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What the Wildflowers Tell Us

by

Madelyn Lohman

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
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Date 05/05/2023

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Abstract

When good pictures come to us, we hope they tell a truth we can relate to. Truths about love, beauty, and death. *What The Wildflowers Tell Us* is a photographic series that conjures up intimate memories of my life during the past twenty years. Photography is an endless source of memory. These exhibition images open doors to the past and into the future. We catch a glimpse of the beauty and the dark side of things; the forest, the wilted peony, and the ashes. Beauty somehow tinges itself with sadness. Why do we need to hold what we love close to our bones when we know it's time to let go? The ever-changing landscape of my life has eased those lessons of fleetingness. The series confines itself within the messy aspect of time, in this intersection of past and future, time and place.



Figure 1. *Untitled, Kansas* from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2023

What The Wildflowers Tell Us

When I was ten years old, my stepmom made a bonfire in my family's backyard and burned boxes full of childhood photos taken by my mother. For the rest of my childhood and into adulthood, no one in the family owned a camera, so I have very few pictures of myself. Family photographs tend to be celebratory; in that sense, there was little motivation to document

our lives. The images within this series are fragments of the lost and uncaptured photographs of myself in the twenty years and the subsequent grief resulting from this loss.

What the Wildflowers Tell Us began when I returned to my childhood home in the Midwest for the holidays in December 2021. I photographed closed-in and cropped interior spaces that reminded me of scenes I once encountered. This trip enabled a way of working with my memory. After returning to Rochester, I continued making these kinds of photographs. I noticed how the home I grew up in slowly erased the mark of my mother. At the time, I felt the need to photograph the remaining bits of my past self and my short-lived childhood.

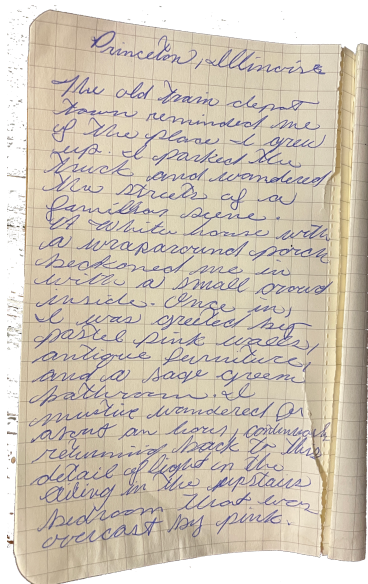
Photography is an endless source of memories. Images open doors to the past, and the meanings they provide show a window into the future. We catch glimpses of both the beautiful and the dark side of things: the forest, the wilted peony, and the ashes. Beauty somehow tinges itself with sadness. I am curious to know why we hold what we love close to our bones when we know it's time to move on. The ever-changing landscape of my life has eased these lessons of fleetingness. I find myself confined by the messy aspect of time, by the intersections of past and present, symbol and reality.



Figure 2. Nancy Rexroth, *IOWA*, 1977

I traveled across the U.S. photographing homes in the cities and towns I moved through, including cheap motels, my friends' apartments, and the homes of kind strangers I had just met. Some images were made searching the real estate market for open houses, wherein I searched for details that could spark a memory or is reminiscent of a dream. I never remember my dreams. In the morning, images come to my head, like visuals "flashes". From there, an obsession is born: photographically staging these flashes. I've concluded that these images are excerpts from my dreams.

This way of searching reminds me of Nancy Rexroth's book titled *IOWA*. Rexroth began photographing the rural landscapes, children, white frame houses, and domestic interiors of southeastern Ohio with a toy Diana camera. She created dreamlike, poetic images of her private landscape, a state of mind, calling this "Iowa" because the photographs referenced her childhood summer visits to relatives in that state.



Shadows linger between the horizon
of my mind and the lucid dreams
I relive it every night.

In my waking dreams lives
an idea of who I am.

Like flowers growing on an
eternal vine, the dreams
cultivate and blossom.

I become the shadows I dream about,
amongst the blooming flowers, I walk

Figure 3. Writing From My Journal, 2022

Figure 4. *Untitled, Illinois*, from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

Figure 5. *Untitled*, from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

While traveling, I journaled, thinking about the images and how the two could work together in my search for memory. I wrote about the image below (Fig. 4). It was photographed in an open house I saw while getting fuel in Princeton, Illinois. The text (Fig. 3) reads,

The old train depot town reminded me of where I grew up. I parked my truck and wandered the streets of a familiar scene. A white house with a wraparound porch beckoned me in with its front door wide open and a small crowd inside. Once in, I was greeted by pastel pink walls, antique furniture, and a sage green bathroom. I must've wandered for about an hour, continuously returning to this detail of light on the ceiling in the upstairs bedroom that was overcast by pink. Once the room was mainly cleared, I laid down on the hardwood floor and took this image using a 4x5 camera.

