On Groundless Fears

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On Groundless Fears

by

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Degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

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Abstract

I often have dreams in which I’m chased or followed. Sometimes there’s an urgent life-threatening pace where I’m running from a pursuer. Often, it’s slower and less immediate, and in some cases, I don’t turn around to see if someone is behind me. The feeling of being followed is enough to keep me moving.

*On Groundless Fears* is a photographic series that focuses on subconscious anxieties where the root causes are not readily apparent to us. Untethered from reality, these fears loom and seep into the mundane. The setting of an American suburb is meant to be familiar and unsuspecting; however, an eerie silence permeates throughout the photographs noticeably absent of people. Harsh flash and distorted reflections reveal psychological landscapes with shadows concealing, fences obstructing, and houses hiding.
On Groundless Fears

I often have dreams in which I’m chased or followed. Sometimes there’s an urgent life-threatening pace where I’m running from a weapon wielding pursuer, but often it’s slower and less immediate. In these cases, I don’t turn around to see who or if someone is chasing me, the feeling of being followed is enough to keep me moving.

My thesis work began taking shape after reading a letter written by first-century philosopher Seneca titled “On Groundless Fears.”¹ There, he calls attention to anxieties where the root causes are not

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readily apparent to us; instead they are hidden. These are ambient anxieties that loom inside our heads, untethered from an identifiable cause and, seemingly, from reality. Seneca discusses the ability of these fears to overtake our rational thinking with their boundless nature and anonymity. It’s important to note that these groundless fears do have a source; today they might be referred to as subconscious anxiety,² but the idea is the same as Seneca’s roughly two thousand years ago. Our inability to discern the anxiety’s cause creates an added tension. The feeling is boundless, muddy, and cloaked in uncertainty while we grasp at trying to make sense of what is unknown to us. There’s a strong desire to uncover that which is not yet revealed, whether that revelation is obtainable or not. As Seneca wrote, “We are frightened by uncertainties just as if they were certain.”³

![Exhibition view, William Harris Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, April 2023](image)

Borrowing the title from Seneca, my thesis project *On Groundless Fears* identifies the anxiety and uncertainty of the middle-class American suburbs. The setting is meant to elicit the feeling of the familiar and the unsuspecting. However, instead of confirming signs of suburbia like


³ Seneca, “On Groundless Fears.”
white picket fences and golden retrievers, I look for instances where the feelings are off-kilter and discomforting. Stairs that lead nowhere sit in the grass (figure 3). Looming shadows hang still on an otherwise empty wall, and windows reflect and distort what appears opposite them (figure 4).

As I began to translate these experiences into my photographs, I looked back to my own upbringing. I grew up in the suburbs of Phoenix, the fifth most populous city in the United States. Defined by its outward expansion, it’s a relatively new city, which saw rapid growth after World War II as automobiles became a household staple, making life outside a city center an option for more people. With plenty of flat surrounding land, the city spread out expanding into a seemingly never-ending grid of beige houses, two car garages, and swimming pools (figure 5). The result is a mass of land with a population in the millions, and a low population density for its size. This environment shaped me. 110-degree summers discouraged exploration, confining me to my own street for most of the year, and strict residential zoning laws forbade anything but uniform homes in planned neighborhoods. Even if the hostile climate didn’t prevent me from getting out, there was nothing to see but hundreds of other houses that looked just like mine. A convenience store half-a-mile down the road was the most enticing option for escape. A community college stood across the street from that. With little motivation to explore, I did
not develop a great sense of independence which contributed to me growing up an anxious kid. Looking back, I see the hot, mundane bubble that surrounded me, and feel compelled to connect the dots to see how these circumstances helped shape the hesitant person I am today. These feelings are with me and inform my work as I photograph empty neighborhoods in Rochester, my temporary home, looking to capture a sense of this uneasiness.

Fig. 5  Cornelius Keyes, *The View of Phoenix’s Urban Sprawl from 4000 Ft.*, 1972
The unease almost seems by design. Growing cities out west along with newer suburban development surrounding older cities shied away from public spaces wherever possible, in favor of privacy and private property. Front porches disappeared as houses moved further away from the street and a greater emphasis was placed on backyards with 6-foot-high fences dividing them becoming the norm. Backyard swimming pools and barbeques reduced the need to leave one's own yard for leisure as families became more isolated – literally “fenced in.” Nevertheless, the Phoenix suburbs compelled me to look for the noteworthy in the banal. Photographing scenes of beauty, instances of intrigue, and visual anomalies became a goal as residential neighborhoods began recurring throughout my work.

The idea of engaging with scenes that go unnoticed compels me. Walking the streets of Rochester suburbs has become the mode of practice for On Groundless Fears. As the project started to come together, aimless wandering gave way to intentional looking Searching for off-putting scenes of looming triangular-roofed homes and puddles reflecting leafless branches (figure 6) became the core of the series in efforts to visualize the apprehension. My use of black and white expands the distance between the images and the reality they have recorded. Devoid of color and often stripped of context, my photographs work as psychological landscapes rather than objective documents of a place. Of course, Rochester is not like Phoenix, but the aura of tension can still be found anywhere. On Groundless Fears focuses on the tinted lens through which I view the world. A lens that stems from my experiences growing up in Arizona amid an extreme example of sprawl, but stays with me even in a new environment and can be found anywhere.

