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Think of Rivers

By

Nell Pittman

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

May 1, 2023

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Abstract

Think of Rivers searches for the presence of my parents in the landscape. My dad through the landscape where his ashes now lie, and my mom in the ways she taught my sister and me how to live. These photographs are autobiographical, encapsulating cycles of life and death. They are about my familial experiences and my drive to make sense of my experiences through subjects of landscape, specifically in Rochester, NY where my mom grew up. Making these pictures helps me to make sense of my childhood and my mom's grief, which turns me towards her. *Think of Rivers* reflects on stories of my childhood and my coming of age.

This paper questions what it means to go from photographing the landscape to mourn the loss of my father to now making pictures in the place my mother was born and raised. The paper delves into formal influences such as Hudson River School painters as well as photographers Justine Kurland, Allasandra Sanguinetti, and Sally Mann. Sections of memoir are sprinkled throughout the paper to reflect on the concepts explored through these images.

Think of Rivers looks for the presence of my parents in the landscape while exploring my connections to both my family and my environment. My dad's presence is visualized through the landscape where his ashes now lie, and my mom's through the way she taught my sister and me how to live. These photographs are autobiographical, behind them lies the experiences that both accompany the pictures and that drive me to make them. As such, *Think of Rivers* reflects on stories of childhood and coming of age.

My parents met when my dad interviewed my mom for a position as crime reporter at the Daily News. She got the job. Their first date was at Taco Bell and a month later they moved in together. I was born in Brooklyn, NY, soon thereafter and we lived there until my parents decided it was time to do the "suburbs" thing and we moved to Yonkers, about thirty-five minutes outside of New York City. My sister was born. We had a yellow stucco house with a quarter acre of land that sat on a hill with what felt like a million steps going up to it; the yard was not huge, but it was enough to fit – give or take – twenty-five chickens, a crazy inbred goat named Daisy, and two always naked little girls eating unripe tomatoes in the garden and licking snow off of fences. We lived next to a church and used to walk to the bus stop sporting green floral rolling backpacks and pigtails. We belonged to a boat club and spent the warmer months swimming in the Hudson River, boat camping, and having Thursday night pasta dinners. Our parents had dinner parties with tons of friends, and wine and grilled pineapple and steaks. My sister and I would run down the hill in our yard with the other kids, chasing chickens and fireflies. Then, my Dad had a heart attack and died in the hallway outside of our bedrooms the night before Thanksgiving in 2009.



Figure 1. *The Deer-Summer*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2021



Figure 2. *The Deer-Fall*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2021

Life's cyclical nature is seen in my photographs. The first two images shown, (Figs. 1 and 2), capture a deer decomposing. This is a literal portrayal of the cycle of life. In figure one, the condition of the deer is unknown. His skin is intact and without the context seen in figure two, the buck could almost be sleeping. I see this deer as a stand in for my father, and the landscape as a stand in for my mother, as I try to complete a family portrait. He died in her arms, the same way the buck died on my mom's childhood friend Christina's land. In this way, the photographs encapsulate the cycles of life and death, and later, rebirth. How different are my dad's ashes from a decomposing deer? Christina had to drag the buck's body away from her house because of the smell. What if we had just left my dad in the hallway? How much do deer weigh? I googled it, 150 pounds in the summer. My dad was almost double that.

The night my dad died, my mom, sister and I sat in my bedroom with fairy curtains and butterflies that hung from the ceiling and promised each other he was not going to die, chanting together, and holding hands while we cried. Turns out he was already dead. Age ten is early to learn that promises are just words, and nothing is forever. We put out Thanksgiving dinner the next day because my mom had already made it, but no one ate. Thursday nights pasta dinners at the boat club became grief counseling in a church basement. The volunteers gave us pizza and we talked to other children who had lost parents or siblings, scribbling with crayons to talk about who we missed. My mom started working more. I hid under my desk in all my classes and teachers did not argue, they felt sorry for me and gave me As and Bs. I never learned how to multiply or divide. Somehow, June arrived and my mom decided we needed to get the hell out of Yonkers. We left the blood-stained hallway house with the wall of laser printed photos of my father taped all over the red dining room and flew to Oregon without a return ticket.

