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ELEMENTAL ILLUMINATION

IP SENIOR THESIS 2011



“Photography is the dialogue between the natural and the un-natural” (Adam Fuss: Light and Darkness). This quote describes the deep thoughts and conversations photography can ignite. It’s a concept deeply rooted in what inspires me as an image-maker, and also informed the process and execution of my Integrative Project, “Elemental Illumination”. By extending this inspiration into experimentation, I realized that a fascinating juxtaposition occurs when organic subjects, such as parts of the human body, fruits and vegetables, are captured through the lens of a camera, and subsequently layered onto one another during the editing process. My insatiable desire to acquire imagery of what I find to be naturally beautiful is enabled by a completely unnatural instrument, the camera. Through photography, I am able to inspect, reveal, and manipulate the physicality of these innately alluring objects that are so often taken for granted. By introducing the natural elements of light and translucency, these ordinary objects can be made to seem like things that have never existed before. Translucent layers of the

human body, fruits and vegetables are fused with light to give birth to unique collages of shapes, lines, textures and colors. The resulting photographic imagery mesmerizes, stimulates, and guides the viewer to a transcendental state of being. The audience may not be sure of what they are looking at, but this confusion breeds intrigue and thoughtfulness. It is my hope that this conjured curiosity is something the viewer will take away with them. It is important to take the time to stop, look, and process the ordinary and allow the resulting inspiration reach towards the extraordinary.

Fruits and vegetables aren’t commonly thought of as compelling visual subject matter. For example, the tomato is essentially a red and smooth ball externally, but its internal structure is much more complex. When it is sliced open, placed on a translucent surface, and backlit, smaller capillaries and vessels of tissue within the tomato are awakened and enlivened. There is a wet, fluid and gelatinous quality to the inner flesh. These traits are so intriguing to me. The construction is

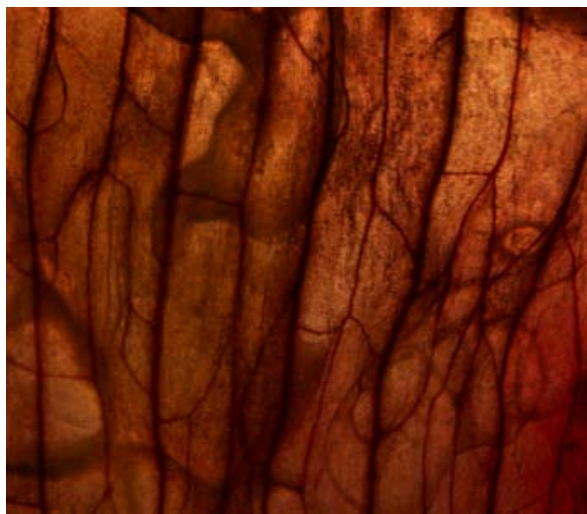
so organic, but also very intricate. So much in fact that it seems like it was created by from a high level of technology, and not natural processes. The tissue is fragile, yet begs to be ruptured. This is displayed in one of the first photographs I shot for this project. It is a yellow heirloom tomato, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Citrus fruits have a similar contrast of external and internal anatomy [Figure 2]. The onion reveals a

more interesting structure once its layers are peeled back in Figure 3. The human body, though admired for its simplistic elegance and beauty, can become predictable when depicted the same way over and over again in the realm of fine art. When the lesser noticed nooks, crevices, folds, holes and creases become the focus of the image, the whole-body connotation fades away and the curiosity is intensified. The view from underneath the nose is like looking into a dark cave. The partially folded, upturned palm creates a winding maize of skin imprinted with lifelines. Shown in Figure 4, even the belly becomes a plane of undulating hills and steep, creased valleys. By creating newness from something so familiar, I am launched into a tumbling chain of events that leads to a cohesive, multi-layered image that holds hidden gems of visual and emotional complexity.



(L-R): Fig. 2-3

Figure 4



pushed further, and also contained the organic subject matter I was so set on exploring in a deeper way. I came to the decision that my focus would be to interpret my visceral experiences with organic material through abstracted and layered illusions within photographs.

From its earliest stages, "Elemental Illumination" was centered on manipulating the internal and external qualities of organic objects. I felt an intense pull to create a piece inhabiting natural subject matter that subsequently becomes abstracted through my work process. I feel most attracted to and comfortable with creating art that is organic in some way. Abstracting imagery through photography was also a concept that I came to find interesting, since photography is usually used to show an unaltered moment in time. I recalled a previous photographic series I did during my sophomore year. This series depicted backlit tomatoes, honeycomb, radishes and cauliflower. It struck me as a concept that could be

