

Symbiosis

Master of Fine Arts Thesis Statement

by Ben Harrison

In this body of work, *Symbiosis*, I am exploring humankind's emotionally and physically intimate relationship with the natural world, a relationship in which the outcome for each is highly dependent upon the other. We all have the desire for "the good life," but as we reach for that goal, we in turn affect the world we live in. Nature provides us the materials we need for growth yet our conscious or unconscious concern for the earth places us in an uncomfortable juxtaposition.

This body of work stemmed from a project in which I was attempting to find the remaining beautiful "untouched landscape." As I found it increasingly more difficult to find these supposed pristine areas, my work began to take a divergent direction. After driving hours and hours to find these "untouched" locations, I began to notice as well as photograph the incongruous and sometimes amusing artifacts of human progress. My increasing agitation with the lack of untouched land compelled me to change my direction and actually focus on documenting the imposition of humans into nature and nature onto humans. I began to search for the peculiar juxtapositions of beautiful land with the man-made and attempted to photograph them in a manner that conveys my concern for the diminishing unspoiled landscape. As I began this working method I found that I actually enjoyed this approach more, feeling that the juxtapositions gave the photographs more depth than I had been achieving with the somewhat blasé nature photographs. Max Kozloff articulated my feelings well when he stated,

In recent years, an admonishing view has emerged in an ordinarily bland genre: the photography of nature. One glance at the field tells us that ecological concerns, understandably enough at this historical point, have infiltrated the medium. How can they be expressed effectively? How can they be responded to? What do they tell us about our culture?

As a craft, nature photography is specialized, requiring particular tools. Only a big-view camera, for instance, has the range to thrust deep into a landscape, restoring to a picture surface remote detail that a smaller instrument would interpret only as tone. In a grand horizon one expects both texture and tone, or rather texture *within* tone. A large-format print allows a panorama to be backed up by what seems to be an endless reserve of data. This discriminative power is just as well, for the scene is likely to be devoid of a main incident. What we generally have in landscape photography is a kind of micro-

nutrition-based on diffuse vegetarian ingredients-that compensates for a lack of psychological narrative and a visual center” (109).

The artist’s tool of choice for this work is a Canon 5D digital SLR camera, with the final output being giclée prints on Crane Museo SilverRag. This method of working was a conscious decision that stems from the environmentally concerned nature of my work. Digital capture not only achieves the image quality that I desire, but it also allows me to limit the amount of waste I produce throughout the duration of my project. From the ability to delete “bad” images before printing them to utilizing re-usable media to store imagery, digital capture is very “eco-friendly” when compared to storing hundreds of negatives and prints in plastic sleeves within plastic notebooks. I have also chosen to print the photographs on a cotton based paper which is comes from a renewable resource and biodegrades hundreds of years faster than your typical resin coated papers, yet still maintain an archival image when kept in a stable environment.

Archival rating is the “big” question when it comes to photography, especially digital photography, and creates a unique predicament for photographic artists working with environmentally concerned subject matter. This predicament lies in the fact that the archival rating of the materials is typically directly proportional to their biodegradable nature. Is it hypocritical for an artist to create a work based, for lack of a non-cliché description, on “saving the earth” yet create an art object that will remain on the earth hundreds of years longer than the artist? Or is it acceptable for the art object to remain for hundreds of years because it brings a greater awareness than the artist could have brought within his or her lifetime? Though I am not going to attempt to provide an answer, these are questions I have contemplated throughout the duration of the project and the resulting photographic approach has become my own answer.

There is a futile struggle that the environmentally concerned artist faces when using contemporary art materials. A struggle rooted in the question of whether or not art can exist without the art object. Can one express language without using language? Can one produce music without

sound? I would argue the answer being no to all of the above questions and therein lies the fruitless impasse. There has to be a tangible object, digital projection, sound, etc. for the observer to experience or the experience does not exist in the temporal realm.

