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Within The Walls

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
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ABSTRACT

Within the Walls looks at the way in which nature is collected and represented within the domestic space. The images employ a quiet and introspective gaze, carefully examining our relationship to these environments. As the home expanded from a simple shelter to escape the elements into a farther removed, more complex and personalized space, we continuously found methods to stay connected to nature. The work explores this connection, as well as the relationship between written and visual language, by using photography and text gleaned from travel postcards.

WITHIN

THE

WALLS

IMAGES











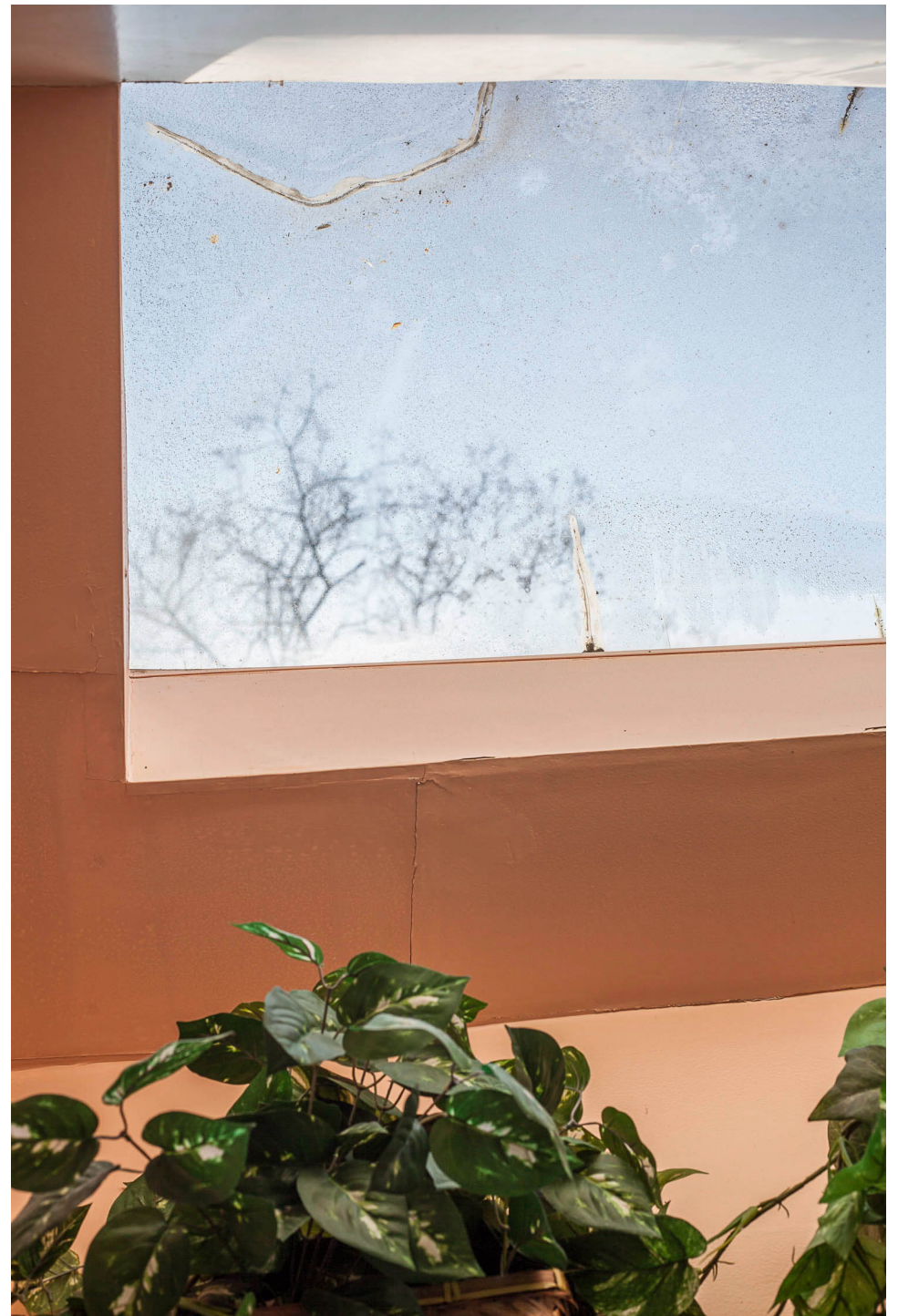


































POSTCARDS

We have been

cloudy

lovely
morning

as usual

■■■■, ■■■■.
Century old Cypress trees draped with Spanish moss along the shores of Lake ■■■■.

