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Enola

by

Justin Gibson

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
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Abstract

Enola, is a photographic collection of visual fragments without a beginning or end. These moments reflect on my inner psychological landscape, translated from pieces of stories, dreams, recollections. My project, inspired heavily by the town that I once called home, Enola, Pennsylvania, acts as a cultural origin point for my photographs. This work highlights aspects of the uncanny, the quiet, and the unfamiliar tendencies of life. These formulations usually manifest as dreamlike scenes. My work weaves these disconnected pieces into a cohesive reflection.

I was all alone in the darkness of the woods by my house, but the woodland terrain seemed out-of-place, contorted, like it was miles away from where it should be, past silent creeks, over quiet forgotten roads, stranded high up in the mountains. I could see the distant flickers of lights of the town below in the distance. The sun had long been set, and the ground was covered in this swaying grass, moving like it was alive. For a moment, I could not help but think that the ground was breathing. I heard the distant moaning of the train horns and the hulking masses of moving locomotives. There was no doubt that I was back home. My breathing was slow, and I could feel my legs itching as though I was walking through a thornbush. An unshakeable feeling of impending doom came over me, not like there was something lurking off in the woods, but that there was something off about the woods itself. The swaying movement of the grass and trees made me feel like I was inside the stomach of a beast.

I wrote this in my dream journal on the morning of December 2019. This journal is filled with chronicled dreams and random thoughts that linger in my head moments after waking. More importantly, it documents my fascination with loose fragments.

Enola, is a photographic collection of visual fragments without a beginning or end. These moments reflect on my inner psychological landscape, translated from pieces of stories, dreams, recollections. My project, inspired heavily by the town that I once called home, Enola, Pennsylvania, acts as a cultural origin point for my photographs. This work highlights aspects of the uncanny, the quiet, and the unfamiliar tendencies of life. These formulations usually manifest as dreamlike scenes. My work weaves these disconnected pieces into a cohesive reflection.

Enola came about after a talk I had with a couple of friends late one night. I was once again telling stories of random events that happened to me in the small Pennsylvanian town, reminiscing over the chaotic moments of growing up, such as kids getting in fights behind pizza shops, or teenagers shooting BB guns from bicycles at

moving cars. I have always loved storytelling and how the tiniest details complete a picture. Maybe this fixation with detail came from late night tales spun by my father around the campfire, or my desire to one day make movies when I was younger. During this discussion with my friend, I realized how long it had been since I'd gone home, and it occurred to me that what truly draws me to this town were these disjointed, flickering recollections. In a way, Enola began to feel like a distant dream.



Figure 1: *Untitled*, 2020.

I have love for this place. Some of my family still lives there, but I sense the fleeting nature of this transient town. The small community sprouted up around a bustling train yard with no intention of being more than a hub for transporting goods. Enola suffered from familiar problems found in rural American towns such as socio-economic downturn and rampant drug use. This town was designed for traveling through and not for stopping. In a way, this place nurtured a sense of comfort in constant transition. People would come and people would eventually go. When I was growing up, all the kids in the neighborhood joked about how the name Enola is just “alone” spelled backwards. Back then, I did not pay it much attention, but now I feel as though this odd detail is imprinted into my psyche: loneliness can become so rooted in a place that it will begin to appear in its surroundings.

In 1924, French writer and theorist André Breton wrote in his founding doctrines of Surrealism, *The Surrealist Manifesto*, “Why should I not expect from the sign of the dream more than I expect from a degree of consciousness which is daily more acute? Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?”¹ Breton suggests that dreams act as a reflection of one’s own unconscious. That the role of the surrealist was to create a synthesis between reality and the dreamstate into a further space just out of reach, surreality. He believed that this headspace that exists in the resting mind was not some nonsensical firing of synapses, but rather the blurring between the unconscious and conscious mind. While I am inspired by how dreams can manifest unique and visually captivating compositions, I am more interested in how dreams can be used for uncovering deeper aspects of my own psyche.

¹André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 3.

The surrealists were a group of artists that sought to destabilize and question the notion of what logic and structure had meant to our lives. Surrealist expression began in France, and spread around Europe. This was following the horrific events of the first world war, and many countries were re-evaluating their cultural identities and practices. Masked men, clouds of poison, and cold, mechanical tanks decimated cities all across Europe. This war came about from “logical” people and policy. Their work critiqued power structures that were formed from working within the bounds of objective reason. They were heavily inspired by the expanding field of psychology and the dream analysis of Sigmund Freud. Dream narration was a concept that was heavily popularized by the Surrealist movement in the 1920s. Using imagery found in their dreams, the Surrealists were interested in blurring the boundaries between reality and their dreamscape.

