHAT'S NEXT

Moving forward, I am going to continue my photography practice. I would like to keep investigating personal growth through image and story. I believe it is important that I document these moments to look back with clarity and a raw eye to see what I learned and how to carry on, living, learning, and being. This project has become so much more than the final art piece, and more of a transformational moment of self-realization, thinking, and being. If I can pass this experience and learning on, I have found my purpose in art-making.

The search for Presence has always been around and people are constantly searching for answers on how to be truly present. Personally, I began to read texts like The Tao, practiced meditation, kept a journal, and recently produced photographs representing my experience. It is an age-old search, and by no means have I claimed to found the perfect presence or an answer on how to find presence. Instead, I have created a piece to invite viewers to question their own presence, see what I noticed and saw, and ultimately passing along the questions and reflections on how to find their own presence through different practices. I do not want to force views, but rather open up an experience that has helped and transformed me.

Presence is about slowing down. Being here. Breathing.

How do we respond to everyday life?

What do we notice?

How will we find our own presence?

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