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Remnants

By

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the requirements for the degree of

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Remnants

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Chapter I

AN ARTISTIC INTENT

The primary goal of my thesis project entitled *Remnants* is transcendence that can lead a viewer or an audience to a new discovery within the Self. I am aware that each individual will experience transcendence in art differently. My intent is for my photography to be the conduit of transcendence, enabling the audience to take part in a discovery of the spiritual and the extraordinary.

My thesis subject is erased chalkboards of varying sizes and gestures. In this series, individuals such as teachers and students are shaping the chalkboards' appearance through erasure and are unknowingly creating information and communication for my series. Thus, I am taking the recorded world of academia – mathematics, history, science, philosophy, language and art – and presenting it as the primary source for my art. I am transforming words, numbers, and signs created by anonymous people, into pictorial objects with the possibilities of spiritual dimension.

The erasure marks obscure and conceal standard fixed points of orientation traditionally seen written on a chalkboard in that we are taught to read a chalkboard – like the printed page – starting at the upper left. Therefore, it is not easy to comprehend what is seen on an erased chalkboard. In my work, the viewer has to rely on his / her visual, emotional, and spiritual intuition, as well as his intellectual interpretation to fully respond to the image pictured.

Further informing my thesis project are aspects of formalism, abstraction, erasure, and beauty, which are themes that I have embraced in varying degrees in previous series of work, including *Airplanes*.

ORIGINS

When I was growing up, I used to climb on the rooftop at home and set up a camera on a tripod to photograph the moon and stars. Keep in mind this was in the middle of a brightly lit urban landscape of Houston, Texas, so not much could be seen. Regardless, I would leave the shutter open for ten to twenty minutes and after film processing observe the streaks that would appear on the film. A transformation unfolded before my eyes while looking at these negatives. Once printed, the color image of the stars looked more like a black and white photograph. I found an aesthetic of shapes and lines. The photograph was reminiscent of a piece of metal with scratches caused by stars streaking across the heavens. Since that time, I find myself attracted to this transformation of perception and incorporate aesthetic elements of symmetry and beauty. I have also developed a hyper-awareness of the space within the photographic frame – a gestalt sensibility – in which every area of the image has a purpose, either literally or symbolically.

In 1992, I dedicated myself to photography and pursued an artistic intent in my work. From that date to 1999, my primary imagery involved photographing the human figure with objects ranging from food to household items. Pre-visualization played a critical role in my early approach to creating these images. Carefully, I specifically picked the people and the objects for whatever idea I had, searching for a combination that would satisfy my artistic vision. Even though I could tell within a split second whether or not the composition would carry the photograph, I intentionally contemplated all of the possible visual scenarios for weeks and sometimes months before capturing the final scene. I had to be absolutely sure they would support my idea from every point of view – artistically, aesthetically, and theoretically.

Concurrently, I pursued commercial photography, which dictated a different kind of timeframe for photographic production. Like the figurative work, I would spend hours and days leading up to a shoot contemplating the composition and lighting of a subject, whether it was a still life, environment, or portrait. In the commercial world, control of the pictured content extends beyond the photographer to the omnipresent art director who has their own set of rules to follow, as deemed by the client. Bottom line – I was ‘raised’ in a world of photography in which every element in a photograph was strictly controlled. Combine that sensibility with a love for some of the 20th century modernist masters, including Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Irving Penn with their formalist perspective and pursuit of beauty. Drawing upon these early influences, my predilection for perfection and control when originating and taking a picture was enhanced even further.

Throughout this period, I strove to achieve as much artistic and technical control as possible. Of course, demanding strict control in one’s work does not necessarily equate to a loss of spontaneity. It simply means that through countless experiments – in the studio, in the darkroom, working with different subjects, and shooting with various cameras – I have acquired an expertise of skills and knowledge, enabling me to ‘bend the rules’ – technically speaking – in order to achieve the desired artistic results.