Automatic drawing and writing were other exercises used by these artists to bring them closer to full automatism. Breton described this fascination with automatism in his manifesto as a mode of making where an artist could be stripped of conscious input and work solely out of instinct.² In Kenneth Wach’s essay, “The Pearl Divers of the Unconscious: Freud, Surrealism, and Psychology”, he explains how the surrealists used automation to further their understanding of themselves:

What we have in surrealism, then, are poeticized psychological insights that attempt to stabilise, to harmonise, to hold, and to artistically fix the inherent flux of the mind; art that establishes reality as well as portraying it; art not as symptom but as revelation.³

² Kenneth Wach, “The Pearl Divers of the Unconscious: Freud, Surrealism, and Psychology,” in *Surrealism: Revolution by Night*, ed. Michael Lloyd, Ted Gott, and Christopher Chapman. (Gloucester, NSW, Australia: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1993), 170-186.

³ Ibid.

Wach's description illustrates the idea that through the act of making, the artist manifests ideas already stored in the unconscious. I have always been drawn to this idea of making that the physical act of making one's work is what allows access to the psychological landscape. As a photographer, I tend to shoot intuitively, finding separate fragments of the world to make sense out of later.

The medium of photography is well-suited for manifesting unconscious fragments into reality because a photograph is a fragment. A photograph operates as a record, or document, preserving a moment within a frame. A photograph is merely a window for inspecting the photographer's subjective sliver of reality. A photograph is silent, still, and in some instances can be entirely misleading. While these qualities could be applied to other visual art mediums, photography has long been associated with "truthfulness." I don't believe a photograph is representative of objective truth, but rather mimics it.

In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag states, "What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire."⁴ While I do not always agree with Sontag's negative view of the medium of photography, I relate to this notion that a photograph is merely a piece of the world that can't describe or tell anything. Relating back to how dreams resolve as moments that seem of reality in one's mind, photographs invoke this same visual deception that merely points to details locked away in the unconscious. The dreamscape is a space made up of fragmented details found in the quotidian landscape and amalgamated together to act as a reflection. I

⁴ Susan Sontag, "On Photography," *In Plato's Cave*, 3-26. (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 4.

believe that photographing moments that relate back to my amassed recollections will offer insight into my own unconscious.



Figure 2: *Cicada Summers #2*, 2020.

For example, *Cicada Summers #2* (fig. 1) shows an individual's shoulder, the rest of the figure's form is only cut out of the frame. Resting on their shoulder is a cicada shell holding a delicately severed flower bud. This Photograph is inspired by a story my partner told me. When they were young, they liked to collect cicada shells. They would

hang them from their shirt so they wouldn't lose them. A few weeks later, I had a dream of them with cicada shells running down their shirt. While walking with my partner on a summer night, I stumbled upon a cicada shell. We usually pick flowers along the way, and I placed both of them on their shirt. I believe this image brings forth elements of fragility, transformation, and admiration through my photographic amalgamation of stories, dreams, and everyday experiences.

Much of my photographic process begins by getting outside and walking around. As straightforward as this approach may seem, my brain formulates thoughts more clearly when I walk, or pace around, and helps me align myself. It's common when growing up in my small town for young kids to walk home from friend's houses late at night, and in Enola those routes usually passed through darkened woods, or past dimly lit houses. I always gravitated towards moments of stillness, usually set against dark, but familiar suburban streets, where the only people are inside, alone in their spaces. While sometimes I found peace in the quiet reflection of these walks, there was always a looming sense of something being off. I became both fascinated and unsettled by distant homes, fragmented people in windows, and abandoned objects on the street.



Figure 3: *Untitled*, 2023.

I noticed the composition in *Untitled* (fig. 3) while wandering around a set of train tracks. While they aren't shown in the image, I was intrigued by the idea of following the track like I used to when growing up. What is shown in the photograph, however, is a discarded blanket left tucked beneath a bush. The setting sun highlights the top of the dense foliage, simultaneously creating a darkened void underneath the bush. The blanket offers a moment of comfort that is simultaneously swallowed by this encroaching void.

This scene appears to be a remnant of a story that I may have just missed. This composition still alludes to the idea of a dream-state, because while the depiction is quite banal, I am reminded how dreams are simply pieces of the everyday. A majority of my writings collected from my dream journal consist of moments that lack meaning all together.

