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I Heard the North Wind Call Your Name

by

Ian Edward White

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY
April 14, 2022

Committee Approval

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By

Ian Edward White

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Abstract

I Heard the North Wind Call Your Name is a photographic series of portraits and post-industrial landscapes made in Rochester, NY. In the fall of 2020, I began wandering, hoping through photography, that I could make connections to people and gain a better understanding of my new home. With no agenda in mind, I allowed myself to become comfortable with the unknown - to follow my intuition and curiosity wherever they took me. Chance encounters and conversations with strangers often turned into portraits. My work, and understanding of the city, are informed by these shared experiences with my subjects.

I am concerned with a sense and rhythm of a place and invested in making photographs that speak to my personal experience of Rochester. Exploring themes of longing, anxiety, and resiliency, my work is an interpretation, rather than a documentation. My project won't tell you what to think about Rochester or its people, but hopefully it can show you that being open and engaging produces meaningful records.

When I approach a project, place is always first on my mind. In Rochester, I have encountered the fragile state of connection and distance, love and longing, serenity, and anxiety. Often, the difference between these states of being are minuscule. This is something that I have continuously discovered in my photographic search – not only in the people I photograph, but the landscape itself, too.

Going out into Rochester over these past two years has taught me a lot. I have learned that this place has been through a lot socially, politically, and economically. But I have also learned that this city is extremely welcoming and resilient, and its people are strong and proud.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Dean and Maryann White. For without your love and support, this journey in Rochester, NY would have not been possible.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Rochester Institute of Technology, Joshua Thorson, Gregory Halpern, Eric Kunsman, Ahndraya Parlato, Dan Larkin, Conor Martin, and the rest of my cohort for all your help and insight along the way. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the people of Rochester, NY. I will never forget you.

I Heard the North Wind Call Your Name is a photographic series of portraits and post-industrial landscapes made in Rochester, NY. In the fall of 2020, I began wandering, hoping through photography, that I could make connections with people and gain a better understanding of my new home. With no agenda in mind, I allowed myself to become comfortable with the unknown - to follow my intuition and curiosity wherever they took me. Chance encounters and conversations with strangers often turned into portraits. My work, and understanding of the city, are informed by these shared experiences with my subjects.

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I work in the tradition of a lyrical, poetic style of photography, a mode of working that documents the real world but presents it with subjectivity and personal expression.¹ Their lyrical quality is borne out of the intention to make photographs just for the sake of one's own curiosity with the world in front of them.

In the 1930's, Walker Evans was commissioned by the J.B. Lippincott Company to document the political revolution that was happening in Cuba.² Evans, much like his contemporaries, was expected to capture the news and bring back photographs of rioting on the streets of Cuba.³ The portfolio he made and brought back with him to America after three weeks

¹ Walker Evans, John T. Hill, and Alan Trachtenberg, *Walker Evans: Lyric Documentary: Selections from Evans's Work for the U.S. Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1937* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 13.

² Stephanie Schwartz, *Walker Evans: No Politics* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2020), 1.

³ Ibid.

of photographing Havana did not meet the expectations of the publisher. They didn't demonstrate any sense of political turmoil. Instead, the portfolio consisted of images of everyday life in Havana, such as people waiting to catch the bus or a man sleeping on a bench. ⁴ It was a clear refusal to capture the narrative he was assigned and a shift in what documentary photography could do. Evans photographed the real world without a sense of definitive narrative and presented his images in a way that was not easy to reduce into news or propaganda. This style of photography would become what he is now famous for: lyric documentary, the term he finally coined at a lecture he gave at Yale in 1964.⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.



Figure 1: *Do I Want to Know*, 2020.

Documentary style photography is used to make lyrical interpretations of the world because both the artist and the viewer are disposed with the themes that are presented.⁶ Due to this predisposition, singular photographs project a metaphoric quality when placed within a sequence. When looking at *Do I Want to Know* (Fig. 1), the handprints on the motel room window speak to concepts like love, death, presence, absence, youth, and more. I can push any one of these themes

⁶ Paul Graham and Rebecca Bengal, "And the Clock Waits so Patiently," in *But Still, It Turns* (London, UK: MACK, 2021), pp. 93-103, 94.

simply by what photographs I choose to precede and follow it in the sequence. This allows me to build an idea of Rochester based in the themes that I choose to present.