By the year 2000, what did become a hindrance was the predictability of my work, and, yes, a sense of loss of spontaneity during the shooting process. This came about due to falling back on previous ‘tried and true’ methods of shooting. My pictures appeared uninteresting, my artistic ambitions unfulfilled. The challenge confronting me was to find a balance of letting go of enough control of the subject matter in order to create new unpredictable and more intriguing images, with the same demonstration of

technical proficiency.

The last four years have been a journey, relying on my intuitive self and vision, while maintaining artistic intent and technical control.

TURNING POINT

The *Airplane* series constituted a turning point in my artistic work, moving from figurative to abstract images. The series began as a way to more directly visualize and relate to the world around me, exploring how to evoke emotions in a photograph. I sought an intuitive experience with my subject, based on capturing the unexpected, the unfamiliar.

When my wife, Julie, and I married in Austin, Texas, in 2000, we bought a house located directly on the flight path of a nearby airport. I have always loved planes and helicopters so the idea of these objects flying 1,000 feet overhead presented no major problem. In fact, they would provide a solution. One summer night, I considered what would happen if I photographed the incoming planes from my rooftop. What kind of marks would the planes make in the night sky? Would they resemble the constellation of stars and moon effects I saw as a boy? These questions were too hard to resist and I began photographing the planes, hoping to reconnect with the perceptual experiences I had as a youth.

Immediately, I realized that a twin lens reflex camera would be the best format for this project. I could watch a plane fly across the camera's ground glass while simultaneously taking a picture, knowing that the camera accurately aligned with my subject. I began experimenting with different films and papers to discover the best combinations. As with the format, I instinctively knew that the final prints would be 20 x

20 inches, printed full frame with a subtle appearance of grain. I chose Kodak Plus-X-Pan film and exposed at 80 ISO. Not wanting the prints to have too much contrast, I came up with a solarization technique to subdue the tones.

After repeated efforts of photographing planes from my rooftop, a problem emerged. Due to the high altitude of the planes, little of their presence could be seen on film, the animation of the streaks they made was too subtle and undramatic to convey my intent. In response, I drove to the airport and found that the edge of the runway was the best place to situate myself in order for the plane to fill up the entire frame of the camera. I photographed while the planes landed and took off, realizing that the time duration when the planes were on approach to land was best to view their trajectory closely.

But even this situation didn't guarantee predictable results every time. Depending on the direction of the wind, the plane would fly at subtly different angles. I soon discovered that each airplane model had a different number of navigation lights as well as various wing and fuselage dimensions. I also found these varying combinations recorded different light patterns on the film, thus, creating completely unpredictable shapes and streaks. Since the planes were flying at high speeds, there was no need for a tripod. I would lie on the grass and position the camera on my stomach, point it toward the sky and open the shutter for about ten seconds as the plane flew overhead. This approach allowed for a more intuitive interaction to enter my picture making. While the camera position was the constant, random factors posed by the planes created unexpected patterns of light in my photographs. Intuition rather than pre-visualization or control began to determine the final appearance of a photograph. It was the liberating experience I had been searching for.

The anticipation of seeing what the film had captured was always unbearable and I would immediately develop and print the images. Afterwards, I would spend hours with my nose almost touching the prints, following the light patterns streaking across the paper (pl. I). My eye would follow one streak, which would abruptly end and jump to another adjacent to the first. These streaks were fascinating because I didn't create them or control how they were rendered on the film. I was simply a participant in the experiential moment of discovery, lying in the grass capturing lights as they flew overhead at 200+ miles per hour.

Most importantly, a transformation unfolded before my eyes, similar in effect to the streaks of the moon and stars from my childhood. Photographically, the streaks could characterize anything, whether literal or symbolical. Personally, they came to represent the many paths my life had taken and would take in the future. Over the years, I felt that my life was going one direction, then suddenly it would change course inevitably changing my perspective of how I viewed myself, my life, and world.