In photography there is a concept known as the “decisive moment”, where a photographer may find themselves in the right place at the right time for the perfect image to be captured.⁵ A decisive moment is when the materialized intention of a photographer amalgamates itself perfectly in a single frame whether out of skill, or a synchronous phenomenon. This concept was coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson. As a photographer, Bresson would place himself into situations where compositions would unfold. He would wait for the proper moment to click the shutter. In Cartier-Bresson’s photograph, *Hyères, France*, the viewer is confronted by a passing gentleman on a bicycle which perfectly follows the spiraling form of a staircase. This photograph creates a visual narrative which is implied solely through the frame, capturing the excitement, as well as the movement of this fleeting moment. I embrace the antithesis of this decisive principle, closer to something of an “indecisive” moment where I find myself with only the leftover remnants of a moment already passed.

⁵ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*. (New York: Simon and Schuster in collaboration with Éditions Verve of Paris, 1952.)



Figure 4: Untitled, 2023.

This “indecision” is depicted in a composition like Untitled (fig. 4) where a guardrail is left mangled and twisted on the side of a highway. The metal is forced into a viscerally disturbing spiral shape. This spiral, formed from what was once a rigid structure, now undulates in an unfamiliar way. This was most likely the impact point of a speeding car that lost control. Did the car flip? Did it spin? How many lives were impacted due to this crash? Was there even a crash in the first place? None of these questions can be answered by viewing the image. The composition simply lacks the context that would allow for some semblance of resolution. On-camera flash fills this image with the full spectrum of tonalities: sharp white highlights bouncing off highway

reflectors, subtle grays following the path of the guardrail, and a sea of black that creates a flat background. The darkness and flatness of the light are reminiscent of the photographic works of Weegee, though in his photographs we are given the reason for the twisted metal. If he photographed this scene, there would be blood in the street or contorted bodies.⁶ But I was too late to witness the scene that produced the twisted rail. The photograph is like a fading shadow of the violence that occurred in that spot tucked off on some forgotten road. My ambiguous frames teeter on the edge between resolution and mystery.

multimedia artist David Lynch inspires my interest in ambiguity . Known for his surreal mystery films and television, Lynch has crafted a visual language around exploring reality through a dreamlike lens. He does this through confusing, fragmented dialogue, visual abstractions, and purposely misleading characters. He bases his films in familiar settings like small-town America, or post-industrial cities which usually should foster a sense of comfort. Instead, Lynch uses this familiarity to envelop those into a false sense of security before pulling away the blinds revealing the darker tendencies that hide in the domestic space. I can't think of a better example of this concept than the opening of his 1986 film, *Blue Velvet*.⁷ The film opens on a shot of a white picket fence seen from below as if the viewer is lying on their back looking up. Beautiful, red roses create a nice contrast against a darkened, blue sky. This shot helps to ground the audience into some of the warm, familiar sensibilities of suburban life, only to be disturbed by the discovery of a severed ear in a backyard by the main character of the film. Lynch uses contrasty black

⁶ “Weegee Archive, Selections,” International Center of Photography, Accessed March 28th, 2024, <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/collections/weegee-archive-selections>.

⁷ David Lynch, dir. *Blue Velvet*, (Wilmington, North Carolina: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group. 1986), 2 hr. DVD.

and white compositions and overly saturated colors to indicate scenes happen outside the bounds of reality. His films encourage the viewer to question the reality that the artist has presented to them. It's through these deceptions and ambiguity that his work alludes to a psychological landscape.

As an artist, Lynch also specifically refuses to answer to questions about certain aspects of his work. In a way, he believes that the act of explaining his thinking causes the mystery of his work to be lost. I remember hearing—though I don't recall exactly where—that Lynch proposed that if a person were to use a macro lens and zoom in very closely on an open wound, that there would be a point where all context would be lost and the mixture of colors would become very beautiful. This added context kills the beauty of the composition.⁸ Lynch uses a lack of context to give his work a somewhat mystical and mysterious, quality. Withholding context allows his work to maintain almost a neutral stance, where the viewer's response is what the piece offers. This neutrality causes his compositions to have a familiar, yet distant feeling, which when paired with the mysterious tones of his films create an overwhelming feeling of uncanniness.

The uncanny holds a lot of weight in the work. This off-putting feeling of something that is both familiar and not at the same time. In 1919, Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud produced his original writings of this idea of the uncanny. Freud wanted to give context, and to define, the ominous feeling that existed within the framework of ambiguity and intention. In his essay, he describes this feeling as being a very particular form of terror, distinct from traditional ideas of fear. This unique terror originates from a

⁸ I searched for the place I first heard this anecdote and was unable to find it. This anecdote helped me to better understand Lynch's work, but whether it was in from an interview, or a talk I am unsure. It may have come to me in a dream.

disorientation that a subject feels when being stranded from context. He further explains the origin of the word "uncanny" as "Unheimlich," coined by psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in German.