The more an artist pushes on the idea of place, the more the idea of time pushes back even harder; this is inevitable because place and time are so closely related.⁷ Alec Soth's version of Niagara Falls is conceptually rooted in the lore of his grandparents' honeymoon and the high rates of suicide in the area. Ultimately, *Niagara* does not serve as a document of the place. Rather, the city is used as a metaphor for Soth to explore his own feelings about his love life and mortality. Newlyweds, love-themed motels, and couples appear throughout the sequence to push the connotation of love, while lonely drinks at the bar, the blood-red color of the falls at night, and frozen motel landscapes suggest a darker undertone. In this work, time appears to be as mysterious as the love letters that are present. Aside from a few cultural signifiers like a no smoking sign, color television, and a pickup truck, this version of Niagara feels older than it really is.

When I approach a project, place is always first on my mind. In Rochester, I have been exploring the ideas of connection and distance, love and longing, serenity, and anxiety. Often, the difference between these states of being are minuscule. This is something that I have continuously discovered in my photographic search. Not only in the people I photograph, but the landscape itself, too.

The non-figurative images emphasize the photographic search that I embark on. By placing them non-linearly in a sequence, the movement through place becomes much more lyrical than specific. I am not tracking my own movement, rather, I am trying to display the feelings I experienced by engaging with this place. Unlike the portraits, I think of these photos in both the lyrical and specific sense. They are lyrical in how they describe my feelings of discovery while

⁷ Jan Baetens, Alexander Streitberger, and Hilde van Gelder, *Time and Photography* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2018), vii.



Figure 2: *Along the Tracks*, 2021.

engaging with the landscape. When looking at *Along the Tracks* (Fig. 2) I want to provide a sense of warmth, both in actual temperature and love for the land that I am moving through. I made this photograph on a Sunday afternoon back in the spring of 2021. “There’s something about a Sunday, that makes the body feel alone,” Johnny Cash once said. As I walk along the train tracks, I notice a deafening silence. An abandoned auto shop lays idle as the walls fall in on themselves, the back lot full of tires and weeds. An occasional knock from the wind startles me as I make my way closer. A hawk circles above my head looking for lunch. The wind picks up and the clouds move out of the Sun’s way. A field of wheat starts dancing in the golden light.



Figure 3: *The Tower*, 2021.

The non-figure photographs are also specific in how they describe the actual place the work is set in. When looking at *The Tower* (Fig. 3), we see the Kodak tower looming far in the distance, being hit by the late afternoon sun. In the foreground, there is a gas station lying in the shadow of the tower. There is rubble on the ground. The gas pump is disconnected. The only sign of life is a neon green ATM sign in the window. It seems that no one will be driving away from this gas station anytime soon. This business has seen better days, now a relic in the downtown landscape of Rochester. Places like this are also symbols of progression stopped dead in its tracks, both industrially and technologically.

When out in the world, I am not thinking about the relationships between images or what motifs I should be concentrating on that day. I am responding to singular moments, people, things, and hoping that the collection of them all will sing together in the end. Making this book has been the ultimate testament of my faith in the photographic search. Ultimately, I see this book as a marker of my time here in Rochester. My approach to sequencing this work was the idea of going

from cold to warm – not just through the seasons, but through interaction with a place and its people, too. When I first got here to Rochester, I did not know anybody and had never been here prior. After nearly two years of making photographs here, I have warmed up to this place tremendously and now possess a strong love for Rochester. In the book, we start in a cold, desolate landscape with few interactions with people. By the end of the book, we find ourselves at the lake, basking in the warm sunlight in the company of others. The fifteen copies that I have made are my way of giving back to the people who have helped me so much along the way. I have learned so much about editing, sequencing, making book dummies, showing work to others, and more through this process that I am eternally grateful for.

I also see this work as the beginning of a much larger project. I will continue to make photographs in the Northeast after my time here at RIT. This region of America is a foreign landscape to me. It is providing me with a larger context to the American Dream that I have been interested in photographing for years. I am eager to see how a photograph made in Cleveland, Detroit, or Philadelphia will look next to the photographs I have made here in Rochester. The more cities I photograph and people I encounter in the Northeast, the more this project is giving me an idea of a particular American experience in these post-industrial environments in the 21st century. I want to be a part of the tradition of American documentary-style photographers who make expansive photo books about the idea and reality of the American dream.

The standard for lyrical documentary photo books was not set until Walker Evans released *American Photographs* in 1938.⁸ Evans' portraits of people and place are presented with only one piece of context: "they are presented without sponsorship or connection with the policies, aesthetic, or political, of any of the institutions, publications or government agencies for which some of the

⁸ Miles Orvell and Miles Orvell, "Photography and Society," in *Photography in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 95-119, 103.

work has been done.”⁹ The combination of portraits, landscapes, and vernacular images, then, is a version of America that is unique to his experience. That is what I love about the photobook. I love that I can bind together a sequence of images of my experiences that will live on in the world. Evans’ masterpiece brought the emphasis back onto the content of the photography, setting the precedence on the single image in relation to the sequence. Robert Frank’s *The Americans* was the next groundbreaking American documentary photo book. Coming to America from Switzerland, Frank saw through the veil of the American Dream. His photographs were seen as a critique of American society by revealing the social, political, and economic flaws of its nature in the 1950s.