The *Airplane* series taught me to trust my intuition completely, following it with courage and determination. The minimal abstraction of my photographs, created from the lights of airplanes helped me realize that this style of imagery can transform an ordinary subject into intriguing artwork, evoking a powerful spiritual and emotional response in different ways than my figurative work.

Because this series was a dramatic aesthetic shift from my previous work, I had a mixed feeling about showing it to critics and curators in the photographic community. The warm and positive response received from these individuals reaffirmed my decision to pursue this intuitive approach even further. I was particularly interested in other kinds of objects that could act as a springboard to transformation similar to the

airplanes.

Chapter 2

GRADUATE EXPERIENCE

In the spring of 2000, I participated at FotoFest, a bi-annual photography festival held in Houston, Texas, in which curators, critics, and gallery owners from throughout the world gather to look at photographers' work. It is a wonderful opportunity for the emerging photographer, like myself, to meet a lot of important people in the world of photography and gain valuable feedback. During my critiques, several reviewers suggested that I consider applying to graduate school in order to hone my body of work. Until that time, I had never considered attending graduate school, but was immediately drawn to the idea of learning from talented faculty possessing a lot more knowledge and skill than myself. I had also hit a barrier in my working methods and graduate school appeared like the perfect, shall I say, battering ram, to break into new artistic territory. Just as I had studied under several commercial photographers in New York a decade earlier, working with other artistic photographers in an academic setting seemed like the perfect scenario at this period in my artistic growth.

I had once told my wife that my dream was to sell all of the photographic equipment I had acquired as a commercial photographer, quit my administrative day job, and start over again with just my 35mm camera and lenses, or better yet, my Holga camera. I reasoned that this would force me to search for new discoveries, hopefully leading to new artistic ground. After acceptance to Rochester Institute of Technology in 2002, this dream came true. I began to prepare my heart and mind to embrace the lifestyle change from a business to an academic environment. I was walking on fertile artistic ground, euphoric for the challenges awaiting me, and eager for the opportunities to begin building on the *Airplane* series. Similar to that series, I wanted to find objects

that could be transformative, lending themselves to an interpretation of the transcendent.

Besides searching for a new artistic ground while at RIT, another intention was to learn new skills from the wealth of knowledge at the Institution, while honing the skills I already possessed. One of the major draws of RIT was the vast curriculum available to graduate students in the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences. A personal goal was to take at least one class in every department in the School, which I realized. Another goal was to take as many photography classes as possible, which meant having a full load of eighteen credits every quarter. Beyond the challenging workload, I understood that this schedule would enable me to take an extra eighteen credits for free at the same price as taking twelve to fifteen credits every quarter, I was getting my money's worth of credits!

For a decade, I had worked with Photoshop and had facilitated tests comparing the resolution of Phase One high-end digital 4x5 camera backs to 4 x 5 and 8 x 10 chromes as a commercial photography assistant, working with commercial photographer Les Jorgensen in New York. Yet, my Photoshop skills were very weak in the area of outputting fine art digital prints, as well as successfully scanning film. Concurrently, while I had read numerous books about photographers and their techniques, I did not possess a comprehensive knowledge of photographic history and theory, having only been exposed to general art history in my undergraduate studies. I was hungry to learn about the entire history of photography and related theory, realizing it would add depth and scope – the necessary context – to my future work.

Excited about fulfilling all of these possibilities, the faculty as well as my peers at RIT challenged me in ways that led to constant experimentation during the first year of

my graduate residency. Besides shooting commercial work, I had never been pushed to constantly create artistic photographs. Immediately, I understood that my previous methodical approach to photography was not successful in the structure at RIT. I was expected to produce good work for display at critique every week, in addition to taking other classes, forcing me not to contemplate or plan as much as usual, but execute quickly. I also put a lot of expectation upon myself to create 'perfect' aesthetic and technical work every week, which was impossible and added unnecessary burdens. Needless to say, I struggled tremendously the first two quarters, searching for objects that could complement my artistic vision. Late in the fall of 2002, I ended up photographing corn syrup mixed with food dye compressed between two pieces of glass, which was displayed during the evaluatory walkthrough. The next quarter, I photographed Barbie's Ken doll streaking across the film using a linear strip technique taught to me by Professor Andy Davidhazy in his Special Effects class. During the winter quarter, countless techniques learned in class were implemented in my work, constantly searching for artistic breakthrough.