We left on my last day of fifth grade and came back the morning sixth grade started. I had not showered in weeks, pulling up to school in the 1993 RV we had bought off the side of the road halfway through the summer. The night before we had slept at a rest stop in New Jersey emptying urine out of a bucket in a dark parking lot and showing up to school wild-eyed from our adventures. Rolling backpacks and pigtails were replaced with experiences and borrowed loose leaf paper. Moving forward, we took these summer long road trips just about every year after, finding solace in long stretches of road touching flowering deserts, washing our underwear in streams, blowing through blades of grass to whistle, and in by seeing that the world was bigger than daddy dying. That the world was bigger than us.



Figure 3. Justine Kurland, *Girls Curled Up*, 1997

Photographically speaking, I feel a kinship to Justine Kurland's series "Girl Pictures". Kurland photographed teenage girls situated in the American landscape. The scenes she created include the girl's building forts in idyllic forests, eating ice cream on the side of the highway, peeing in fields of yarrow, and living communally in a "perpetual state of youthful bliss."¹ I find Kurland's series "Girl Pictures" more reminiscent of my feral childhood than any other images I have ever come across. I first saw this series in high school, coming from the trips in which my mom, my sister, and I found ourselves in very similar landscapes. Kurland's images "depict teenage girls in natural or nondescript settings, casting them in the adventurous roles of runaways and fighters."² Like her subjects, my mom, my sister, and I were runaway girls trying to reconcile ourselves and our new reality.

We really didn't know what we were doing when we did it. We did not intentionally set out to spread his ashes on our trip, it just kind of happened. We didn't want to leave his box (which became a *very* personified object) at home, so he came with us. We spread his ashes wherever we 'felt' him. My mom says that "this way wherever my girls went as they grew up, their dad would always be there." My sister and I coined them "mini-funerals". These funerals were free and intuitive, held under weeping willow trees and over grand canyons. Something about the American landscape will always remind me of my dad and what pieces of him are where.

¹ Kurland, Justine, and Rebecca Bengal. *Girl Pictures*. New York, NY: Aperture, 2020, 4

² Vanderhoof, Erin. "Another Look at Justine Kurland's Girl Pictures." *Vanity Fair*, May 7, 2020. <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/05/justine-kurland-new-book-girl-pictures>.



Figure 4. *Blue Grass*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2022

Since starting my life here in Rochester — which just so happens to be where my mom grew up, I have been photographing in places that I see as ‘her’s’. My whole life my mom told me stories of Rochester: Tommy Speginiski throwing frog guts at Aunt Wendy, Tommy’s sister, Sherry, jumping off the roof with an umbrella and breaking her arm, Aunt Wendy convincing my mom to eat poison berries and then having to get her stomach pumped. As I wander through Mendon Ponds, I think of the parties she went to in the woods, the time she snuck out to go to her high school prom and got attacked by a German Shepard. I had never been to Rochester before coming to Rochester Institute of Technology and now I am photographing and living on her old stomping grounds. Where I used to see my dad in giant sequoias and crashing waves, I am faced with my mom’s presence in this landscape while thinking about my own girlhood and upbringing.



Figure 5. *Hand*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2022

The North American landscape is home and the season changes seen within my work are integral. Some of the images in the exhibition are dark, cold, magical, and blue—that cool light at night after sunset (Fig. 4). Others are waterlogged skin, golden flickers in ripped hair, mud warmer than the air, everything is pink. A tangibly misty, deep green color cast coats a skinny forest. In figure 5, my dirty hand interrupts an atmospheric fog in a landscape on the brink of autumn. This photograph suggests a cyclical coming of age and a childish carefree nature in my playful floating hand, as I start to distinguish myself as an adult in the place my mom was born and raised. How different are my mother and I?



