

River Rat

by

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May, 2023

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ABSTRACT

The marsh; what is it about this brackish, swamp-like area that is so attractive? This environment emanates gnarly gases, is filled with death and erosion, yet has a thriving and resilient ecosystem. I began to wonder what would happen if I used the water from the areas I am photographing—if the water in the image was tied to its creation. Could the salt print process provide the connection between the concept and process I had been searching for? *River Rat*, a series of salt print photographs, depicts a glimpse of life in this complicated environment and the peace it brings to my mind and soul. Sitting on the dock to cool off from the sweltering hot sun, enjoying the bounty from a long day on the water, and how the vast openness of the water is so restless and beyond comprehension that it simultaneously makes one feel insignificant and integral to the greater web of the world. The hidden beauty of the back rivers, the secret hideaways, the elusiveness of the land that is only accessible during certain tides; the water connects and provides for this ecosystem in such a way that feels sacred to me.

River Rat

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Morgan Williams Zichettella

May, 2023

Director of Thesis: Angela Franks Wells, MFA

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Daniel Kariko, MFA

Lisa Beth Robinson, MFA, MLIS

Timothy Lazure, MFA

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IN MEMORY OF

M'Liss Gurney Williams

December 12, 1953 - December 30, 2016

and

Joel Cash Williams Jr.

December 19, 1942 - February 14, 2022

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Robert Cash Brandewie, may you never doubt how much you
are loved.

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I would like to acknowledge and thank my husband, Nick, family, and dear friends for their love and unconditional support. An enormous thank you to my exceptional thesis committee Angela Franks Wells, Daniel Kariko, Lisa Beth Robinson, and Timothy Lazure, for going above and beyond, being the best mentors, and taking the time to invest in me.

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the Gaule people who lived along the Georgia coast¹, the Euchee people of Tybee Island, Georgia², and the Yamacraw people of Savannah, Georgia³, who are the traditional custodians of the land in which I call my soul place, and recognize their continued connection to the land, water, and air of Tybee Island, Talahi Island, Wilmington Island, Whitemarsh Island, Thunderbolt Island, Isle of Hope, Skidaway Island, Burnside Island, and Savannah consume. I pay respect to the three state-recognized tribes of Georgia: Cherokee, the Georgia Tribe of Eastern Cherokee and the Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe, all Nations, and their elders past, present, and emerging.⁴

In addition, I acknowledge the Tuscarora people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which I work and live, and recognize their continued connection to the land, water, and air that Greenville consumes. I pay respect to the eight state-recognized tribes of North Carolina: Coharie, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of Saponi, Sappony, and Waccamaw-Siouan, all Nations, and their elders past, present, and emerging.⁵

¹ Freeman, Michael. *Native American History of Savannah*

² Tybee Island - New Georgia Encyclopedia

³ Freeman, Michael. *Native American History of Savannah*

⁴ www.georgiaindiancouncil.com

⁵ East Carolina University Land acknowledgment

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“Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into the sky. Slow-moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of the sun with them to the sea, and long-legged birds lift with unexpected grace—as though not built to fly—against the roar of a thousand snow geese. Then within the marsh, here and there, true swamp crawls into low-lying bogs, hidden in clammy forests.”

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 1. *Secret World*, Lazaretto Creek, river water salt print, 2022

INTRODUCTION

The marsh holds an entire world within its borders—a life of its own, with its own citizens, visitors, and rules. The sounds of the wildlife interacting, the rhythm of the water, and the bend of the tree branches when a breeze passes through are its voice. When I pause to listen closely, I can hear its calming whisper and drift into a moment of peace. During that moment of *Selah*, I stop and listen amongst the sawgrass, breathing in the salt air; I can feel this ecosystem's embrace with the sun's warm kiss on my face. Time appears to stand still even though I'm watching it pass before my own eyes without even realizing it because, for a few moments, I was utterly immersed in the present. It is my desire to share this odd sense of wildness and peace with those who haven't seen this environment that means so much to me.

