

STATIONS IN LIFE
VISUAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRAVEL, EXPLORATION, AND SELF DISCOVERY

By

Dan Willett

December 2012

Director of Thesis: Daniel Kariko

Major Department: School of Art and Design – Photography

Through my fine art photography, I create an understanding of how and why I explore new environments. My photographs allow me to ask a series of questions about myself. What motivates me to do so? Why do I choose a particular destination? How did I get there? What do I think of along the way? These are all questions I am investe through my own travels as I pursue my work.

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of Photography

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts – Photography

By

Dan Willett

December, 2012

STATIONS IN LIFE

VISUAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRAVEL, EXPLORATION, AND SELF DISCOVERY

By

Dan Willett

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: _____
Daniel Kariko, Master of Fine Arts

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Angela Wells, Master of Fine Arts

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Seo Eo, Master of Fine Arts

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Gerald Weckesser, Master of Fine Arts

DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

Michael H. Drought

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Background – Getting To Where We Are Today	Page 1
Chapter 2. Introduction	Page 3
Chapter 3. Thesis Exhibit Work	Page 4
Chapter 4. Conclusion	Page 20
Bibliography	Page 21

LIST OF IMAGES

Library Street Back Porch, Greenville, NC	Page 5
Library Street Kitchen Sink, Greenville, NC	Page 6
William Eggleston <i>Untitled (St. Simons Island, Georgia)</i>	Page 6
Kipper Beach #1, #2, #3, Wrightsville Beach, NC	Page 9
Kipper Earl Road, Durham, NC	Page 10
Christmas Eve, Wilmington, NC	Page 11
Ferry #1, #2, Ocracoke, NC	Page 13
4 th of July #1, #2, Wrightsville Beach, NC	Page 14
Johnny Mercer Pier #1, #2, #3, Wrightsville Beach, NC	Page 15
Barbary Coast #1, #2, Wilmington, NC	Page 17
Tanner Haircut, Greenville, NC	Page 18
Kitchen Sink, Greenville, NC	Page 18
Larry Sultan <i>Conversation Through The Kitchen Window</i>	Page 19
Larry Sultan <i>Argument at the Kitchen Table</i>	Page 19

CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND – GETTING TO WHERE WE ARE TODAY

I will share some background and history as an entry point to discuss the art I create. This is important to understand in that it will give the reader a conceptual base of what I am accomplishing with the visual interpretation of my travels.

My personal art journey began in the summer of 2003. I moved to Durham, North Carolina to begin a new chapter in my life. Although things didn't quite work out how I planned, I simply couldn't move back to Philadelphia because of my employment situation. I am a positive person and believe that when life gives you lemons you just need to make some lemonade. I decided to simply dig in, work my ass off, drink lots of lemonade, and continue with this next chapter of my life. For the good part of five years it was just a German Shepard named Kipper and myself. We did everything together.

In the spring of 2004 I decided to learn to ride a motorcycle and begin travelling the country. I didn't want to "get away" so to speak, I simply wanted to get out and see the country at ground level. I covered quite a bit of ground going west to the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone National Park, and countless out of the way places along the way. I have also ventured north into Canada through Niagara Falls, made several trips to the Georgia and South Carolina coasts, as well as finding my way to a Grateful Dead festival outside of Cleveland a couple of times.

As a boy growing up in Philadelphia I spent a lot of time at the Jersey Shore with my grandparents and have always been partial to being close to the water. In the winter of 2005 I

purchased a small townhouse in Wilmington on the North Carolina coast. From our little home base, Kipper and I were exploring the North Carolina coast rekindling my love of the ocean.

In 2007 things took an unexpected twist with the economy and in the fall of 2008 I was laid off from my job. Rather than re-entering the job market I decided it was time for some more lemonade and I chose to return to graduate school and fulfill my dream of studying art. An unexpected development in this chapter of my life has been meeting Shannyn. Now my travels on the motorcycle take the form of day trips with her that end Waffle House for coffee and a pecan waffle. We also enjoy spending time exploring the North Carolina coast together.

This past summer a little poodle dog came into our lives unexpectedly. His name is Tanner. Shannyn has been sharing my love for John Steinbeck by reading several of his works that I own. Most recently, *Travels with Charlie*. This reading coupled with our adoption of Tanner has created what we now refer to as our “Travels with Tanner” that have taken on our own unique qualities. Along the lines of Steinbeck’s novel, our travels include camping. We started putting our camping “system” together in the spring of 2012 and the addition of Tanner on these trips has been quite enjoyable. Our most recent excursion was to Ocracoke Island at the end of August 2012 for three nights.

CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION

All of the works in my exhibit originate from black and white film I process myself. I utilize two styles of images. The first are panoramic views of how I experience the place that I am visiting that capture a stylistic interpretation of the period of time and the involvement I have with my surroundings. The constructed photographic collages of David Hockney were very influential in creating this technique. He referred to these as “joiners” and were created by piecing together parts of photographs in an effort to show how the eye views and focuses on the surroundings.

The second are images that seize a specific moment of my time. I studied documentary photography and the numerous artists that make up this genre, and everyone from Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans to Alec Soth and Brian Ulrich have influenced me in some way. The work I make to record certain instances of my doings is a collection of these influences, combined with my personal touch, to create a style that is unique to me as a photographer that captures the feelings I want to convey to the viewers of my work.

CHAPTER 3. THESIS EXHIBIT WORK

Stations In Life.

I explore the relationships people have with the places where they live. I consider myself very grounded in that I build a close connection to my home. When I am at home I often think about places I travel to or simply being out on the road. When I travel I often think of home. I have a strong connection with the places that I live. I refer to them as my “stations in life” and can still visualize in my mind the rooms and their settings. Even for places that I have not lived in for quite a long time. Utilizing photography as a contemporary practice, I chose to use a documentary approach to visually explore the thoughts I have of my home while I am away.



**Library Street Porch
Greenville, NC**

I spent a lot of time sitting on this porch relaxing and reflecting on graduate school. This image captures the ease of which someone can sit right down and make him or herself at home and be comfortable. The viewer can feel that someone spent a lot of time here enjoying themselves both alone and in the company of others.



Library Street Kitchen Sink
Greenville, NC

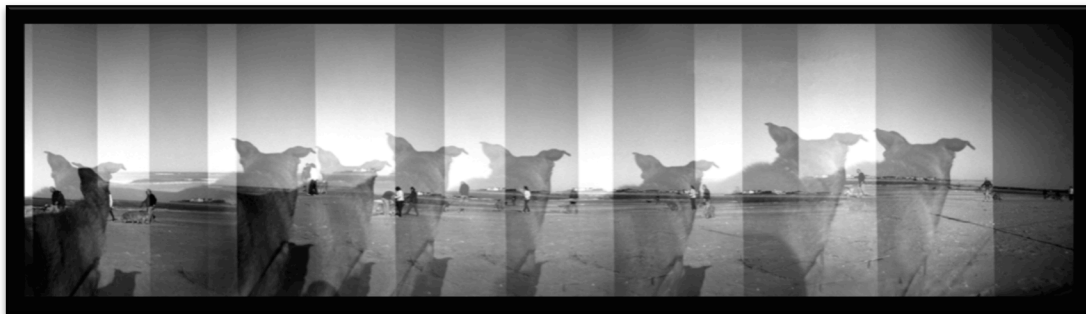


William Eggleston
***Untitled (St. Simons Island, Georgia)* Morals of Vision**

My image is inspired by this William Eggleston photograph that I admired for years. I am drawn to it because of the ordinary, although personal, composition as well as the subtle lighting. It has a feeling of stillness as the work from the meal has been completed and the residents have moved on about their day. I captured this same stillness in my image as I just finished up my lunch and was getting ready to head back to school.

Kipper

Kipper was a German Shepherd I owned for 11 years who passed away in August of 2011. I had many dogs during the course of my life, but Kipper was by far the most influential. He was with me during a transitional period of my life. In these images I am establishing an understanding of the connection that we had and how important the time was that we spent together.



Kipper Beach #1, #2, #3
Wrightsville Beach, NC

The three images shown here are from the many beach trips Kipper and I. All dogs have that special word that gets them excited. “walk”, or “bone”, or “food” for example. Kipper’s was “beach”. I chose to compose these images in a panoramic manner to not only include Kipper’s interactions with me, but also the entire environment that we were enjoying at the time. It was important for me to show how vast the area was, the perspective of how Kipper was moving within it, and around me with the movement of the camera.



**Earl Road Driveway
Durham, NC**

This image captures Kipper's confidence, as well as the patience he had with me as I was tinkering with a new lens I had just purchased. My tripod and corner of the American flag were intentionally present. It was not staged or posed and I am capturing us on a normal day getting things done around the house.