Figure 6. Alessandra Sanguinetti, *Ophelias*, 2001

Alessandra Sanguinetti photographed two Argentinian cousins in the late 90's and early 2000's, documenting their relationship and transition to adolescence. She follows them as they play and dream their way through the secret enchantment that is childhood. Using these two girls' play as inspiration, Sanguinetti captures: funerals for imagined boyfriends, dances in underwear sporting fake mustaches and cowboy hats, and plastic shopping carts with baby dolls and tired motherly faces. Taking photographs of myself nude in the landscape feels like re-experiencing a childhood play, a special girlhood play Sanguinetti captures exquisitely in her photographs. This play is complicated. Play is not always fun and happy, sometimes it can be dark, and this is where children experiment with their roles in this life. This play relates to my photographs as I explore the landscape my mom experienced growing up through my still, girl-like eyes.

A photographer who touches on this aspect of children is Sally Mann. Her book entitled *Immediate Family*, captures the play of her children around her family's farm. It is a raw documentation of her children's beautiful, feral childhood, running around their property in rural Virginia. The images were made through a mother's honest lens. We see a mother tending to bloody noses, wet beds, and the inevitable odd questions children ask that give you a glimpse into their inner thoughts. *Immediate Family* emphasizes and holds on to the complexities of this brief period of delicate innocence in which the sinfulness of children is often invalidated and overlooked. As Mann wrote: "Find me an uncomplicated child, when we are young we are a jungle of complications. We simplify as we get older."³ Mann felt that far too many people saw children as holy angels with no inner dialogue of their own. Often, children's feelings are disregarded. I connect *Immediate Family* and the way Mann portrays the complex nature of children back to my own upbringing and how much it has affected the way I experience and photograph the world.

My work aims to reconnect myself with the natural world. In this era of the Anthropocene, constructs of industrialization, settler-colonialism, and capitalism have fragmented the natural environment. So much so that most humans in the global north have a tenuous relationship with the resources that sustain them. Modernity has waged an aesthetic war against the incivility of nature with mowers, pesticides, etc. The settler-colonial mindset tells us to tame the "uncivilized," to harness the power of nature, and make it bend to our will. It tells us to conquer, exploit, and demand.⁴ I aim to work within, not against, the biosphere.

³ Mann, Sally. "Sally Mann's Exposure." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 Apr. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/the-cost-of-sally-manns-exposure.html>.

⁴ Holm, Nick, and Sy Taffel. *Ecological Entanglements in the Anthropocene*. Lexington Books, 2017, 19

In Danielle Pafunda's, *The Book of Scab*, the protagonist actively and intentionally rebels against the culture from which she was born (a white-supremacist heteropatriarchy)⁵. She addresses each poem, or manifesto, to her parents and details her life and adventures in drugs, sex, and danger. She lives by her instincts. This book is nothing but confrontational toward the hypocrisy of her parents and community. *The Book of Scab* puts theories about rebelling against the bourgeois establishment into praxis. I relate to these writings of a young woman foraging a connection to the wildness that has been wrested from her, since she is a product of industrialized capitalism and settler-colonialism. An element of my work aims to do just this: to help myself rebuild my "wildness". I connect to the more mournful, somber, literary illustrations in Scab's manifesto: her grief over the loss of her childhood, her experience of desire, and her desperation to find love in absence of her parents.

My mom made me eat a burrito filled with ants once. It had been sitting on the RV counter for a day or two and she said it was extra protein. Once, we went mud sliding in the Bay of Fundy, slicking our naked bodies and hair with smelly red clay. After searching for somewhere to get clean and failing, we ended up power washing each other at a local car wash. Pulling out of the do it yourself garage we saw a sign that said they reuse all the water. The trips were rough, and a lot of time was spent yelling at each other, but we found resilience in climbing mountains that were taller than our father and building campfires without lighter fluid. I possibly found some resilience by eating ant-filled burritos. Growing up this way, the need to photograph myself in the landscape is a ritual I can't let go of performing.

⁵ Pafunda, Danielle. *The Book of Scab*. Los Angeles, CA: Ricochet Editions, 2018.