different
all together

-it's

████, █████.
████ Lake offers excellent swimming, camping and picnicking. Central █████ Mountains.

real nice
or how-
ever you want it

████████, █████.
Lake ██████████, in the heart of the █████ Mountains.

everything

for awhile.
is

in the
midnight sun.

████████, █████.
Ten Dall rams traveling in procession through the rugged slopes of the █████ Mountains.

you would
like it

I did not
have the nerve.

████ █████ █████ █████ █████
The tower extends to the ultimate panorama of canyon, desert and forest.

completely dis-
illusioned

and still here

████████████████████
The ██████████ spreads out for seemingly endless miles, an ocean of color.

down

describe can't

a fraction

████████, ██████████
Visitors enjoying on the ██████████ River in ██████████ ██████████ Forest.

but
we are in a
different world

████████████████████
A gentle waterfall in ██████████ ██████████ ██████████ ██████████.

Wouldn't take
too much persuasion
if
I didn't have ties.

█████ Mountain █████, █████
Pine-circled █████ Lake is seen here after climb. Road continues to beautiful █████ Lake and top of lofty Mt. █████.

have

let go as
it would only interfere

█████ █████
█████ █████ thunders into the colorful canyon carved thru the ages by the mighty river.

could not even go

speechless. makes one almost

████████████████████ █████
Cool green pines against the warm red of the mountainsides present a scene not soon to be forgotten.

At present

my head is where

█████ █████, █████
█████ is called the █████ █████ and you need go no further than the "█████" to know why.

Hardly seems possible

from here

█████ █████ █████
It takes on a completely different beauty in the fall of the year as the colors change.

if you could see how
lovely it is
too to be

█████ █████ █████
"██████████" at █████ █████, █████ Harbor, ██████████, █████.

just
with

the end of
everything

██████ is a richly diversified ██████ island east of ██████ and the ██████ ██████.

lost

me

terribly.
soon

██████, ██████, ██████.
Two and a half miles of wide, snow-white beach.

Can not describe the

marks upon
Today

██████, ██████, ██████.
██████████. Mustering sheep, Mt. ██████ in background.

so glad
to be wonderful-

Much of this will
be changed

Front: The River,

here's
that you
are to be around
not too confined.

Morning glow on Mount , 9665 feet high with Lake in the foreground.

quality time

despite
staying away

The powder-like white sandy beach at open sea.

hard
to go back

Aerial view of this scenic Village at the junction of the and Rivers.

hit

Hope the
predicted

didn't
you.

█████
Vivid █████ sunset. The sunsets in tropical █████ are always changing, but never dull.

still alive

getting used to
it.

█████, █████
Rising from its misty depths of nearly one mile are gigantic islands of crimson sandstone.

never return-

I may

hearing from me

don't mention

█████, █████
Evening moods of █████ and █████ █████



ESSAY

While on the surface *Within the Walls* looks at the way in which nature is collected and represented within the domestic space, this body of work grew out of a strong personal desire to return to a place of solace. The setting for which I longed, was the natural landscape. Vast and liberating, daydreaming of this space provided me a better state of mind than the one I found myself in at the beginning stages of making this work.

When I started this project, I was creating small platforms in which I was able to manipulate and play around with allegorical coding. By using objects, from both the domestic and natural worlds, I was creating spaces for daydreaming by deliberately staging scenes for the camera. I quickly realized, however, that these spaces already existed, in some form, within my own home; and on a daily basis, I had been engaging in these moments of reverie, without having to forcefully create them. I started to recognize how the objects I chose to keep and display had their own essence and how their presence provided spaces for momentary escape, even if only in thought.