Walker Evans and Robert Frank are the forebearers of a lineage of photographic artists who would use the photo book as the vessel of expression for their documentary practice. These artists challenge the viewer to see themselves within the American people photographed.¹⁰ There is no singular image that represents America; America needs to be represented by the landscapes, people, symbols, icons, beauties, and failures that make up the perception of the American Dream.¹¹

Back in the Fall of 2020, I would constantly see my neighbor working on his farmland during my commute to and from campus. I knew that I wanted to make portraits of strangers but was very timid to approach people out in the world. One Saturday morning, I decided that if I really wanted to dive into portraiture, he would be the first person that I would approach.

⁹ Walker Evans and Lincoln Kirstein, “American Photographs,” Preface in *American Photographs* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016).

¹⁰ Siri Engberg, Geoff Dyer, and Britt Salvesen, “American History,” in *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America*, First (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2010), pp. 104-111, 105.

¹¹ Ibid.



Figure 4: *Impasse*, 2020.

Russell (Fig. 4) is 78 years old and has lived on the farm his whole life. His family has owned the land since the turn of the 20th century, and he is now the one running the show in its fourth generation. Russell's main crop is ethanol corn, and he gets contracted by the Shell corporation to grow it for them. I told him my story and that I am a photographer from RIT working on a project loosely based on Rochester. Russell was very excited to learn that, and I asked him if I could make his picture. Waiting for his response felt like an eternity. I could see the old man thinking about it and considering all the pros and cons. After what felt like ten years, when it was probably only ten seconds, Russell obliged. This session was monumental to me. Russell allowed me to direct him around the farm. I played with distance, environment, composition, and light.

I made several more trips to Russell's farm during that Fall. I met his friends, he would tell me stories, and I learned how to connect with a person through photography. I was drawn to Russell because there was a certain aura about him. It felt welcoming and it seemed the land around him could tell as great a tale as he could. I am so glad I followed my instinct to approach him because I made a new friend and our interaction taught me to follow my curiosity, approach people with empathy, and engage with an open temperament to produce a meaningful record.

What initially draws me to a person might be one of a few things. It could be the way they separate themselves from the crowd. It could be the way they are walking alongside the road. It could be the way two people share a sunset together. Sometimes, people come up to me because they are interested in what I am photographing. For whatever reason, I am pulled into their orbit, and I choose to follow my intuition and start a conversation with them. I choose to give myself completely over to them. It's almost like being under a spell.

When I make a portrait of someone and share a conversation with them, it helps me find likeness in the world. I dealt with depression and substance abuse in my late teens and early twenties. I went through major episodes of isolating myself from friends, family, and the world around me. When I rediscovered my love and passion for photography, it brought me back into a world that I had ultimately given up on. The subjective reasoning behind my portraiture today is to continuously bring me closer to people and share the complexity and beauty of our existence in this world.

Contemporary documentary portraiture is much more concerned about the connection made between the photographer and subject. Martha Rosler suggests that documentary photographers must give up the fear of direct engagement and conversation to produce a much

clearer document.¹² When a photographer fosters connection intensely, the relationship and trust is reciprocated more wholly between photographer and subject.

I have found that having a camera is the best excuse to start a conversation. The camera acts like a passport that opens the social and cultural barriers that exist without it. However, I do realize these barriers exist with the camera, too, and I know that I am owed nothing by the people I approach for a photograph. I am always grateful for the privilege of taking someone else's picture. Going out into the world with my camera gives me a sense of curiosity and confidence that is not present without it. I've come to learn that people generally recognize photographers as beacons of curiosity and are interested in what we see in the world. When this curiosity is noticeably shared between us, I give myself over to it and say yes to everything within reason that comes my way. I've learned things about the world and about people that I don't think I would have ever known without engaging with people through photography.

In his work *Lost Coast*, Curran Hatleberg spends anywhere from an hour to months with his subjects (sometimes even living with these people), often without the camera to his eye, waiting for when the relationship sparks a genuine moment of excitement or mystery.¹³ Hatleberg feels that a great portrait is the result of shared curiosity and longing for connection. Of his process, he said he can't tell who needs who more in these situations.¹⁴

¹² Martha Rosler, *Martha Rosler: 3 Works* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006), 82.

¹³ Christian Badach and Curran Hatleberg, "Interview - Curran Hatleberg," Paper Journal, October 4, 2021, <https://paper-journal.com/interview-currant-hatleberg/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.