I grew up chasing fiddler crabs, building palm frond forts, fishing from the neighborhood dock, and being a river rat. It's a term that seems degrading to most non-river people and, at a time, referred to a lower-class person living off the water. But that's never how I've known it. There are certain traits we river rats commonly have, especially in the summer: sun-weathered skin, cracked fingertips from being in the saltwater day after day, sun-kissed hair, sun-bleached clothes, raccoon eyes from a sunglass' tan, and the combined scent of sweat, sunscreen, and saltwater with the occasional fish aroma depending on your daily activities. The marshlands' eerie beauty and mystery captivate me, and I feel the water is what unifies human, animals, and the environment. There is mutual respect and understanding amongst all who share this ecosystem.

“The marsh did not confine them but defined them and, like any sacred ground, kept their secrets deep.”

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 2. *Johnny's Cut*, Moon River, river water salt print, 2021

KINSHIP TO PLACE + JACK LEIGH

Have you ever found a place that purely resonates with you? There's this unspoken connection that you feel unable to describe. When you hear the word kinship, one automatically thinks of a relative, a blood relation. Many people don't consider us to have a kinship to place. Another term to consider describing this connection is a soul place. A 'Soul Place' is where you feel at peace, anywhere from a forest, river, city, park, ruins, etc.⁶ It is your soul's "true" home, where you feel as much a part of it as it does of you. Your soul place gives you a spectacular sense of belonging when you're there. It's where you escape, your best friend, your safe zone, your peace, your stillness, your awe, where you belong, and no care in the world matters. We crave a place where we feel we belong. The marsh is my solitude, my escape, my soul place.

There are countless times I've found myself sitting in the low tide mud, tears streaming down my face, feeling the water brush my toes without explaining myself, and letting the marsh embrace me when I felt helpless. The marsh is my constant; she's always been there for me and knows all my secrets. I never felt judged, ridiculed, or told what I was doing wrong. When I needed to escape the frustration and anger of my parents, I'd run into the swamp woods that were my backyard. I knew all the paths and could get around and into places an adult couldn't. I would spend countless hours in my palm frond fort put together with random scraps and whatever else drifted in during the tides. The

⁶ Hindle, Caroline. "What Is A Soul Place and How Do You Know If You've Found Yours?"

marsh is where my imagination could run wild. I could be a princess in a castle in the marsh, have battles, build forts, and create worlds. Herons didn't care if I was part of the junior league, and the fiddler crabs didn't care if I mispronounced words. There's a beautiful sense of balance and respect; we're all equal in the marsh. I spent my entire adolescence on the water. Summers were spent boating, exploring sandbars, fishing, crabbing, sunbathing, camping, etc. But I never appreciated it or understood my connection to this place. If you had asked me twenty years ago what I thought about the marsh, I probably would have been indifferent. It wasn't until I moved away and returned home to Savannah, Georgia during a complex time in my life that I subconsciously sought out the marsh for solitude and started making art again. Fellow Savannahian and artist Jack Leigh had a



Figure 1. Jack Leigh, *Oystering As The Tide Rises*, gelatin silver print, 1979

similar experience with Savannah. Leigh didn't even recognize his deep-rooted inspiration from the familiar landscapes until he, too, returned home later in life. I grew up with Leigh's artworks.

His images "reflect a calm and consistency that comes with the hot sun and the landscape that reminds you of the history that has come before."⁷ He managed to capture scenes that a camera is usually not privy to and shared the other side of those typical marsh

⁷ Smithson, Aline. "Savannah Remembers One of Its Own: Full Circle with Jack Leigh."

scenes one usually sees. Leigh was able to share the essence of the coastal empire due to his connection to the land.

“... judgement had no place here. Evil was not in play, just life pulsing on, even at the expense of some of the participants. Biology sees right and wrong as the same color in different light. Nothing seemed too indecorous as long as the tick & the tock of life carried on. She knew this was not a dark side to Nature, just inventive ways to endure against all odds.”