Figure 7. *Yellow Grass*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2021

Intuition and play are important parts of my process. When making my series of self-portraits, I use a self-timer that waits twenty seconds and then takes nine photographs two seconds apart. As a result, I capture a performance as I walk through and explore the landscape rather than individual staged images. The act of performance helps me to pick and choose which photographs best portray what I am trying to say. While working on this series, I slowly started to choose photos where I am obscured. To include the landscape as a “character” within my photographs, I find myself subconsciously stepping out of the frame and entangling myself in branches (Fig. 7). Taking photographs of myself alone in the landscape has allowed me to explore the relationship between us further. Photographically, I am interested in the relationships between subjects, specifically in the way body language tells

narratives that words cannot. This is a substantial reason why I find Justine Kurland, Alessandra Sanguinetti, and Sally Mann's work so compelling.



Figure 8. Asher Brown Durand, *Chapel Pond Brook*, Adirondack Mountains NY, 1870

Growing up, I went to the Hudson River Museum all the time. It was down the street from our house, and often when we had a day off from school we would visit. We would sled in the front yard of the museum in the winters and go into the air-conditioned galleries in the summers. Somehow, I think looking at the Hudson River School paintings at such an impressionable age, while being surrounded by that scenery, sparked my interest in landscapes and contributed to the way I photograph. I see visual correlatives to paintings such as Asher Brown Durand's *Chapel Pond Brook*, in my own landscapes. I tend to gravitate towards the romantic natural light utilized by the Hudson River School as well as the

placement of the figures within landscapes. It has actually taken a lot of effort for me to get *away* from this canon and find other approaches to making photographs.



Figure 9. *Coming up for Air*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2021

The title for this project, *Think of Rivers* comes from the connection I have to the Hudson River and the landscape. My parents married at the Saugerties Lighthouse right on the river, thus they made my middle name Hudson. My sister's middle name is Lake, because she was conceived in upstate New York's Lost Lake. My mom says my sister is lucky they didn't make her middle name Cabin 18. *Think of Rivers* speaks of the interconnections between myself and my parents in the landscape. My dad always wanted a Viking funeral so, in May of 2010 — almost a year after his death, my mom gave it to him. We made a raft at our boat club on the Hudson and put his ashes on it. People placed glasses of wine, naked barbies,

sunflowers, and notes on the raft. His friends kayaked out with it and set it on fire. My sister, my mother, and I stood on the rocking dock we had stood on so many times before and cried quietly as we watched it burn. What is a river? I googled it. A river is a flowing watercourse that feeds into something larger, such as an ocean, bay, wetland, or other river. Rivers search for something larger than themselves, not dissimilarly from what I do through my photographs.