My work is very connected to the notion that light is a major provocation to organic material. The working process begins with an illuminated and translucent stage (makeshift glass table) to photograph the fruits and vegetables. I take macro photographs to really capture the detail in the texture of the fruit and vegetable innards, and the selected parts of the body. It's exciting to see such small details like hairs, blemishes, bubbles and water droplets. When cropped into and layered on top of one another, I can start to create my alternate universe out of these initial images. In Photoshop, I adjust transparency of the layers, and edit contrasts, levels, saturation and color balance. Usually, the

first layer has to be the most highly contrasted and saturated so it still has a strong presence underneath what lies on top. It also serves as that base for the composition, revealing pockets of light and color that give the image balance and vibrancy. The layers closer to the top have the most intricate and delicate details that need to be preserved. The initial images transform into abstract collages that are now hard to recognize as something crafted from nature. I have manipulated the physicality of these organic objects crafted by nature, by mode of man-made technology. This juxtaposition adds a complex conceptual component to the final series of images. They pose the questions of what is real and what is not. What was altered and what was left untouched? After about five shoot/edit sessions with different produce selections and two different human models, I had a plethora of photo collages to choose from. I decided to select photos that would relate to each other in a dynamic way through color and composition. As a series, I

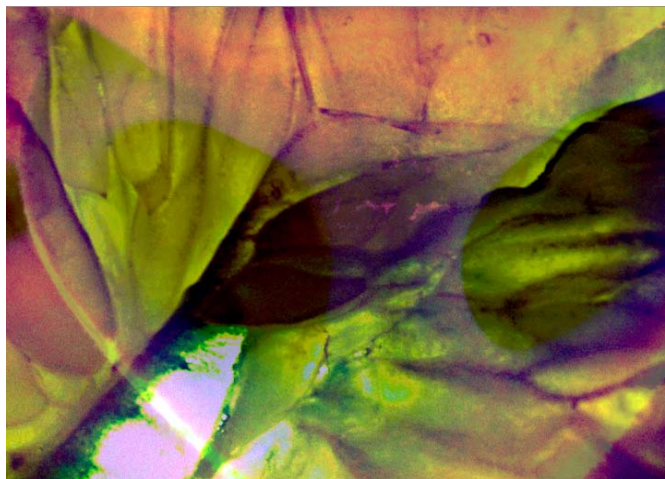
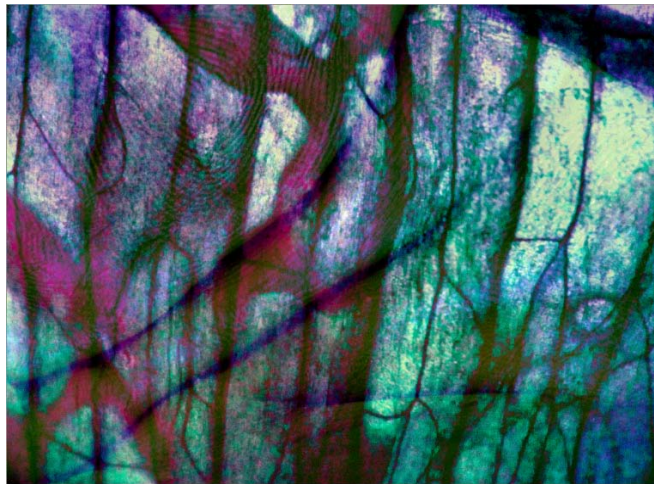
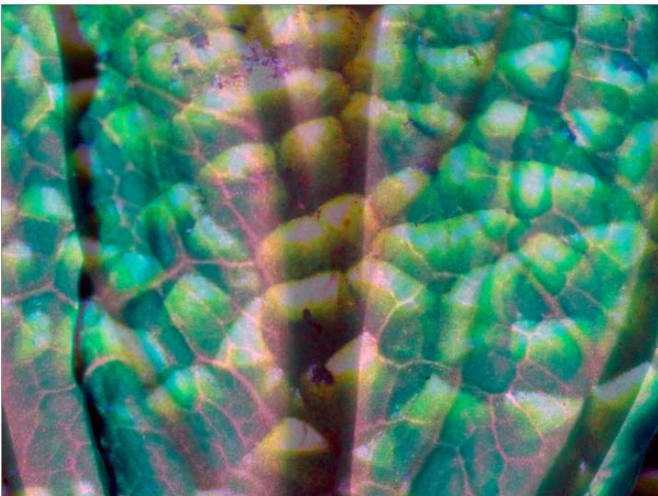
wanted them to read as a visual narrative. Each one has at least one common component.