The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to the home'; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar.⁹

There is a unique tension that forms from this idea of an "unhomely" home, this unknown yet familiar place that I engage in my work.



Figure 5: *Untitled*, 2023.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, (New York: Penguin Books. 2003,) 2.

Take, for example, *Untitled* (fig. 5), a photograph that depicts a pair of dead deer on the side of the road. This composition, when described, doesn't seem to be an uncommon occurrence, but becomes uncanny because the deer are placed on top of a discarded mattress left on the side of the road. Who placed these deer in this manner? Were they struck on the road? Surely, some will think I placed them there. The photo prompts the viewer to consider what could have occurred, but I conceal that level of context through the fragment of my frame.

In my dream journal, I wrote about a dead deer left in a meadow. I believe this dream echoed a memory of deer hunting with my father when I was very young. I distinctly remember somebody in our hunting party shooting a deer, and it was my job to help my father move it to the truck. I was 15 years old, and I remember standing over this dead deer and not being disturbed by it. The scene was not as gruesome as I expected it to be. There was not a lot of blood, just the animal laying perfectly still in the middle of this clearing. At that moment, I told myself the deer was just sleeping and that helped me through it. I did not do much hunting after that. The deer I encountered in making *Untitled* (fig. 5) reminded me of Enola. It was hard to go anywhere in Pennsylvania without the familiar stench of dead deer on highways.

My investment in the uncanny is complicated by photography's relationship to truth. Photography has been used as evidence, mementos, and for record keeping since its invention. Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's collaborative photobook, *Evidence*¹⁰ is an influential photography project, which calls into question the objectivity of photography. Sultan and Mandel curate a collection of vernacular images from police records, research

¹⁰ Sultan, Larry, and Mike Mandel, *Evidence*. (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2004.)

institutes, and government agencies. These images depict remnants of government experiments, men in suits seemingly confused in fields, or distant figures in massive, mysterious structures. The images are all untitled with no context given as to where they came from. Sultan and Mandel's book is poetic, conveying ideas of the inaccessible nature of photographs. The images themselves once acted as objective records, but through this new synthesis continue to weave a complex story of mystery, confusion, and transparency.

Photography's history of objectivity offers me the opportunity to create uncanny compositions with the subtext that this event may have occurred in reality. Whether the subject was found organically or staged means nothing when viewing the image because the piece is merely a representation, or a reflection of an inner psychological process. Freud even discusses this same concept in his writing on the uncanny when referring to how artists can elicit this emotion in their work. In his words: "The storyteller has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases."¹¹ Photographs can feel uncanny in their positioning, or their composition, even in their sequence, but conceptually, they may construct an eerie tone as well. In my process I continue to explore how these fragments somehow appear naturally in the landscape.

One aspect of my shooting process is based on the idea that if one goes searching for something, they will inevitably find it.. I believe that if one aligns their headspace correctly, compositions eerily form around them to reflect on that internal headspace.

¹¹Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, (New York: Penguin Books. 2003,) 2.

These scenes manifest themselves in a mysterious, coincidental way. Take for example the photograph of a twisted guardrail discussed above. This composition felt familiar to me in an unexplained way, as if it was just another fragment that felt like home. On a trip back to Enola, I was editing photographs and my mother picked out this same picture. She asked if I had taken the photo off Valley Road, part of the route my bus would take to school every morning. I told her I was not sure where the photograph was taken, but it was somewhere in New York. She insisted that this photograph was made recently and only a couple minutes from our house. Later that evening, as I was coming home from a day of shooting, I found myself on Valley Road and, to my surprise, it was there: a nearly identical mangled guardrail, spiraling backwards into the woods. I do not know whether the cold feeling I felt was from the uncanniness of the moment or the winter air.

In photography, there is often a discussion around the concept of serendipity, where an external factor outside of the photographer's control can indirectly affect a photograph in a meaningful way.¹² While referring to moments that appear coincidental within a photographic frame, people often bring up the idea of serendipity. However, in relation to the photographs I make and the conceptual framework constructed around finding meaning in fragments, I liken these coincidences to the principle of synchronicity. As I see it, serendipity suggests something similar to luck, while synchronicity invests meaning into chance.