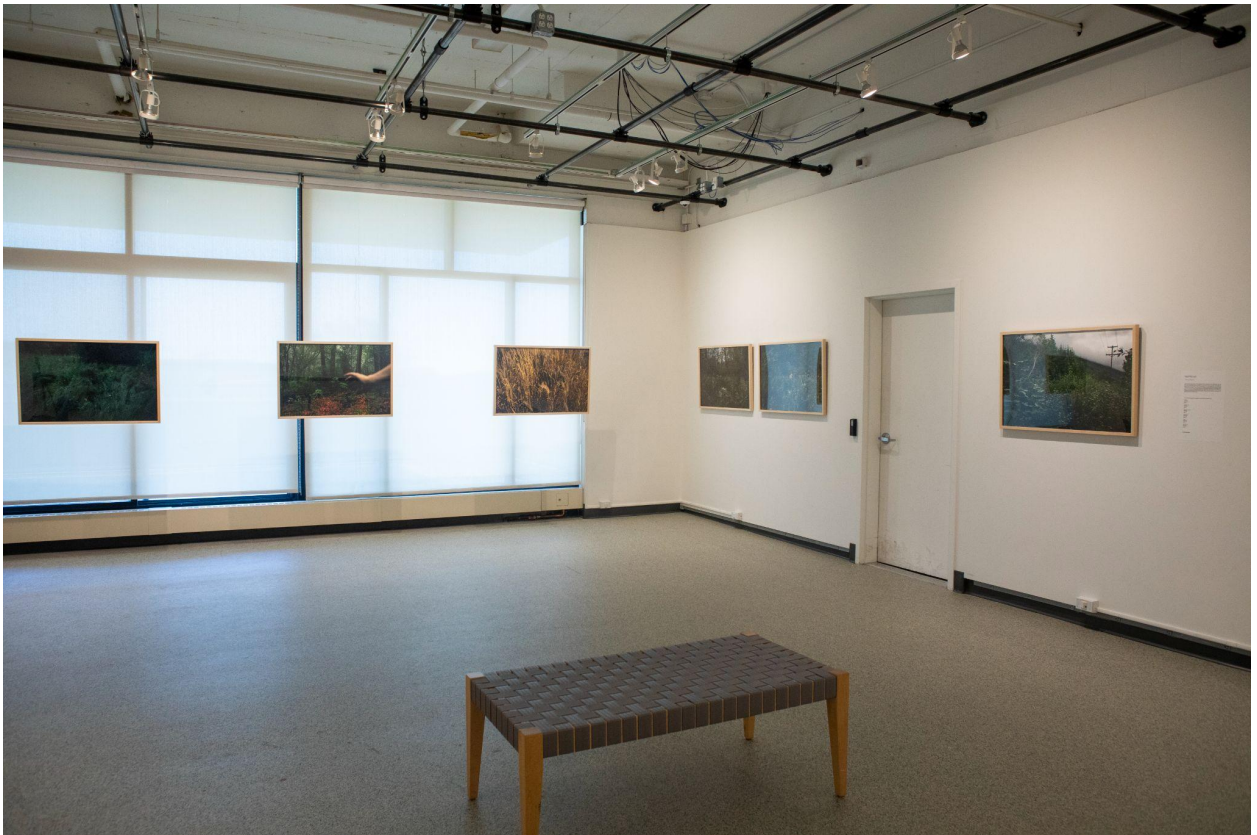


Figure 10. Exhibition view from *Think of Rivers*, 2021

The photographs shown in the exhibition are chosen and sequenced to portray cycles of life and death through a heightened natural world that you are meant to enter and feel the presence of. They are all printed large scale – at the same size – so as to not disrupt or distract the viewer from seeing through and into these landscapes. You enter the exhibition space seeing the figure of a nude woman coming out of tall weeds. A telephone pole with thin wires emerges from the fog behind her and reaches towards you, opening the sky and creating dimension. The wires tangled over the birch tree give the audience a sense of time, this is a contemporary scene despite the woman's primal nature. The next image in the series is a decaying deer, nestled in overgrown weeds, not unlike the woman. Directly next to it is an image of the same deer nestled in weeds, but the deer looks to be coming back to life, as is the earth. The weeds are a bright green with yellow yarrow weeds framing the subject, juxtaposing the reds and yellows seen in the prior image. The next three images are not fixed to the wall but instead hang from the ceiling in front of a wall of windows. The first is of a blurred dirty hand reaching out to a fuchsia and wet green forest. Suspended in the air, the viewer can fill in the blanks of what the rest of the landscapes looked like. The next image was taken on the shore of the Hudson River, and shows the same woman nestled in golden reeds, her hand resting between her legs. The tonal shift to the last image is significant; dusk blue light coats long grasses, imprinted from a lying form. Is the imprint from the deer or the woman?



Figure 11. *Lily Pad*, from the series *Think of Rivers*, 2021

My mom is more like these photographs. Wild and untamable, blurs of fragments of the body. Unsure. My dad was larger than life and technical, a financial journalist who sued the federal government. What does it mean to go from photographing the landscape to mourn the loss of my father to now making pictures in the place my mother was born and raised? Am I subconsciously trying to connect to my mother, or is this just serendipity? I cry now for my mother's grief. I feel like I am re-experiencing her girlhood here in Rochester. Making these pictures helps me to make sense of my childhood and my mother's methodology around grieving, turning me towards her. These photographs encapsulate the cycles of life and death, and thus, of my mother and myself, as our life cycles continue in tandem.

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