The journal writings became puzzle pieces, which is how I approach and write poetry (Fig. 5).

The poem itself is written photographs of a past self.

When I visit open houses or tour apartments for rent, I look for older buildings with elements that relate to my childhood home. Since the beginning of photography, realism has dominated the photographic discourse. Photographs became a new way of visualizing the world as documents of modern life. Architects commission photographers to circulate their designs through images. This act happens because for a building or room to be remembered, it must be photographed and circulated repeatedly, or it will be forgotten.¹ When I photograph the interior spaces of homes and buildings, we can argue that my images become less about the architect's finished product and more about what the architecture determines. By doing so, I am acknowledging its relationship with the space it inhabits. The interior spaces become places of history, decay, memory, and culture.

The images I make, collectively and individually, are also psychological self-portraits. For me, they possess a significance having to do with time, mortality, and memory; many of my other photographs do not contain the same rich meaning. Starting at a young age, I accepted death as a part of life. I experienced grief for the first time with my mother's death at the age of four. Soon after, the entirety of my family on my mother's side had passed. I found myself holding onto memories of my family, as well as the objects I keep that spark and sustain the memories of the people I love most.

¹ Katherine Brickell, "Home Interiors, National Identity and Curatorial Practice in the Art Photography of Simryn Gill," *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 3 (2014): 32–52.



Figure 6. Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Thistle and Carrots*, 1603

Often, we want to see items placed into the world as something other than the object itself. We want things we collect to be emblems, symbols, and metaphors rather than the things “themselves.” And yet, we are faced with the question of how these domestic objects and their everyday spaces can fulfill our expectations. These things have no life of their own, no voice that utters their preferences. They cannot complain when they are folded up and tucked into dark spaces or when their surfaces are carved into. Juan Sánchez Cotán is a Spanish baroque painter, his most notable paintings were spare, gloriously illusionistic arrangements of vegetables and fruit, with gestures of subtle movement and composition that suggest mystique — capturing our curiosity. The painter invites us to contemplate extra-ordinarily ordinary subjects.

Every day and banal objects depicted in this painting has a noble simplicity. They are treated with great interest and respect. This object-ness and silence is something that fascinates me and something that I aim to enhance in my own work. Cotán emphasizes the composition organized with care where the objects of the everyday world, deeply marked by loneliness, are confined in their own space and eternity. The intensely real fruits are immersed in an absolute dark and abstract vacuum, in a composition that reflects a deep knowledge of perspective and geometry, which achieves a metaphysical reflection of nature and the spirit.

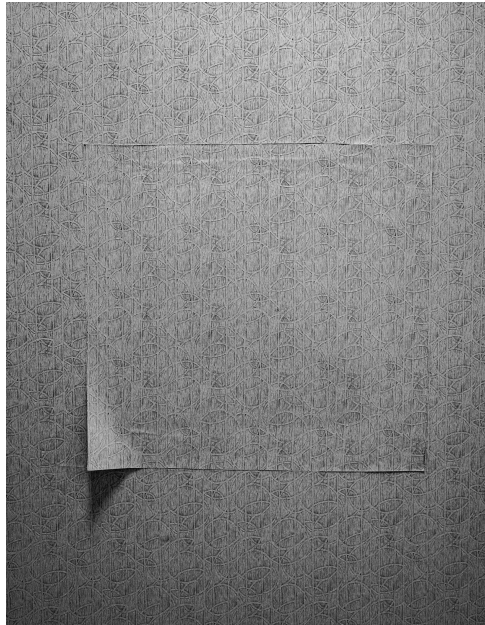


Figure 7. *Untitled, Indiana* from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

In places like these, I am not visually stimulated by the sight of the spaces I photograph. This image above (Fig. 7) was taken at a run-down motel off the main road in Richmond, Indiana. It was 3 AM, close to the Fourth of July. Each room number marked by a photograph represented a facet of the town's identity, mine being of a pale-colored cowboy hat sitting on a fence post. The room was mostly beige, with thick woven berber carpet and maroon accents. A view of a roller-skating rink with flashing neon lights looming in the windows. The bathroom was narrow, a square piece of wallpaper covering who knows what. Was it blood from a murder? Or simply just a plumbing fix? To photograph this scene I had to balance myself awkwardly in the bathtub with my press camera in hand, not knowing that the image would speak to object-ness as much as it does. The most interesting attributes of the wall and what it covers have been smoothed away to make the square of wallpaper shine brighter in comparison to the rest of the wall.