Once I finished editing my collection down to the final five images for the series, the printing and installation process needed to be addressed. The five images I selected can be seen in Figures 5-9. Test prints on regular luster photo paper proved that these images needed to be printed and displayed in an alternative way to preserve the luminous and transparent qualities so intrinsic in their inception. When the backlight of the computer screen was removed, the radiating glow within the images that was so striking was completely lost. To keep that backlit quality as a cohesive element within my piece, I decided to make 5 individual light boxes for each of my photographs. Each photograph was printed on transparent paper, and then mounted to white, translucent acrylic to create an even surface for the light to diffuse from within the light box. With a great amount of guidance during the design process, I built light boxes that were each 8" x 18" x 24". The frame was constructed out of MDF and

masonite, and I used a taping and gluing technique to adhere the sides to one another. They were painted white so that they would blend in with gallery walls, leaving the images themselves to stand out. To fit inside the boxes, I cut down drop-in light fixtures to a custom size and wired them so that they would light up the cool, fluorescent bulbs. Building these light boxes was a great learning experience in mechanical design and construction.



Clockwise from top left: Fig. 5-9



When I started experimenting with color and light, I became extremely inspired by the photographic work of Adam Fuss. He creates photographs that link the elements of light, color, organic shapes, subjects and sensations together in wonderfully purposeful way. As the author of an article on the PHH Fine Art Gallery website states, "There are artists whose work reminds us that photography is prized equally for its ability to capture reality and to transcend that reality". That is the quality of Fuss's work that I admire most and the one that he achieves so flawlessly. It is also something that I strived to achieve in "Elemental Illumination". The important factor that transports the photos to this transcendent reality is his relationship with light. His untitled piece created in 1998, [Figure 10], engages cool, diffused light sources with the organic subject matter of a snake skidding across a wet surface. Instead of the traditional means of photographing with a camera, he uses a process that result in photograms. He also uses a similar composition and process in another work entitled "Journey" [Fig. 11]. In this

piece, he replaces the cryptic reptilian with a faceless, plump, shadow of a human baby splashing around in a shallow puddle of water. The light glows a hot, gold and orange hue behind the figure, highlighting the ripples in the water and creating a free-flowing and



Figure 10

dynamic pattern within the composition. In both pieces, I am able to appreciate the unusual depiction of organic subject matter by absorbing his strategic way of using light, color and layers in the composition. These subjects are removed from their natural environments, and their physicality is altered so that we are forced to process the visual information in a new way. The translucent quality

of the light is what most elevates these pieces for me, and what I aimed to execute in my own work. He addresses the role light takes in his artwork in an interview with Ross Bleckner in 1992. Fuss explains "Light is a physical sensation ... When one works with the idea of light, one's working with a metaphor that's endless and huge and unspecific. Light represents the fuel that is behind our existence ... It's a mystery". Fuss uses light, translucency, layers and organic subjects to create a curious and lustful aura around his photographs.

In my work, I also used those same modes of visual language to create imagery that is somewhat mysterious. Fuss elevates the animal and human subject, while I chose to abstract and combine food and the figure. Getting to understand and know his work gave me a greater understanding of how I can utilize these same elements but with my artistic style.

Charles Bergquist creates photography that has also been extremely influential and inspiring throughout my working process. His work is often

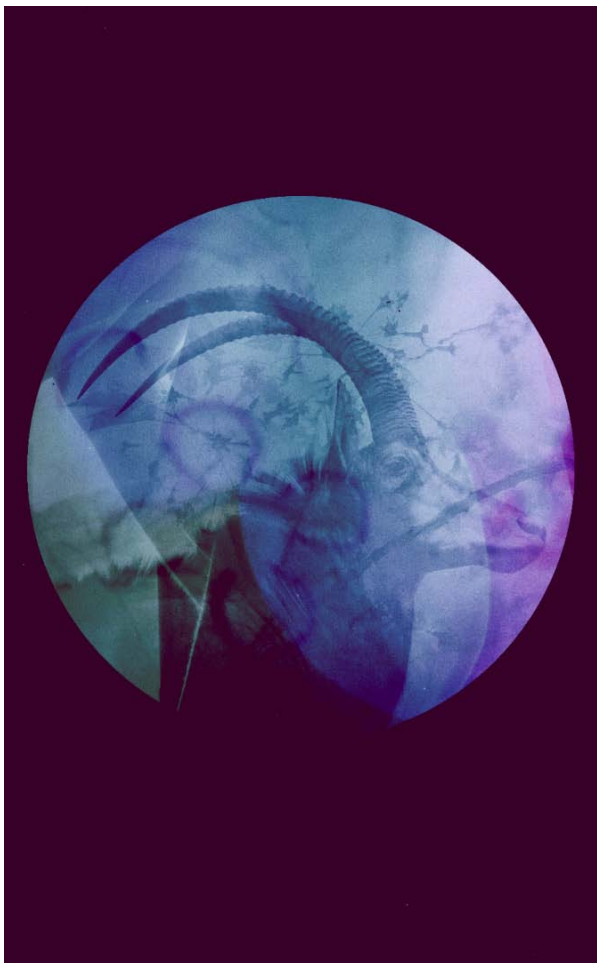


Figure 11

viewed as a projection, displayed during musical performances by bands and electronic DJ's. This specificity of his installation allows him to really emphasize the movement and fluidity within his work. He also incorporates layering, transparency, and neon colors in his abstract and representational visual narratives. In his work "Bluebrain Sericulture Poster" 2010 [Figure 12], a photographic sphere containing a layered composition of a ram's head and tree branches, floating underneath a pool of blue, purple and green dye droplets that have bled into the surface.