I was holding onto this memory of ‘something better,’ by surrounding myself with things that transported me back to that state. Upon this realization, I began to photograph the areas in my apartment that spoke to this idea of transient diversion. Robert Adams once said that “Although we are not as naïve as we once were about the accuracy of pictures, we continue to value them initially as reminders of what is out there,

of what is distinct from us.”¹ He says this to describe landscape photography; I consider my photographs to be domestic landscapes—identifying the details that serve as reminders of the world outside of our walls.

The pictures I was creating in my own home extended my curiosity towards others’ living spaces and their relationship with nature. While the work stems from a personal desire and informs my choices of seeing, a yearning for nature, in some form, is practically a universal human trait. This desire manifests itself in various ways within our culture. We see it portrayed in literature and films or displayed in museums and gardens, to give some examples. My specific interest, however, is in the way it manifests within our homes—arguably the most intimate place we know.

The notion of home has always fascinated me and been an integral part of much of my work. Having grown up with a precarious sense of what a home is or should be, it only makes sense that I would have such an interest in the composition of a house and what that implies about its inhabitants. Much of my work leading up to *Within the Walls* revolved around the domestic sphere. The home is a crucial part of our lives; and despite how its main purpose has remained constant, it quickly “became an arena for more complex human practices”—a space to mirror the desires and fears of its residents.² A home speaks not only to the identity of the individual inhabitants, but also to the society in which it developed. The collection of physical objects and décor existent within a home bring up interesting questions about the way we organize our spaces and what that reveals about us.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues that our soul is a place of dwelling and therefore the house is an exemplary site for phenomenological analysis of mental space.³ The title I chose for this body of work encompasses this idea. If we look to the dictionary, the first definition we are given for *within* is “in or into the interior: inside,” and the second “in one’s inner thought, disposition, or character: inwardly.”⁴ In my title, the word *within* thus functions on two planes: physical and mental. *Walls* refers both to the walls of a home and the walls of a mind, both containing a soul, and consciousness of their own. Both seeking to contain experiences—and although we may not be able to erase the memory of bad ones, or remember only good experiences, our homes serve as containers for indications of the good. My work explores this notion by exposing the small pockets of comfort created within our homes that help to create ease within us.

Nature, in particular, has a way of creating a sense of calm within us and as the home expanded from a simple shelter into a farther removed, more complex and personalized space, we have continuously found methods to stay connected to it. When I photograph, I search for evidence of this compulsion to grasp onto objects of comfort in pursuit of stability in such an uncertain world. As a force that we cannot ever overpower nor fully understand, nature remains, in a sense, a mystery. This mystery has captivated us since our existence as human beings on this earth and the tendency to incorporate nature into our places of dwelling dates back to our primitive ancestors.

From crude depictions of the natural world scribbled

onto the walls of caves to the floral patterns woven into the fabric of the orient, nature has long been symbolized in our living spaces. The reason for these representations, however, varied and was not always simply decorative. Most early depictions of elements from the natural world were often associated with mystical rituals and beliefs, and indoor spaces were often decorated and constructed in a manner that reflected these cultural beliefs and rituals. Throughout history, and cross-culturally, our means of representation have transformed and manifested in different ways. In ancient Greece, elaborate wall paintings with images of plants and animals, in a society that was supported by agriculture and fishing, not only served to contrast the stark floors and ceilings, but also reflected the lifestyles of the people at the time. In the Middle East, India and Persia, where religious restrictions prohibited realistic pictorial imagery, abstract shapes along with naturalistic floral and plant motifs dominated the décor.⁵ This was seen especially in items like rugs and carpets—of which we find still adorning our homes today.