As it turned out, I was seeking breakthrough in all the wrong places, including the comfortable space of a studio-like environment, reminiscent of my commercial days. In this space, I walked a tightrope between 'tried and true' methods and new territory – a walk too familiar, too predictable. This approach was a failure and the work produced was unfinished and artistically unfulfilled. This experience taught me what graduate school was all about – taking risks – and living with mistakes in order to learn from them. This experience also wiped away any preconceived notions of perfection I continued to harbor, allowing me to loosen control of my working process and respond more spontaneously in my approach to picture-making.

The good news was that I had acquired a strong discipline as a fine art photographer, with an intense daily routine of taking photographs. I was completely focused on becoming the best fine art photographer I could be, shedding my social life to concentrate on my art every waking minute. The experience of graduate school is one of the most fulfilling times of my life, in which I gave myself license to be completely selfish, to dedicate myself to fine art photography.

Chapter 3

CHALKBOARDS

It wasn't until February of 2003 that I discovered the chalkboards. One day I literally stopped in my tracks as I walked past a chalkboard in a study room at Wallace Library. I stared at the shapes created by the eraser marks, enthralled with the abstractions that remained on the chalkboard (pl. 2). The textures and lines were elegant and subtle, possessing a mystical, transformative quality reminiscent of celestial galaxies, clouds, or waves in the sea. For me, there was also a strong spiritual presence within the shapes on the chalkboard. This transformation was what I had been searching for since the *Airplane* series and I immediately realized that an erased chalkboard could serve as a springboard to my further investigation into transcendence.

The boards engaged the visual remnants of written communication in the classroom. The visual forms that the erasure marks made interspersed with the continuous layering of communication also intrigued me. The process of someone erasing the messages of the previous person in order to communicate his own ideas occurs thousands of times throughout the lifespan of a chalkboard. This makes the intended information a board conveys immense in number. Concurrently, the unintended and subtextual information is equally abundant, for example, the erasure marks in *Untitled #401* (pl. 3). Later in the year during my thesis opening, two viewers would approach me to inquire if I had intentionally created subliminal messages in all of the images. They brought to my attention the multiple combinations of animal-like shapes in this image in particular, which varied depending on individual perspective. One person saw a lion, while the other recognized a frog. And while observing *Untitled #102* (pl. 4), another viewer saw a cave with a person's face looking outwards towards them.

None of these representations were observed by me while working on the images, and none of the responses was provoked by me during the opening. In fact, I didn't know any of the people who approached me with these observations. Instead, each individual had come to experience the work differently and according to his / her sensibilities, creating a wide array of interpretation and intrigue. This was one of my goals. Once again, central to my interest in the boards as an artistic source was the effect of random or accidental possibilities – automatic, utilitarian acts created by an anonymous teacher or student that when photographed aesthetically produced mindful and thought provoking contemplation.

So, I began to search for chalkboards around the RIT campus, looking for erasure marks that possessed the transformative quality present in the very first chalkboard I observed. Luckily, no shortage of these objects existed. Half the fun became walking into a classroom and into the unexpected, not knowing what would remain on the boards. Sometimes the slate surfaces did not change for days, while other times, they changed within an hour. I did not control who wrote on the chalkboards, what was written, or what was erased. It was vital to my images that I not write or manipulate any of the boards in this first stage of 'capture'. Instead, I seized upon the remnants of what was left behind, the act and effect of communication as displayed over time (pl. 5).