The overall mood is subdued, but also haunting and intriguing. The piece causes me to react the way I wish others will in response to “Elemental Illumination”. I take time to process the image and understand all of the elements that make up the whole. Right away I’m attracted to the photograph’s striking beauty. Because of the

Figure 12



image’s multifaceted and complex qualities, I’m drawn in further to try and unveil how each

component relates to the entirety of the image. It is organic and familiar, yet simultaneously supernatural. During an interview with thefader.com, staff writer Claire Lobenfeld asked members of the band Viernes, to address the music video concept for song their song “Liquid Tunnel” [Figures 13-14], which Bergquist created. “I believe it was the lowest tide of the year, and the creatures were suddenly washed up and out of their elements in these tide pools. The images he captured were both beautiful and dark, which fit the music pretty well” (Lobenfeld).

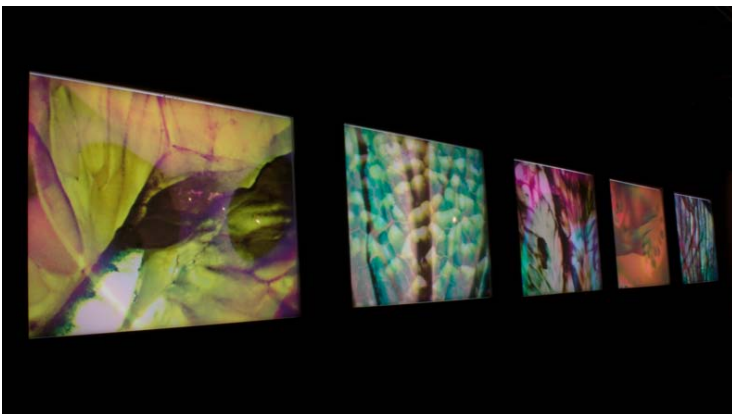
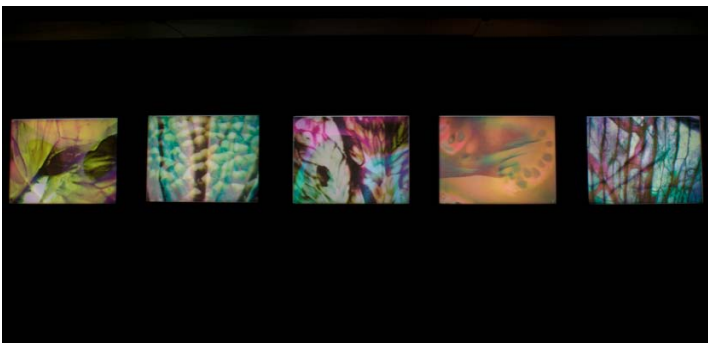


Figure 13-14

Bergquist was able to listen to music, find inspiration and imagery in nature, and blend the visual and emotional components of both. As an image-maker, I admire the different parts of life and mentality that Bergquist drew from to create more of a psychological and tactical experience through his video and photography.

To be able to create art that contains the organic subject matter that I am passionate about, and a working process that is completely personal, proved to be an extremely fulfilling experience in many ways. My final installation of "Elemental Illumination" can be seen here in **Figures 15-16**.

I displayed them above eye level in a row, allowing the viewer to walk side to side in a dynamic motion of interpretation. I am very happy that the image construction and light box construction came together holistically, and that I was able to create five solid images that I am proud of after such extensive experimentation and editing. The light, layering and translucency are strongly depicted elements within these organic, colorful, photographic collages. I plan on continuing my exploration of natural subject matter and visual elements through my art practice for years to come. This finale of my undergraduate career has given me confidence and strength in knowing where I've come from and where I'm going as a creative individual and artist.



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Figure 10: Fuss, Adam, "Untitled", photogram, www.exitmedia.net/.../titulo14_fuss_snake.jpg
< www.exitmedia.net/.../titulo14_fuss_snake.jpg >

Figure 11: Fuss, Adam, "Journey", photogram, www.pablogarcia.org/.../2009/04/adam_fuss1.jpg, 09 Apr. 2009.
< www.pablogarcia.org/.../2009/04/adam_fuss1.jpg >

Figure 12: Bergquist, Charles, "Bluebrain Sericulture Poster Main Detail", poster photography, <http://work.charlesbergquist.com/389092/Bluebrain-Sericulture-Poster>, May 2010.

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