While the reasons for past depictions of nature may differ from our reasons now, our connection to the earth and the natural world has remained constant, and seemingly essential to our existence and understanding of ourselves in relation to space. Throughout the changes, we still regard nature as a place of solace. In the book, *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being*, Esther Sternberg studies how space can affect both physical and mental health. She speaks of the importance of exposure to the natural world, even through small glimpses and views, and how that has proven to

speed the healing process in the ill, no matter what their ailment. She provides examples of studies that prove that patients whose beds were located beside windows recovered faster and required fewer doses of pain medication.⁶

The spaces presented in my images offer therapeutic qualities, as did the process of creating them. By presenting nature in various forms within the home, we are able to fulfill the need for connection to nature. At the same time, these displays mimic the notion of human longing. As I photographed, I saw myself and my state of mind reflected in the details of the space; and the subjects, or objects, began to take on an existence of their own. The details, which are introspectively examined in the photographs, speak also of a longing and struggle with their own existence within the walls they are constrained by.

In my images, nature begins to meld into the built environment. In image 13 of this publication, an indoor tree takes over the frame of the photograph and begins to question itself in the face of a painting of what is essentially its predecessor. The houseplant extends itself towards the glass of the painting which is reflecting light coming from a nearby window, making reference to the outside world—a world that the subject no longer belongs to. In some of the images, the subjects are neatly contained, knowing their place and accepting their role as objects of appeal.

In Susan Stewart’s *On Longing*, she discusses the ways in which keepsakes are objects that mediate experience in time and space. She says that “the souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object

¹ Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2005), 14.

² Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft, *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 13.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

⁴ Merriam-Webster, “Within,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/within?show=0&t=1368026426>.

⁵ John Pile, *A History of Interior Design* (Hoboken: J. Wiley & Sons, 2005).

⁶ Esther Sternberg, *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being* (Cambridge: First Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia.”⁷ Collected objects, as seen in many of my images, speak not to themselves in nature, but rather their proprietor and a version of nature distinguished by personal experience.

In other images from the series, only a hint of nature edges its way into the domestic landscape, beginning a process of inquiry. The extraction of detail in ordinary yet unfamiliar spaces, allows me to examine these subjects as intimate moments open to being understood by a larger audience. The instances, which I choose to direct the eye of my camera, and thus the eye of the viewer, are what I may call the *punctum* of my gaze. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes defines what he calls the *punctum* of a photograph as that which “disturb[s] the studium.”⁸ The *studium*, being the general and, most often, culturally influenced interest in the subject matter of the image.

When I photograph, what might initially, or upon first glance, draw me to the scene is this *studium*: a window view, plant life, floral patterning—things that we easily recognize and have a general interest in. But what causes me to press the shutter and capture a particular view or instant is when I find my *punctum*. That detail, which draws my attention further into the sight. This imposition presents itself in various degrees within my photographs. In image 14 of this publication, it is quite clear that I, as the photographer, am directing the point of focus. In image 1, however, the *punctum* is not so clearly laid out for the viewer. Rather, the viewer can determine which point, if any, is the one that pricks them. Whether

it is the butterfly-adorned glass sitting on the windowsill, the fake candlestick amidst the houseplants—or, as it is for me, the picture frame with an indiscernible image, due to its placement against the sun; whatever detail it may be, it is one filtered through the personal.

“We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.”⁹ John Berger’s words struck me, as the spaces observed in my images are without doubt areas of personal projection; and the objects in them function as emblems for notions of personal struggle and desire. What we find documented in my images is the representation of that which we cannot fully possess—nature. A portion of these representations is found in painting, and the meaning of the framed painting, within the frame of my photographs, shifts. It is no longer just about the subject depicted within the canvas, but about the image as an object, a commodity. “It is no longer what its image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer to be found in what it says, but in what it is.”¹⁰ The painting becomes about meaning itself, what it represents within the context of its surroundings, and what purpose it serves as an object of desire.