I have always been intrigued with as well as “dabbled” in experimenting with photography in a manner that didn’t always fit with the “guidelines” of photographic archival standards. Though my career as an artist has been relatively short, I am pleased to say that around 70% of my art has maintained a temporal nature that without proper storage or environment renders the work susceptible to deterioration. Many other photographic artists, who have had substantially longer careers in art, have pursued this approach to photography yet few have done it to the extent of Mike and Doug Starn. The Starn twins are two artists whose work I admire greatly, and whose works confront the importance of archival art. The brothers have faced attacks by numerous critics who simply cannot get passed the temporal nature of their work to see the beauty and life within the biodegrading pieces. For them, according to Robert Rosenblum, “photography, which usually delivers its messages in the present tense, could be opened to a vast new range of temporal experiences that include the slow and layered accumulation of memory and history, and the melancholy decay of flesh and matter”(29). Their pieces have an earthly connection scarcely found in such an archival and technically based medium. The works practically age in front of your eyes as if they have a life of their own. As the brothers state in reference to the temporality of their work, “Well, it’s meant to age ... it is not supposed to stay the same.” The Starns’ continue, “Our work is meant to change as it ages. It belongs to the world. We don’t feel we have the right to say that the world can’t happen to it. And it will ... that’s welcome; that’s supposed to be there.” They are advocates of change and growth. “We are making pieces now,” the brother’s exclaimed, “that we know are going to be different. That’s part of the work. It continues to create itself. It’s an act through time” (Götz 155).

Though I am not expanding my work to the temporal extent that the Starns have, I have found that my work is forcing me to be more conscious of the impact I have on my surroundings and in turn the impact others have on theirs. I have found that my work has given me a sort of “hyper-awareness” of human influence within the land. My goal within this body of work and its presentation is to pass on some of that “hyper-awareness” to the average viewer, who has been so inundated from birth with the interaction of man-made structures and natural surroundings that appears to be an innate interaction.

The phrase “Manifest Destiny” is typically associated with the territorial expansion of the United States from 1815 to 1860, but in various forms it still remains so prevalent within our cultural framework that many Americans no longer recognize its presence. Whether it is another suburb popping up in a metropolitan area to a new fence being installed in a backyard, our boundaries are continually being redefined and with it the landscape. As John O’Sullivan stated in 1839 with regards to manifest destiny,

We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as lessons of avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its un-trodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? (426).

Though our knowledge of the effects of human progress on the natural world has matured greatly, we are still a nation of “human progress” and I reiterate what O’Sullivan asked, “who will, what can, set limits to our onward march?”

I am not proposing that we are as unapprised as early explorers of the “new world,” nor that we should all live a “green” life in a bamboo home sans fossil fuels, I am simply documenting the visual result of our impact on the earth. One might even call me a subliminal activist of sorts, because my imagery is not dealing with something as overt as a landfill, yet still asks the question “What are we doing?” Though I do agree to a certain extent with romantic ideas of the late 1800’s

modernists that art can make a difference and influence people, I disagree that art should provide the answer. As Edward Burtynsky eloquently stated in an interview with John Grande, “Art does not provide the answer. It is far more complex than that. It is political. It is scientific. It is a whole series of layered meanings. What art can do is present an individual perception about what is actually going on. One actually begins to see things, and understands the world in a way that clarifies in ways that words cannot. The object is not to be *liberated* it is to simply show what exists” (92-93).¹

From about the mid-1800s, the planet has experienced an unprecedented rate of change, with one of the most noticeable and dangerous, according to Edward Wilson, being that of the destruction of forests worldwide (3). This tragedy can be seen globally, with 70% of Afghanistan’s forests being lost, forests in Europe being destroyed by acid rain, and about half of the world’s tropical rainforests have been destroyed. The devastation of these tropical rainforests, with only 750 million hectares remaining from the original 1.5 billion that once covered the planet, is having an adverse effect on biodiversity and contributing to the constant Holocene mass extinction (Leakey, 25). The destruction of forests is occurring at a rate tracking the pace of human population growth. With the growth of cities, building of suburbs, businesses using thousands of sheets of paper a day, and the buildup of greenhouse gases, serious changes need to be made. If the rate continues, by 2030 there will only be ten percent of the forests remaining globally. The irreversible loss of hundreds of thousands of species of plants and animals, not to mention the higher concentration of CO₂ and the loss of oxygen from photosynthesis, will result from this eighty percent deforestation.

My work definitely shares many parallels with several contemporary artists’ series including Terry Faulke’s *Observations in an Occupied Wilderness*, Frank Gohlke’s *Accommodating Nature*, and Edward Burtynsky’s series *Manufactured Landscapes*. Of these artists, however, I feel that Edward Burtynsky’s work is the most closely related to my work stating that his

¹ In response to the statement made by John Grande that “So many artists work hard at expressing ideas. I am not sure if it even liberates them in the end. It could be a kind of prison.”

... images are meant as metaphors for the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire - a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction. For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our times (Burtynsky).