The spontaneous and transformative qualities of the chalkboard reflected my new working methods, which defined the current objective in my art – to readily accept the affective characteristics of an object – its remnants – found in the experiential moment of discovery. In this process, I discovered my own aesthetic predilection for achieving a photographic ideal based on the purity of purpose, which resides in the unpredictable surfaces of found objects.

INSPIRATION AND CONTENT

“That which takes us by surprise – moments of happiness – that is inspiration. Many people as adults are so startled by inspiration which is different from daily care that they think they are unique in having had it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Inspiration is there all the time. For everyone whose mind is not clouded over with thoughts whether they realize that or not. Most people have no realization whatever of the moments in which they are inspired. Inspiration is pervasive but not a power. It’s a peaceful thing... Do not think it is unique. If it were unique no one would be able to respond to your work. Do not think it is reserved for a few or anything like that. It is an untroubled mind. Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind cannot last. So we say that inspiration comes and goes but in reality it is there all the time waiting for us to be untroubled again. We can therefore say that it is pervasive... All the moments of inspiration added together make what we call sensibility.”

Agnes Martin, *Writings*¹

Similarly to Agnes Martin, I believe that inspiration is always in our midst, we just have to embrace it. For me, however, that process of putting inspiration into action was initially not an easy task, especially as I adjusted from a business mind-set, i.e. pragmatic thinking, to an artistic attitude of uninhibited ideas and practice. The months leading up to the discovery of the erased chalkboards were a quest for inspiration and a search for aesthetic insight that could lead to transcendence. Throughout those months I was also unknowingly absorbing inspiration for my next series in the form of groundbreaking artists, bold artistic movements, and significant theories.

I became especially intrigued with the abstract expressionist painters, particularly Barnett Newman and Cy Twombly. In fact, a strong influence of the chalkboard series stems from theories of High Modernism of the 1950s and early 1960s. By reducing shapes to their most elemental forms, these artists wanted their work to provide a transformative experience in the spiritual realm. The transformative experience these artists were looking for in their reductive abstraction was the ‘way’ to the spiritual

possibilities that lie within the Self. This 'way' of spiritual importance was derived from prevailing philosophical and religious concepts of the day, especially existentialism. The core of its philosophy is the ability of the human being to act upon choices, i.e., the self as an acting agent. Another element of existentialism is that in these choices, one is searching for the truth in many areas of life, including spiritual, moral, and intellectual. For Newman and Twombly, this existentialism 'way' led them to take an audience from viewing to perceiving to experience. For a viewer to move from viewing to experiencing required a contemplative approach to looking and interpretation. This was contingent upon the viewer readily accepting the two-dimensional picture plane with elemental shapes as not only an aesthetic object, but a conduit to a spiritual journey. This could be experienced by anyone coming into contact with this genre of creative expression regardless of one's spiritual, religious, or philosophical background.

Newman's famous 'zips' engaged my imagination and I never tired of soaking in their simplistic power. When visiting museums, I would stare at his paintings for long periods of time, fixated upon the subtle nuances of the 'zips' tearing through the plane of the canvas. And size does not matter – Newman's smaller paintings had the same impact, for me, as his monumental pieces displayed at MoMA. I always ask, "Is the line taking over the rest of the painting or vice-versa?" The simplicity of his compositions using elemental shapes frees my mind, unleashes my imagination, and produces a tremendous spiritual response. His 'zips' are the essence of using minimal shapes and design to enhance contemplation, which is an attitude that I have embraced in my work. I have been curious how elemental shapes can lead a viewer, including myself, to deeper contemplation. For example, the lines of the airplanes led me to question how they relate to my spiritual, moral and intellectual path in life. This contemplation led me to

ask questions of how does this relate to what I believe? Where I am going? Viewers of my work have also reiterated similar questions to me concerning the chalkboard images. My intent is that they evoke a response similar to that of Newman's 'zips' – the image of a simple gesture leading one to introspection on multiple levels. Newman's sensibilities inspired me to continue creating in order to find the path that leads to spiritual revelation.