Figure 5: *Mayson and Gabby, 2021.*

When I ran into Mayson and Gabby (Fig. 5) down by the lake over summer, there was a mutual excitement to this portrait. For me, I had been dreaming about making this picture for weeks. I envisioned photographing a couple on this slab of rock and when I saw them, I knew this was the moment to make this happen. After I made the photographs and gave them my contact information, they revealed why they were so excited: earlier that day, Mayson and Gabby got married. Their photographer, however, did not show up to make their pictures, so, to distract themselves from this frustration, they headed to the water to enjoy their first day as newlyweds.

When I approached them and asked to make their picture, they couldn't believe it. They said it was a true sign of the universe. I was able to make the photograph I wanted, and they were able to get the photograph they wanted to commemorate their day. Moments like this inspire me to continue directly engaging with people.

The portrait in documentary photography is a result of an innate need to confront and directly engage with society.¹⁵ By engaging with people, the artist must be aware that their work has innate social implications for which they are accountable for. Dawoud Bey, for example, has called attention to power imbalances and hierarchies within photographic practices, and has sought out ways to make his portraits more collaborative. Bey often allows his subjects to have direction over their pose, which he feels allows them to have ownership over their representation and physical space within the photographic act.¹⁶

In my process, I try not to over direct the people I photograph. I think that portraiture is like doing the box step dance. I'll lead one way and then I'll let my partner take me a different way. My only consistent request of people is that they gaze into the camera as if they are looking at themselves in the mirror. I have found that this achieves the neutral and unguarded expression I am looking for in my portraits. This is important to me in my portraiture because I have found that facial expressions can be too powerful and distracting. I don't want a huge smile or a devastating frown to take away from the gesture of the body, the distance between myself and the subject, and the environmental factors that all make up the portrait. The portrait begins and ends with the face; however, it is the culmination of all those factors mentioned that make up the magic of a good

¹⁵ Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (Boston, MA: Focal Press, 1986), xviii.

¹⁶ Dawoud Bey and Brian Ulrich, *Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities* (New York, NY: Aperture, 2019), 49.

portrait. Once our time is over, I always give out my contact information and let them know I will send a copy of their portrait over email.

Driving has always been a meditative act in my photography. For one, it allows me to clear my head. One of the toughest challenges I have is getting out of my own head before I go out to shoot. There is often this negative voice telling me that I lost it, I won't make anything good, or it's not worth going out. Once I get in the car and start driving, this voice goes away, and I enter this trance like state of being. I've found that because I must pay attention to my surroundings while I drive, I become atypically present. So, there is no room for this negative voice to occur any longer and I just get to concentrate on the photographic search.

This trance state of thinking is what really ignites the artistic process for me. As Garry Winogrand once said, it feels like the closest thing to not existing. I can feel the death of my ego kick in and I just become this hyper aware, hyper curious being. Stimuli come in all shapes and sizes, and I try to be as open as I can. In conversations in the past, I've described my mode of working like a dog who is looking for the bone he buried. I can't remember what it looks like, I can't remember where I went, but I'm going to follow the trail of curiosity until I find it. I've learned from experience that having an agenda in this way of working is not very useful at all.

Working off intuition and curiosity alone can be a slow process for me. Some days, I drive for hours without pulling over. I never know how the day will go for me when I step out of the door. I have found, though, I need to get into a groove to really start making consistently good work. I am the kind of photographer who needs to go out seven days a week to make one good picture. This is because I do not typically know what I am looking for. I enjoy that the search reveals these things to me, whenever the universe allows it to happen. As much as I'd like to think I rely on my own intuition, a lot of my work has to do with chance.

One of John Baldessari's three rules for being a great artist is being in the right place at the right time. I fully subscribe to this idea. On one day, I'll get three portrait opportunities in a row that are interesting. The next day, I'll get rejected twice and just miss a person as they are leaving. These kinds of days happen much more frequently than one would think. I feel that these bad days really inspire me and push me to work even harder the next day I go out. I don't think I would be consistently inspired to go out into the world if every day was perfect for me. There is nothing interesting nor challenging about that.

Going out into Rochester over these past two years has taught me a lot. I have learned that this place has been through a lot socially, politically, and economically. But I have also learned that this city is extremely welcoming and resilient., and its people are strong and proud to be from Rochester.

Rochester has taught me a lot about myself, too. Detachment from the people I love and the places I lived in was the reason I got back into photography five years ago. Photography gave me a reason to go back out into the world and try to carve out my space in it again. With this project, I feel that I have completely closed off that distance and chapter of my life. This work has taught me a lot about what it simply means to be human, to embrace the unknown, and to look into the eyes of a stranger but feel right at home in our shared existence. This city will always have a special place in my heart and this project is my way of saying thank you.

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