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 3. *Balance*, Moon River, river water salt print, 2021

BIOPHILIA + SELAH

The need to have our own relationship with a place and benefit from the sense of peace and comfort it can offer us is personal and can't be dictated. The term Biophilia was first coined in the 1930s by social psychologist Eric E. Fromm. He recognized that plants, air, water, and animals all play an essential role in not only our survival, but also in our emotional well-being. Biologist, naturalist, and entomologist Edward O. Wilson further expanded on Fromm's theory in his book *Biophilia*, "We should be compelled to love nature to the degree that when we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them and ourselves."⁸ Wilson discusses that humans have an ingrained and instinctive bond with nature and how our need for connection is deeply rooted within our DNA. We often talk about a love of and for a place, but rarely do we think that the place loves us back. This bond to place gives us, somewhere to return to and offers an intimacy that allows a small portion of ourselves to remain connected.

Some landscapes have such an expansive space that it helps to put whatever we're dealing with into perspective of our small role in this vast world. These locations give us refuge. These areas remain the same and are more reliable than human beings, even though both are changing. Humans advance faster, so when we return to specific locations, they appear to be the same and provide that familiarity in the unknown. Somewhere that our own stories aren't outweighing the present—a place to experience a

⁸ Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species*

moment of Selah. There is no exact definition of this term, and the ambiguity of that suits me.

According to the Columbia Encyclopedia, Selah (סֶלָה) is an obscure Hebrew word that occurs seventy-one times in thirty-nine of the Psalms, and three times in Habakkuk 3: altogether seventy-four times in the Bible.⁹ The book of Psalms is the hymn book mostly written by King David of Israel. Scholars believe Selah to be a musical notation signifying a pause or the end of a phrase. The Jewish encyclopedia describes it as an invitation to suspend choral music, stop prayer recitation, or engage in a moment of silent reflection.⁹ This word is a puzzle, and to this day, Judaic scholars are still researching to better understand it's definition. I choose to interpret the idea of Selah as a pause in the chaotic nature of life and a chance to reflect. In this fleeting moment of mental rest, one can feel the connection between mind, body, soul, and place.

Trying to bring this idea of Selah into my life, I've found a correlation between moments of pause with a sense of joy and fulfillment. Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist, believes that focusing on and absorbing ordinary moments of joy has a natural and beneficial effect on our health.¹⁰ This constant journey for fulfillment, joy, or true happiness is something we all desire, regardless of our religious or spiritual practices. I believe this sense of joy can be found when we pause and appreciate the little moments in our soul place, letting ourselves be present and feel our connection to the world around us. It can be frustrating and fleeting, and I find genuine happiness most readily in the

⁹ Hirsch EG, Selah, Jewish Encyclopedia

¹⁰ Loeffelholz, Tracy Matsue. "How to Fund a Just Economic Recovery"

marshlands. For this series I strived to create images that show these in-between moments—the things that are only seen and appreciated when fully immersed in the present and the environment, not simply passing by.

“Nature had nurtured, tutored, and protected her when no one else would.”

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 4. *Feriby*, Moon River, river water salt print, 2020

ELLA MORTON + COURTNEY JOHNSON

Artist Ella Morton's series *Dissolving Landscape* is a great comparison to the power of having a process connected to a concept. In this series, Morton relates the process to the concept using the Mordançage process, which provides a visual aid in the subject



Figure 2. Ella Morton, *Little Fogo #1*, Chromira print from mordançage, 2018

matter of climate change.¹¹ The lifted silver gelatin, also known as veils, mimics a slow motion time-lapse feel of the landscape fading away. The fragility and the lack of control in the process creates results similar to climate change.

When working on my series, I couldn't quite figure out that I was searching for a process that would help articulate my art in a way words cannot. I was subconsciously searching for a process to tie it all together, and salt printing was my answer. Using river water to print my images is unpredictable. This has been a blessing and a curse. I am inherently a creature that loves control. My collaboration with marsh water takes some of that control away, leaving me open to new discoveries and avenues of exploration. I use this process because it not only shows the hand of the artist, but it also shows the contribution of the elements. I've

¹¹ Kurlat, Galina. "Ella Morton: The Dissolving Landscape"

grown to love the inconsistent marks because that is evidence of the water's presence in the process.