I'm intrigued by the interest and curiosity that viewers have in glimpsing private spaces recorded in photographs. Photographing these spaces has provided a different view of how we experience a place aside from its relationship with architecture. Images of interior spaces become a mirror of how we see ourselves. The act of pointing the camera at a bedroom, lobby, or kitchen indirectly asks us to reflect on ourselves and the world we inhabit. An interior holds a symbolic potential in the way we arrange our things, by the light that trails along the walls, or by the color of a room. Interiors can yield a poetic vision that reflects our psychology.

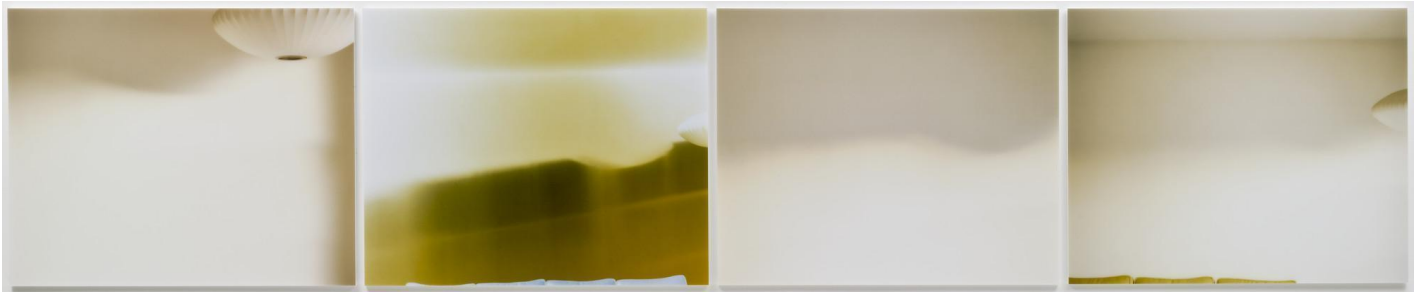


Figure 8. Uta Barth, *Sundial*, 2007

In Uta Barth's series *Sundial*, the images are of empty tables, walls, and the minimal furnishings within her home (Fig. 8). The photographs become more about light and shadow as she records how the light moves in a single room when the sun begins to set. In a way, the photographs discretely remind us of Plato's allegory of the prisoners in the cave.² In the allegory, a group of people tied up in the cave began seeing the shadows on the walls and echoes of sounds in the cave as their reality. The false reality created by the cave is all the prisoners know.³ The blurring of Barth's photographs also removes us from seeing the images as documents or as dispassionate representations of the space. The blur becomes a way to view memory, forcing the viewer to bring the image into a more concrete reality.

² Fiona Hackett, "Photography, Architecture and Inner Space," *Building Material*, no. 19 (2009): 13–108.

³ Dale Hall, "Interpreting Plato's Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition," *Apeiron* 14, no. 2 (1980): 74–86.



Figure 9. Mark Rothko, *Untitled Number 11, 1963*, 1963

When photographing, I study the light around me and how it affects the objects within the room. Dark shadows continue to reappear in my work. I often think of Mark Rothko's painting, *Untitled Number 11, 1963* (fig. 9). It is a large-scale painting depicting a black void with a smaller, slightly darker rectangular shape that, in a way, becomes a portal. In 2019, a former instructor and I stared at this painting for over an hour in a museum. We spoke every so often about how this painting made each of us feel. Suddenly, I felt like I had stepped into a dark void.

My reactions to Rothko's painting provide a model for how I want viewers to experience my work. The longer one stares at the images, the further one falls into this void. In one image (Fig. 10), the light has no impact on the background, as it seems impassable; the contrast between subject and background, or between figure and ground, hints at the impasse. Though the space is flat and shallow, the thick darkness appears to extend deep beyond the photographs, suggesting a larger, more expansive space that hides from the viewer at first.



Figure 10. *Untitled, New York* from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

This series consists of images made in interior and exterior spaces as well as staged imagery. The framed photographs in the exhibition are of various sizes and arranged to amplify the “off” feeling created by the pictures. The “off” feeling is the sense of a presence lurking within spaces that are seemingly normal and every day. Throughout the series, a physical ghost figure appears within the images. The “ghost” is also an effect of how the light is captured within the photographs, or by the viewer as they themselves become reflections within the images. Like in Rothko’s painting, the viewer enters into the void and becomes a ghostly presence.