Visually, my chalkboard images most closely relate to several of Cy Twombly's paintings, specifically his *Untitled* series from 1970-71. His images are touchstones to my chalkboard series and undoubtedly, my inspiration was similar to his. In his book, *Cy Twombly*, Gottfried Boehm wrote about Twombly,

“What we see is neither the unequivocal manifestation of a subjective impulse of expression nor is it objectifying in a manner which would exclude all personal moments referring to the existence of their author. Rather, Twombly's conception can be considered a turning-point or a transition, in which the subjective shifts to the objective and the objective to the subjective... If we sharpen our eyes, we notice that one pictorial idea constantly recurs. It could be described as the contamination of display and concealment. Whatever individual notations, signs, and traces we observe, they are never free of the act of extinction, covering negation... Most frequently, however, we are faced with an impenetrability, a definite disappearance of something whose content is unknown to us. Something that has been there is no longer... they are inseparable from the process of palimpsest-like stratification. This process, in turn, is infinite... it is much more the performance of a visible moment.”²

An obvious similarity is, like Twombly, I am attempting to make an aesthetic statement out of something that seems so artless, such as chalkboards. As Kirk Varnedoe wrote concerning Twombly's paintings, “the results are, however, transporting. The picture brims over with a nervous, obsessed energy, yet its trance-like monotony also opens out into sense of serene, oceanic dissolution, in a nebular cloud of great depth and infinite complexity.”³ Like Twombly, the gestural marks of my work lead to infinite interpretations and deeper contemplation of our world.

Although Newman and Twombly provided the groundwork in similarity of intent, my work differs greatly from theirs. Socially, I live in a different time in which the world is full of anxiety. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, our society lives in uncertainty during a war on terrorism. Artistically, the Postmodern era challenges and questions the theories and philosophies of Modernism. I am photographing objects in which its faithfulness to literal reality is reinterpreted. In my chalkboard series, I am using an academic vernacular to establish a visual display of information, forms, and signage. Another major difference is I am interested in capturing the found object – a combination of various academic subjects layered and erased on top of one another in a continuous process based on utilitarian gestures, created by anonymous persons. This is similar to the work of photographer Aaron Siskind, who worked in a photographic process of recording the banal tar marks on the road and weathered, multilayered posters on walls. Like Siskind, I am the artist creating the final aesthetic object, but engage others in the creative process by capturing the linguistic remnants. Newman and Twombly both heavily controlled the image from beginning to end – arguably previsualizing their image. I take a found object and transform it from a utilitarian object to one with aesthetic possibilities, a work that complements my vision of transcendence. With these differences, my work transcends the High Modernist category in which these masters are often placed, leaping forward to our current postmodernist era of reinterpreting the found object to enhance the final image.

I am primarily interested in the aesthetics of the elemental shapes in the chalkboards – the linguistic remnants – and their ability to suggest an aesthetic experience to a viewer. However, I am also interested in the meaning of the remnants of the words or numbers left behind from the erasure process. In particular, I am

inspired by the question of how different viewers interpret the forms and signage seen in my images. At what physical location does one begin observing the image and start connecting the remnants of words, equations, and erasure marks? And once the remnants have been identified, how does the individual interpret them linguistically?

This last factor of interpretation is contingent upon the knowledge and background a viewer brings to a work. On the one hand, a mathematician might experience an image by figuring a partial equation left on a chalkboard, on the other, a literature professor might seek a linguistic statement. An art historian will no doubt contemplate the gestural shapes in an intellectual context different from that of a physicist. Interpretation is subjective, yet the signage and forms on the boards are objective in that they are signifiers pointing beyond themselves to the culturally signified. American intellectual Charles Sanders Peirce, a major contributor to the theory of semiotics, mused, "It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe – not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part... is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs."⁴ The gestural marks on the boards are culturally determined signifiers that draw us toward the signified, i.e., the final remnant of the found object, which leads to complex interpretations.