During my first year of grad school, I was introduced to the artist Courtney Johnson, who had a similar question: Can one use natural saltwater to make a print? Learning of Johnson gave me some ease in knowing that what some may view as “mistakes” or “impurities” are the results from using brackish water. Johnson’s research focuses on the reaction of the water’s salinity with photographic chemistry.¹² She



Figure 3. Courtney Johnson, *Badwater Basin* 28% salinity, salt print, 2017



Figure 4. Courtney Johnson, *Galveston* 12% salinity, salt print, 2017

experimented with bodies of water from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Salt Lakes, varying in salinity from 1% to 55%. Similar to Johnson, I’m using the physical impact of the water’s salinity to create images that represent the river rat lifestyle. The water’s contribution is that these images are made with the water from the areas I’m photographing. The various minerals and microorganisms in the water sources cause unexpected and wonderful surprises representing the “hand” of the water.

¹² Franks Wells, Angela. “Courtney Johnson: The States Project: North Carolina.”

SALT PRINTS

Salt prints are one of the earliest photographic techniques that makes a positive photographic print. The process was invented in the mid-1830s by English scientist William Henry Fox Talbot.¹³ Paper is soaked in salt water and then coated with silver

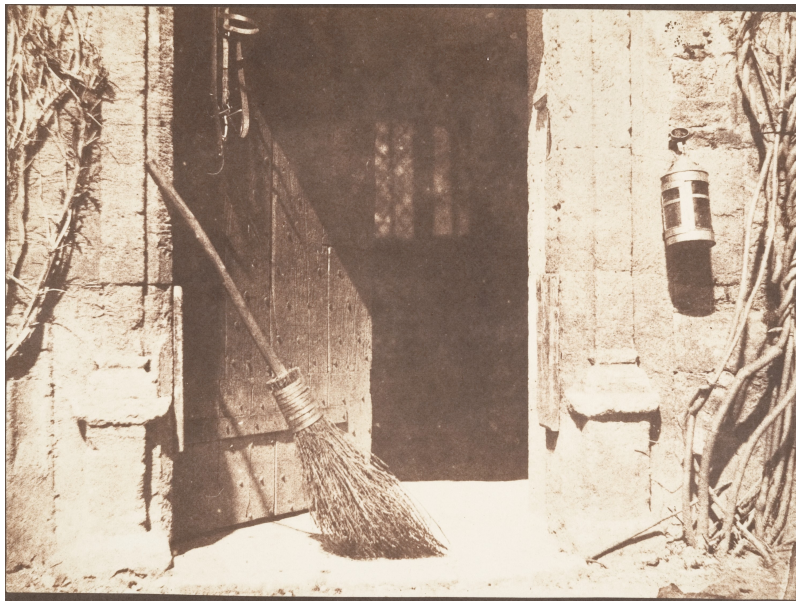


Figure 5. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Open Door*, salt print, before May 1844

nitrate in a light-tight room. Next, the paper is exposed to UV light with an object or negative placed on top. The silver chloride reaction is what prints the image onto the paper. After, the image is rinsed in saltwater and then fixed in sodium thiosulfate to

stop the chemistry from advancing and preserves the image. The result feels like magic. Humidity, minerals contaminating the water, inconsistent brush strokes, and chemistry fogging the paper are a few factors that affect the results, making this a fickle process. My biggest challenge with learning to work with such a simple yet temperamental process was that even with controlled materials, the results are so mixed. I have found a way to add more uncontrolled variables. But the results are worth the frustration.

¹³ Marien, Mary W. *Photography: A Cultural History*

"Reckon I was better off learning from the wild."