The idea that his images are “metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence” definitely resonates with my own intentions in photographing this series and we actually share the same motivations for pursuing our analogous projects. Burtynsky told Grande that his early work “looked at the pristine landscape in Canada and the United States, but after a couple of years of doing that I realized it was not enough. I wanted to probe much deeper, into the nature and visual result of our impact on the planet” (90). As I stated earlier, my project was also set in motion by a project in which I explored the untouched land, and similarly to Burtynsky, I found that a desire to document human presence within the land grew from an agitation with the disappearance of the pristine land. I also echo Burtynsky’s ideas regarding what I call the uncomfortable juxtaposition of modern existence, which is ideally depicted through the image *Globe, AZ 2007*. The image illustrates one individuals’ response to this discomfort, be it conscious or unconscious, through an attempt to disguise the industrial look of an electrical power meter by painting a depiction of the surrounding natural environment. Why would such an effort be made if there didn’t exist a concern to lessen the visual impact of human presence? Another image that solicits the same question is *Grand Rapids, MI 2007*, which displays an environmentally friendly architectural firm’s decision to bring nature back to a once natural but now sterile environment. Again I ask, why the effort is no such concern exists?

Though Burtynsky’s work focuses mostly on the atrocities in Third World countries that are a direct result of human’s mass consumption and I have chosen to focus on a more subtle impact, I have found that I really empathize with his work as well as his thoughts regarding the world around us. This is especially apparent in the images *Apache Junction, AZ 2007* as well as *Coopersville, MI 2007*, which display a direct visual result of human mass consumption. The former of which shows the

flattened cardboard box remains of thousands of purchased products, and the latter which documents hundreds of wooden slats awaiting the next shipment.

Burtynsky's method of photographing Third World countries where these "visual results of our impact on the planet" abound is very effective in giving his work a global response and appeal, but I have chosen to explore the more intimate subtleties of the Westerner's "common" surroundings. I feel as though Burtynsky's images have a certain ethereal appeal to a "western" audience that begs the question of whether or not the viewer can relate to the imagery in a personal way. These foreign locales are luscious and have a spectacular appeal to them, which is essential to their effectiveness, but I wonder if the audience experiences difficulty when associating the imagery with the corporeal landscape in their own world. I feel that subtlety in the recognizable land is an essential element to the effectiveness of my own imagery; that the audience can draw parallels to their own experiences and environments thereby recognizing the tangible ways he or she can respond to the imagery. I think this idea is best summed up in a question: would a person growing up in the Midwest relate better to power line towers running through a field with hay rolls or to shipbreaking in Bangladesh?

The choice of a subtle, recognizable focus stems from my own experiences within education as well as business. I have found that people naturally respond favorably to ideas that they feel allow an individual decision and negatively to ideas in which the decision is already made. The subtlety by which I have photographed this project is a key element in presenting these favorable ideas because it allows the individual to discover the intricacies for themselves. This discovery reassures the individual's decision and when combined with the recognizable surroundings provides the viewer a means by which to form a personal connection.

Antonin Artaud, the philosopher and playwright, believed that the contemporary audience is desensitized and has, to a certain extent, lost his/her empathy and sympathy. He believed that to counteract the desensitized nature of the viewer, art should be offensive, uncomfortable, and

shocking, to give the viewer a “slap in the face” to wake them from the insensitive “slumber.” I believe that while uncomfortable or “shock” art definitely affects the viewer, it in turn furthers the desensitization and broadens the amount of visual discomfort the viewer can withstand. I would like to suggest a different response for the artist in creating a visual “remedy” for this desensitized condition. This “remedy” involves a focus on beauty as well as subtlety, both of which I believe all viewers are drawn to despite their level of empathy loss. The luscious visuals within the landscapes I have chosen to document will hopefully draw the viewer into the work, combating the temptation of a “quick read.” As they continue to admire the landscape the intention is that the incongruous artifacts will begin to become more discernible emphasizing the uncomfortable juxtaposition of contemporary existence. I believe that this method can be just as effective, proving the adage that “You’ll catch more flies with honey than vinegar.” If the work can draw the viewer in with its beauty and lead the observer to see the intricacies that are so subtle in fact that the viewer may feel as though they are the pioneers of the discovery, the body of work is a success. I am adopting the ideas of the French *paysage moralisé*, which according to Max Kozloff is “a landscape genre which, either by reflecting our passions or inducing some philosophical meditation on life, drives home a moral. We do not just contemplate the goodness of the place but find in it an object lesson derived from its pictorial appearance” (109).