Photographers like Karen Knorr and Thomas Struth have undertaken projects in which they photograph the collections and paintings inside museums. Their images are very much about the act of looking, and the ‘reproductions’ found within them are no longer just about the art, or the paintings themselves. The images take into consideration everything in the surroundings, including the people observing. They capture the act of daydreaming, in the precise moment of int-

eraction between viewer and object. My images, on the other hand, take the stance of the viewer’s eyes, the observer. They take on the point of view of someone fixated on a particular sight, caught in a moment of contemplation.

“Nature has become commodified; its benefits can be bought and sold in the form of camping fees, trail passes, and vacation packages at wilderness resorts[...]we come into contact with Nature on a tight schedule—holidays and weekends—which is determined not by the change of seasons, but by the routines of urban work.”¹¹ Deborah Bright highlights the role of visual reproductions as records for the true experience of nature. She talks about how nature became commoditized and conventionalized, something to be spoon fed to the public. The postcard exemplifies this packaging of information and understanding of a place through snippets of information.

The role of the picture postcard is that of a memento, something to be sent home as an indicator of the beauty of what lies outside of our daily routines and responsibilities. The second part of my work, entitled *Postcards*, consists of 24 4x6in pieces of text gleaned from travel postcards sent from natural sites and attractions. The words were carefully chosen to elicit in the viewer specific feelings of the personal, contrasted by descriptions of locations pulled from the same postcard. In these pieces, I act as curator, rearranging context and meaning. In many ways, the forms and processes of creation for both visual art and creative language are similar.

The art of both poetry and photography is in the personalized form. Just as the arrangement, proportion, symmet-

ry, and harmony of the objects captured in an image are all factors that decide whether the picture will invoke any of a wide range of human emotion and thought; the choices of vocabulary and the placement of words upon a page determine poetry’s effectiveness. This is characteristic of concrete and visual poetry, where the visual elements of the poem play into the overall meaning as much as the words do.¹² Drawing upon both visual and textual methods of significance, concrete poetry marries text and image, forcing the viewer to fluctuate between both means of comprehension.

The spacing of the words in my text pieces is roughly where the text falls on the original postcards. This serves to emphasize the missing fragments, referencing the intention of the selection in a subtle manner that allows an uninterrupted curiosity and reflection upon the words. The blacking out which occurs on the bottom, however, is much more harsh. Instead of a subtle extraction, it is an audacious omission of information—a denial. This is done to emphasize that the specifics of location are not important, but rather the idea of place and the image it creates in the viewers mind is what is valuable.

Stripped of personal names the text pieces only include pronouns, such as ‘you’ and ‘I’—these pronouns, without an identity attached to them, become universal. The omission of personal identifiers allows the viewers the freedom to create their own relation to the words and the ability to place themselves and identify on some level with the words on the page. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart explains the importance of descriptions and their ability to transport the reader into a

⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 135.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (United States of America: Editions du Seuil, 1980), 27.

⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹ Deborah Bright, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography,” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 129.

¹² Ron Padgett, ed., *The Teachers and Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms* (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000).

remote experience.¹³ These descriptions are found along the bottom line. The upper text often conflicts with these descriptions. The latter containing a melancholy or nostalgic expression, with a sense of uneasiness or longing for something unfulfilled, while the bottom text provides optimistic expressions and descriptors of a place that serve to momentarily transport the reader out of the feeling conjured by the preceding words.

Both the images and text pieces from *Within the Walls*, display a sense of longing while at the same time offering glimpses, either conjured by words, or revealed photographically, of relief and comfort. “We can create for ourselves a place of healing—a tiny island—wherever we find ourselves in this world, at any moment in the interstices of our busy lives. It is really in ourselves, in our emotions and in our memories, that we can each find our healing space. For the most powerful of healing places is in the brain and in the mind.”¹⁴ The page, the photograph, the home, the mind—these are all containers for experience and meaning. *Within the Walls* intertwines these integral parts of our lives to allow for a deeper consideration of our relationship, both to the spaces we inhabit and the spaces for which we long.

Nina Ramadan

¹³ Stewart, *On Longing*, 30.

¹⁴ Sternberg, *Healing Spaces*, 296.