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 5. *Off The Beaten Path*, Cock Spur Island Channel, river water salt print, 2022

MY PROCESS

When I'm photographing, I always make sure I have a gallon jug with me. After photographing a location, I will grab my jug and collect water. I get some of the most peculiar looks, and my response is merely, "It's for art." Saltwater is brackish and filled with all types of wild microorganisms, minerals, waste, etc. Marsh water has a funk to it, and these jugs sometimes sit for days, weeks, and months in my studio accumulating a pungent odor that smells like what I'd imagine the bog of eternal stench from *The Labyrinth* would smell like. After warning my studio mates about the stench, I'll soak the paper in the saltwater solution for 15 minutes. Once the paper has soaked, I hang it up to dry and let the smell dissipate slowly. The next step is coating the paper with silver nitrate. This process requires specific ratios between salt and silver solution. I coat my paper twice with silver to compensate for the additives and increased salinity. Coating paper can be



Figure 6. Examples of varied results caused by river water

frustrating if you have uneven brush strokes. The saltwater causes reactions with the silver that provides inconsistencies such as speckles, color distortions, odd stains, and streaks; some areas can become super dark so that you can almost see the silver, and sometimes you can see little salt residue crystals, or the prints can look dark and muddy. The unpredictable reactions due to the saltwater means you never know what you might get.

“...laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother.”

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 6. *When I Carried You*, Cock Spur Island Channel, river water salt print, 2022

I started exploring the idea of this series after my mom passed away. I began making photographs of the marsh, which is very cliché, especially with that geographical region—so much of the artwork you see around Savannah, Georgia, is of the marshland and water. The photographs I created were technically sound, but I was continually frustrated by the feeling that something was missing. I also wasn't acknowledging why I needed to capture the marsh just right. When I challenged myself to create a connection between content and technique, I realized the process of salt printing could show the viewer the amazing world I saw within the marsh. Everything finally made sense when I started using river water to make my images; I am able to collaborate with nature and share a piece of the area I love so much.

The first thing I focused on was choosing sound compositions. Images that could stand on their own without the additional details and textures this process would provide; images that fully visualized the essence of being a river rat. I worked to find the perfect balance of picturesque “postcard” scenes and the subtle nuances and hidden moments I was privy to as a river rat. I want to share the big picture as well as the intimate vignettes; how people, environment, and animals interact in this world together. It was important to capture images that showed my point of view so that the audience could experience this world through my eyes. I wasn't the subject; I was the lens. There are hidden meanings behind these images because of my personal memories connected to the particular location, such as “Off the Beaten Path” (plate 5) and “When I Carried You” (plate 6) which both were photographed in a marsh creek area that is only accessible during low tide and

the place where I like to go and hide to just be present with the marsh. The selected sequence curates the moments by sharing my point of view with the audience.

“Never underrate the heart,
Capable of deeds
The mind cannot conceive.
The heart dictates as well as feels.
How else can you explain
The path I have taken,
That you have taken
The long way through this pass?”

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens



Plate 7. *Beyond the Reeds*, Lazaretto Creek, river water salt print, 2020

CONCLUSION

After installation, I sat in the gallery to reflect on my photographs. To fully experience as intended. I was able to see the peace that my soul place provides. Realizing



Figure 7. Thesis Installation, *River Rat*, Greenville Museum of Art, 2023

how I tried to deny the truth of this series. Thinking I was merely creating art to document this geographical location and provide scientific context regarding climate change and the importance of this ecosystem. Yes, Coastal

wetlands, salt marshes, mangroves, and sawgrass store a quarter of the carbon in the earth's soil despite only covering 5% of the planet's land area.¹⁴ Yes, these barriers protect and provide for us while self-sustaining their ecosystem. This body of work captures the beauty and fragility of this beloved and often overlooked ecosystem, but it's so much more than that. In truth, working on this project has allowed me to acknowledge the deeper meaning. It's about resilience, grief, peace with myself, and solitude. This series explores the complexities of adolescence, relationships, time, and the tensions between nature, history, and memory. *River Rat* is a self-portrait and a love letter to my soul place.

¹⁴ Rush, Elizabeth. *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore*



Figure 8. Thesis Installation, *River Rat*, Greenville Museum of Art, 2023



Figure 9. Thesis Installation, *River Rat*, Greenville Museum of Art, 2023



Figure 10. Thesis Installation, *River Rat*, Greenville Museum of Art, 2023



Figure 11. Thesis Installation, *River Rat*, Greenville Museum of Art, 2023

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**“That’s where you’ll always find me, way back yonder, where the
crawdads sing.”**

...

Where The Crawdads Sing, Delia Owens