Synchronicity is a psychological concept created by the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, in his book "*Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*". This psychological

¹² Bruno Chalifour, "Nathan Lyons: In Pursuit of Magic at the George Eastman Museum (Rochester, NY), Retrospective or Exhibition?," *Transatlantica*, no. 2 (December 31, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.11136>.

concept describes Jung's fascination with the formation of meaningful moments from acausal means. Acausality refers to any event that occurs outside the boundaries of a simple logical structure of cause and effect:

Synchronistic phenomena prove the simultaneous occurrence of meaningful equivalences in heterogeneous, causally unrelated processes; in other words, they prove that a content perceived by an observer can, at the same time, be represented by an outside event, without any causal connection.¹³

Jung's research into this phenomenon focuses on instances that seem to perfectly sync up outside the realm of one's own intention. In synchronous moments, the boundaries of mental psyche and physical reality merge to reveal an unexpected synthesis. One of the best explanations of this synchronistic phenomena comes from an essay by Marie-louise von Franz in Jung's book, *Man and his Symbols*. In this selection she offers a clear example into investing meaning into chance,

If an aircraft crashes before my eyes as I am blowing my nose, this is a coincidence of events that has no meaning. It is simply a chance occurrence of a kind that happens all the time. But if I bought a blue frock and, by mistake, the shop delivered a black one on the day one of my near relatives died, this would be a meaningful coincidence. The two events are not causally related, but they are connected by the symbolic meaning that our society gives to the color black.¹⁴

This selection specifically re-shaped my perspective on the world. This selection implies that we are merely at the whim of some unknown, yet organized chaos.

¹³ Carl G. Jung, "The Collected Works of C. G. Jung Vol. 8," *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011,) 125.

¹⁴ Marie-Louise von Franz, "Man and his Symbols," *The Process of Individuation*. Ed. Carl G. Jung. (Anchor Books/Doubleday 1964,) 208.



Figure 6: *Untitled*, 2023.

Untitled (fig. 6) is an image that I attempted to stage. This ominous scene manifested itself as a reflection of my own internal anxiety. Inspired by a dream of two hands clutching my car window, I was trying to depict a moment of fear. But mimicking the scene exactly as I saw it in my dream, did not produce the intensity that I desired. It was in between photos, when my subject rested his hands on the windowpane, an image that offered more of a sense of the fear I felt in the dream. In my process of finding compositions, I am opening myself up to these synchronous moments. This simple resting of his hand manifested a clearer tension within the composition.



Installation view of *Enola*, in *WHY WAIT*, William Harris Gallery, Rochester, NY, 2024.

For my thesis show, the viewer will respond to these images as each image being a segmented piece of a larger internal landscape. I arrange my photographs into a constellation on the gallery wall. Each individual photograph is framed in a non-descriptive white frame, and acts as a piece of a collective whole. The white frames on the white gallery wall acts as a way of camouflaging my intentions. As mentioned previously, part of my way of viewing the world comes from this idea of losing myself, and focusing on the unfolding scene in front of me. My desire is for the viewer to be thrust into a similar experience.

While installing this work, I meticulously configured these pieces to be in

dialogue with one another based on distance, height and visual kinships. I favor the constellation hanging style because I believe it conveys uncertainty, rather than a linear narrative arrangement. My construction on the wall will be an assemblage of these dreamlike manifestations. Not aiming to distinctly guide someone around a specific place, but to look at the remnants of a confusing past. Accompanying the framed images are smaller, more intimate unframed selections leaning on a wooden shelf. These photographs are mounted to pieces of matte board and are offered to the viewer as objects to hold and inspect. Untitled (Fig. 4) is depicted on this shelf at the smallest scale in the entire show. The scale implies some sort of preciousness as being resolved similarly to a pharmacy, family archive image, leaned against the wall, this image entices the viewer to interact. The aggressiveness of the twisted metal creates a tense moment of pause before handling.



Close up of Shelf, in *WHY WAIT*, William Harris Gallery, Rochester, NY, 2024.

In tying these loose fragments together, I see how the place that I once knew so well left a lasting imprint on my psyche. The photographs that I make help to visualize this inner landscape. While my work explores some of the darker moments in my mind, I begin to notice the fragile, lighter side of my thinking. There are moments of peace and quiet that become distorted by confusion and paranoia. This process of photographing the tiny details I encounter expresses aspects of what I experience internally: a tension, as well as a plethora of desires, that exist deep within the confines of my unconscious mind.

These photographs question my logical thought process. I often struggle with overthinking, and in the moments when I let go and allow myself to be at the whim of my process, I feel I express my emotions more honestly. These expressions materialize as visual deceptions of space, and time, creating an abstracted form of familiarity. In the summer of 2020, I wrote a poem also entitled *Enola*, and the concluding stanza read,

The people here have all sensed it,

You interface with its oscillations,

It's mesmerizing, melodic, metaphorical groaning,

The town presents itself to those that listen,

When the firs reach up to frame the fleeing moon,

Or the passing trains come to lull you to

sleep.

It imprints itself upon you.

You are the town experiencing itself.

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