¹ Martin, Agnes, *Writings / Scriften*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, pp.61-2.

² Cy Twombly, Fundacio Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, pp.43-4.

³ Varnedoe, Kirk, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., p.42.

⁴ Deely, John, *Basics of Semiotics*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.34.

Chapter 4

PROCESS & MATERIALS

From a technical standpoint, it was essential that the spontaneity and instinctive quality central to initially capturing my subject of chalkboards be complimented with proficiency and control. As mentioned in chapter two, a goal for realizing artistic breakthrough was to shed all extraneous photographic method so present during my commercial years. I wanted to photograph with a minimal amount of equipment.

After several experiments, I decided my gear would be similar to that of a photojournalist, using comparable equipment – a 35mm camera, an overhead camera strobe, and a camera bag with extra supplies. The shedding of extraneous equipment and unburdening of my ‘artistic toolbox’ furthered the goals of the series, in which premeditation succumbed to intuition. I spent less than ten seconds composing and taking each photograph. This instinctual working process was incredibly refreshing and allowed me to capture every chalkboard on RIT’s campus in a short amount of time. I would walk – from classroom to classroom, from lab to lab, from study hall to study hall – and capture the information on the boards very quickly, recording the constant change in the shapes on the boards on a regular basis, which usually occurred in between classes and ‘under the radar’ of anyone in proximity. The speed and stealth achieved would not have been possible with a larger format camera.

The next step in my process was to decide whether to use a film camera or a digital camera. I decided to use a film camera because I saw similarities between the history of film-based photographic technology and chalkboards. Both have been used to record information and communicate ideas via art and education. They are both becoming obsolete technologies of information dissemination. In the case of film, digital

technology is becoming the preferred method of capturing information. And with chalkboards, multimedia computer programs are favored due to their breadth of communication templates. And both film and chalkboards share the same fate – they are being phased out – eclipsed by digital technology. I found this added layer of meaning to be significant and it contributed to the many layers of meaning in this series because it mirrored the obscured information on the chalkboards.

I also considered how to light the chalkboards within the environment of a classroom, with its multilayered texture of chalk spanning across the slate. I wanted to light the boards in an unconventional way, to bring out their unique properties, have my subjective hand at play, to aestheticize their presence as objects of variable meaning. Flashing the boards directly would create an interesting glow in the center of the image. This approach to lighting helped to remove the chalkboards from the original context of a classroom, and advanced them as aesthetic objects. I ran countless experiments using flash, from the hand-held strobe directly at the chalkboard to bouncing it off the ceiling, walls and floor to see how texture would be recorded. In the end, the direct flash technique worked best. The glowing highlight in the center of the chalkboard image became an essential aesthetic element in order to give the elemental forms and signage a spiritual import. The glow not only adds depth to the image, but also focuses attention on the chalkboard as a source of transformation, which can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the viewer's thoughts and beliefs. The photographic flash is my artistic fingerprint to help shape the theme of the final presentation of the images.

My next challenge was to find a wide selection of chalkboards on campus. They were hard to find, due to the fact that RIT was transforming classrooms into 'smart' classrooms, filled with cutting edge technology. All told I found approximately forty

chalkboards throughout campus, the majority located in the science building, followed by the library, and then the art building. Not surprisingly, none were found in the engineering, computer science, and other technology buildings on the far west side of campus. Even the photography, liberal arts, and administrative buildings did not have chalkboards. The majority of boards located outside of a classroom or study hall setting were neglected and sometimes covered up by furniture or objects, especially in art studios. The surfaces of some were beat up, yet these boards had some of the most beautiful erasure marks.