**Christmas Eve
Wilmington, NC**

This image captures the serenity of the late evening while Kipper slept in his bed and I was reflecting on the holiday season. It is lonely but also joyous as we were spending our first Christmas together in our new home in Wilmington.

Shannyn

I established an understanding of the connection that two people develop, what they choose to do (or not to do) for exploration, and how they go about doing it. Our travels and methods of exploration are also unique in our own personal way.



Ferry #1, #2
Okracoke/Swann Quarter, NC

Shannyn and I are fascinated with the ferry system here in eastern NC. Places where we grew up didn't have ferries so we never really experienced this method of transportation before moving to North Carolina. These two images are from our first trip to Okracoke Island in June 2012. I chose the panoramic method of taking them so that I could capture everything that was going on around us. It was important for me to show the viewer how Shannyn and many of the other passengers were watching the shrimp boats in the surrounding waters. The images are a two part diptych displayed side by side that create an almost 360 degree panorama.



**Fourth of July #1, #2
Wrightsville Beach, NC**

When Shannyn and I go to the beach we have our own unique “setup”. It is interesting to us to observe all of the contraptions other people employ as well as what they do when they get there. When I took these images I captured our own unique encampment and activities of others by choosing the panoramic view to build an appreciation of how we were fitting in with each other on the beach that day. I chose two perspective for these images. The first is us looking out from under our umbrellas, and the second is of the outside world looking in towards us as we enjoy our day.



**Johnny Mercer Pier #1, #2, #3
Wrightsville Beach, NC**

When we go to the beach we spend a lot of time walking, looking for shells, and people watching. On just about all of our trips we like to go to Johnny Mercer's Pier. Through the use of the panoramic viewpoint I am capturing the expanse of the pier on our approach and then right up to the people camped out and playing in its shade. I want to give the viewer a feeling of all the activity that is going on around the pier. I have also printed these images very large to establish the perspective of the size of the pier and it's surroundings. Each frame is five (5) feet and the total work is almost sixteen (16) feet wide.

Tanner

Tanner came into our lives quite unexpectedly. A woman Shannyn works with couldn't take care of him any longer and offered him to us. He has become an important part of our daily lives in a very short period of time. We take him everywhere with us.



**Barbary Coast #1, #2
Wilmington, NC**

The Barbary Coast is a bar located in Wilmington that caters to the biker crowd and has somewhat of a rougher atmosphere. Even though the bar is dog friendly, the presence of a poodle was definitely out of place. These images capture the situation showing how at-home Tanner, Shannyn, and myself were.



Tanner Haircut
Greenville, NC



Kitchen Sink
Greenville, NC

These images show us enjoying our time together at home and how Tanner has become an integral part of our lives. Shown below are two photographs by Larry Sultan in his 1986 *Pictures From Home* series that document his parent's daily activities after his father had been laid off and forced into an early retirement. This type of photography is continuous and timeless as no two domestic situations are the same and the ones that I have chosen to compose capture the intimate moments that Shannyn and I are experience as we build out lives together.



Larry Sultan
Conversation Through The Kitchen Window, Pictures From Home



Larry Sultan
Argument at the Kitchen Table, Pictures From Home

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

The manner in which people travel, explore, and discover is unique unto themselves. Some people keep going back to the same place time and time again. My dad is a great example. He made about a dozen trips to Australia and he still plans to make more. Others have to go to a new place each time they travel, and some choose to go nowhere at all. Through the work in my exhibit I communicate how I chose to travel, explore, and discover as well as whom I chose to do it with. These choices are unique to the individual.

Being at home is very important to me. For some reason, when I travel I think of it a lot and in my exhibit I captured images of the rooms and settings that are in my mind. These moments at home are a reflection of not only how I spend my time, but also whom I choose to share it with.

As I discussed in the Background section of this document, I was laid off from my job in 2008 and decided to return to graduate school to study photography rather than make an effort to re-enter the work workforce. This detour in life has given me the ability to visually analyze and develop a better understanding of the world around me. I am lucky to have had this opportunity to slow down and inspect the reasons why I travel, the relationship I have with Shannyn, and the domestic environments that I enjoy.

Bibliography

Steinbeck, John. *Travels with Charlie*.

Pirsig, Robert. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*.

Thompson, Hunter S. *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw*.

Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*.

Guevara, Ernesto. *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

William Eggleston, *Morals of Vision*

Larry Sultan, *Pictures From Home*