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Silence is a common motif throughout these images, complementing the idea of groundless fears. My photographs frequently foreshadow a looming future or reveal overlooked traces of the past but rarely an event, there’s hardly ever something happening in the present. Silence then becomes a presence in my work. I want the viewer to hold their breath in fear of disturbing something unseen lurking beneath the surface or behind a corner - to metaphorically tiptoe from image to image.
Someone who understands photography’s ability to slow the world down and capture its quiet is the artist Robert Adams. In the summer of 2022, I was able to visit his *American Silence* exhibit at the National Gallery of Art. Throughout his career, the use of silence in Adams’ images highlight the duality of the characteristic illustrating serenity and unveiling tension. This theme, explored in the exhibition as well as in his work at large, is something I have long thought about both in his photographs and my own. Seeing it across the artist’s work pushed me to take a step further and identify why I was drawn to silence and how it functions in my work. Through deadpan images of eerie, empty suburbs, wide open fields with grand skies, the cemetery-like resting place of clear-cut forests, and the tranquility of moonlit streets, Adams encapsulates both moments of quiet beauty and a palpable anxiety (figures 7 and 8). He hints at this anxious allure by discussing “quiet pockets of beauty that can still be found in the shadowed depths of the forest.”

This intertwining of beauty and tension is something I strive for in my own work.

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My quiet images and slow pace are periodically broken up using the flash (figure 9). This disruption of silence, through harsh light on darkness, is intended to draw out a heightened awareness in the viewer. A burst of flash on a closeup shot of an unruly bush is especially noteworthy when seen in sequence with images of empty fenced-in yards and sidewalks absent of people. It’s not only unexpected, which adds to the intended anxiety, but the sequence encourages the audience to think of the interruption in relation to what came before and what comes after in the sequence. Twentieth-century American visual artist and musical composer Dick Higgins describes this effect succinctly, noting “boredom often serves a useful function: as an opposite to excitement and as a means of bringing emphasis to what it interrupts, causing us to view both elements freshly.”6 In my case, certain louder

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photographs bring attention to the silence of the quieter ones. Attuned to the quiet, my hope is that the audience tentatively anticipates the next interruption. Adjusting the audience's expectations are important as well. The series functions more as a slow-burn psychological thriller rather than a jump-scare filled horror film. The change of pace in this narrative is more about a subtle shift in tone.

![Figures 10 and 11](Fig. 10 Untitled, 2022) (Fig. 11 Untitled, 2022)

This sequence was encouraged by the switch from shooting film to shooting digitally. In the past I found myself in creative ruts, continuously taking the same shots with the subject centered at a medium distance using a great depth of field. The unlimited exposures and instant feedback offered by a digital camera has made it easier for me to push my work in different directions. I’ve played more with distance, flash, depth of field, and exposure time to broaden my once rigid visual toolkit (figures 10 and 11). This has only enhanced my thesis project as the variety can create tension and surprise in a sequence, keeping the audience on their toes.
In her 2018 book Landfall, photographer Mimi Plumb begins with a recollection: “I remember having insomnia for a time when I was 9 years old. My mother told me there might be nuclear war.”

Plumb’s project revolves around the anxieties of the world during the 1980s. She highlights an “increased concern about global warming during this period, civil wars in the Middle East and South America, and the election of a former movie star to the presidency of the United States” as contributions to a sense of no future. While stylistically Plumb works in a documentary fashion, she’s never interested in getting at objective truths, but rather at what it felt like to live during a specific time by visualizing a general unease. I feel as though there is a strong overlap between my work and Plumb’s in terms of our artistic intent, particularly in the similarities between the desired feelings we hope our images evoke.

On a technical side, I admire Plumb’s pacing in the edit of her sequences. Her ability to build suspense through slower, more subdued images with periodic breaks of heightened intensity perfectly moves and orchestrates an audience along with the artist. The more intense images use contrasting visual strategies like flash and dark shadows, or depict scenes of destruction to keep the audience in a rhythm.

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The more toned-down or subtle photographs continue to round out and soften the atmosphere of despair. It’s a delicate balancing act between not wanting to lose the audience, nor wanting to overstimulate them; neither would get at her intended effect. Walking this same line, I pay close attention to Plumb’s sequencing and my own to achieve this balance of anxious engagement and anticipation.

A large part of my practice involves looking at photobooks. I find myself constantly engaged with the art form and seek them out as a source of inspiration and motivation, particularly during creative blocks. The love of looking through photobooks has slowly pushed me into making them (figures 13 and 14). The go-at-your-own pace and intimate nature of flipping through a monograph has always appealed to me. As an artist, photobooks are a primary means in which I want my work to be interacted with. Through this engaged viewing of other artists' photobooks, I have been thinking about the ways in which I can activate and elevate my concepts by looking to the intersection of form and content. Creating books and editing the layout allows me to explore cohesion, size, pacing, and balance amongst a series of images and how to deploy these formal elements to elicit the emotions, ideas, and themes intended from my work.
While a single image from the project may hint at the ideas I’m expressing, it rarely gets at the full effect. Rather, the constant feeling of subconscious anxiety is fleshed out through the series. A sequence of photographs with barricades constantly interrupting the viewer creates an unapproachable atmosphere as shadows conceal, fences obstruct, and houses hide. Through an absence of people in a residential landscape, consistent blockages, and an uneasy tone, a series full of homes built to elicit feelings of security and stability, end up coming across as cold, distant, and unwelcoming.
Bibliography