Figure 11. *Installation View*, from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

Within the installation, the photographs sequenced on the wall, and the book becomes a resurfacing of memory (fig. 11). The wallpaper was initially nicely applied on the wall with the image camouflaging itself amongst the surface. However, something felt off as I continued returning to it throughout the day. Once everyone had gone, and I was alone in the gallery to meditate on the imagery I had chosen, I recognized that none of the surfaces were perfect. Even when photographing, I actively avoid it. The tearing brings a present tense as well, as the act of tearing becomes the current act of me revealing my past to you. This once perfectly aligned wallpaper began revealing the past, good or bad, that refuses to stay dead. We can cover up, and smooth away its surfaces, but over time, the past will slowly emerge into view.



Figure 12. *Installation View*, from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

the day after you died
 I looked for you
 the dead linger like mist on a river
 people gather like flowers
 to bring solace
 float on busyness
 I feel you walk with me to your grave
 funerals are full
 the next day and the one after
 empty
 once the sun warms, you disperse on the wind
 gone but for the lingering scent on your pillow

Shadows linger between the horizon
 of my mind and the lucid dreams
 I relive it every night.

In my waking dreams lives
 an idea of who I am.

Like flowers growing on an
 eternal vine, the dreams
 cultivate and blossom.

I become the shadows I dream about,
 amongst the blooming flowers, I walk

Pictures are crooked and broken

fatally familiar faces
 have turned to dust

A picture of my mother
 she shakes her head, and
 I turn the frame away

such a coward

Warming my hands
 the pentecostal oil

how ice cold

My mother always said
 I never believed

Figure 13. *Selected Poems*, from the series *What The Wildflowers Tell Us*, 2022

For the exhibition, I was very adamant that the selected images would be silver gelatin prints. As for me, the process itself lends to how we view memory. Once the paper is exposed and in the developer, the image emerges soft and hazy until it becomes fully clear. The use of dodging and burning becomes a way in which the memory is altered in our minds. Each print made isn't always the same, which lends again, to memory itself. There are three poems within the book. While I do see the writing as images within themselves, I also saw them as guiding points with the themes I'm working with. The first speaks to grief, the second alludes to the dreamscapes and the void, and the last speaks to memory and my home.

Photographs like Anna Gaskell's series *half life* do something similar. Her series of images and videos depict the haunting of a young woman. The images manifest a sense of isolation, fear, and uncertainty. In Gaskell's photograph, *Untitled #90*, we see a fragment of the woman's curly, black hair at the top left corner. The image is an off-kilter view of an empty, large white room of a mansion. The immense shadow of a chandelier looms over the archway, creating a sense of fear and anxiety.



Anna Gaskell, *Untitled #90*, 2002

In this sense, the ghostly feeling cultivated by Gaskell, and the one I fashion in my own work, can be understood as a contemporary version of spirit photography. For instance, in traditional spirit photography, the “extra” can only become visible after the sitter’s image is made. The spirit in the image does not represent the person it embodies, but rather, the image the spirit uses to communicate with the living. Similarly, the shadows and light captured within the photograph become this ghostly “extra.” The picture becomes less a view of a specific room and more of an abstraction of loss.

Spiritualism in the nineteenth century revealed, through spirit photography, that the human soul or consciousness exists independently from its material form.⁴ Today, photography can still embody the feeling of the disembodied self, as seen in the nineteenth century. Ghosts transform the relationship between what we usually see and what we do not. The appearance of a ghost is a physiological phenomenon that is otherwise obscure. The spirits captured today are not of deceased loved ones but symbolic manifestations of the past that refuses to stay dead. How I register these ghosts in my photographs is analogous to how we mourn the dead.

To redress the erasure of my family memories, *What the Wildflowers Tell Us* enables a point from where I can move forward. The photographs resurrect and resurface those lost images from twenty years ago. While there is a looming presence that is reflecting onto the past, there is also this sense of moving on from it. The wallpaper begins stripping away, the door is closed, and fire becomes symbolic of rebirth and new beginnings.

⁴ Ben Burbridge, “The Ghosts of Media Past and Present: Spirit Photography and Contemporary Art,” in *The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in Nineteenth- to Twenty-First-Century Art and Culture*, eds. Sas Mays and Neil Matheson (Manchester University Press, 2013): 79–158.

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