Though I am bringing awareness to a social concern for the earth, I am not presenting a visual or verbal answer nor would I desire to. I don’t believe that a universal answer exists to this uncomfortable state of modern existence. The answer is unique for everyone and we are all responsible for discovering our own response. Due to the fact that we all live, sleep, breathe, and eat of the natural world, I believe this responsibility is an inescapable reality for everyone despite his or her level of awareness, and therein lies the intent of my work. The work should shed light on the importance of awareness: the ability to recognize, stop, look, and question. My hope is that the work spurs the viewer to be more aware of their surroundings and participate in any way they can to

lessen their “footprint. My desire is that this body of work will help the viewer to be mindful of the subtle, everyday influences we have on the earth so that he or she can make a subtle, yet very important difference.

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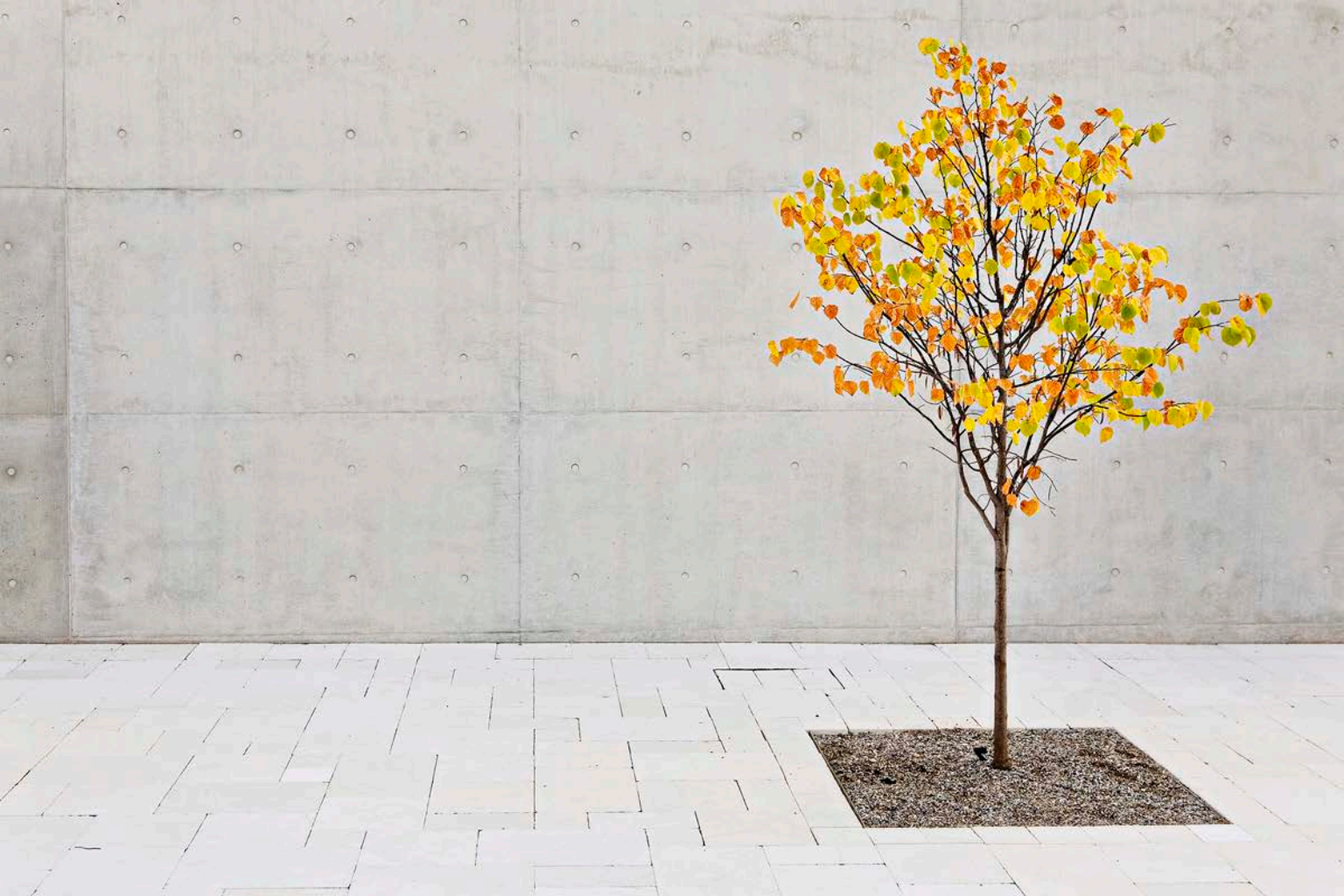












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