The reason for the plethora of boards in the science building is that science education and chalkboards share a verdant history. When the construction crews were ordered to remove all of their chalkboards for dry erase boards a few years ago, the entire science faculty objected and physically blocked the doors to all of their classrooms, preventing their removal. In the end, the science faculty won their case, and all of the labs and the majority of the classrooms still have chalkboards. In fact, the newly designed main lobby of the science building serves as homage to the chalkboard, with an enormous chalkboard that is fifty feet long. Students are free to write anything on the boards and plenty of chalk is always available.

Once I found all of the locations of the chalkboards on campus, I charted the best course for photographing them in an efficient manner. Since I spent every day working in the photography building, I would start my 'rounds' in the adjacent art building, then walk across the quad to the science building, and finish in the library. Initially, I photographed them every other day, but soon, my approach changed. I began recording them every day, then twice a day, and finally three times a day. After nearly a year of documentation, including two boards that were found at New York University, I

ended up with thousands of images, which content ranged from more literal markings and gestures (partial equations, words, symbols, etc.) to those that contained much more ethereal shapes and strokes.

My task then became curating a cohesive series and refining my thematical goals. Ultimately, I decided that boards that contained more abstract shapes and celestial patterns served my vision more appropriately, eliminating half of my imagery. Although this first selection made the editing process more manageable in reinforcing the series' theme, it was somewhat difficult to let go of the other set of images containing more intelligible markings. However to my delight, they were able to be enjoyed as part of my thesis exhibit as an ancillary, but no less compelling aspect. They were shown in a nearly chalkboard-size power point projection in a separated room in the gallery.

When deciding how to print the images, I also needed to be more spontaneous, releasing myself from ingrained artistic habits, such as printing solely in a darkroom. While I committed to shooting with film for a variety of reasons, I was less interested in using the wet darkroom for their production. This was because I initially wanted very large prints that could only be produced, I believed, as analog. However, difficulties with departmental equipment and student demand severely limited my abilities to realize the series properly. During a walkthrough evaluation in February 2003, a chance meeting with Associate Professor Patti Russotti from the Print Media Department offered a new approach to producing my work – digital output.

With the guidance of Patti, digital output would be the spontaneous approach I had been searching for. I immediately connected with her warm personality. She intuitively connected with my work. She encouraged me to meet with her so that she could give me some Photoshop tips and tricks. Since my digital printing skills were weak,

I was excited for some advice. Within five minutes of our first meeting, she introduced Photoshop techniques that advanced my images from mediocre to exceptional prints. It was like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time! Needless to say, Patti's digital mastery is the reason my final images for the thesis exhibition were successful. In subsequent months, Patti introduced me to Greg Barnett, Director of Operations for the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences. Like Patti, he is also a guru of digital technology, particularly digital output. With both Patti and Greg, I was under the best supervision possible to fulfill the potential of my images. Under their patient mentoring, I quickly realized how little I knew and, more importantly, how Photoshop and digital output offered the flexibility, control, and attention to detail that I desired for the series. Digital printing allowed me to focus on aspects of the images that were central to creating the visual qualities necessary to enhance the characteristics of the chalkboards – in particular the spiritual import I so eagerly sought.

Concurrently, I had switched from shooting Fuji Neo Pan to Kodak Ektachrome EI100 G for several reasons. The main reason was time efficiency. I was burning through so much film weekly that dropping it off at the end of the day at the ISM lab on campus, and picking it up the following afternoon negated the hours that would have been spent in the darkroom processing instead of photographing. And the major benefit of recording with chromes was that I could lay them on a light table and make immediate edits, further increasing efficiency. Since I was working in Photoshop, it did not matter if the film was color because it could be converted into black and white via the channel mixer adjustment layer, allowing contrast control, which further added to the pinpoint control necessary for the final image.

Once the image selection process was closer to completion, my next goal was determining the size of the prints for the final exhibition. In the early summer of 2003, I requested the SPAS Gallery for my thesis exhibition, sharing it with two fellow graduate students. By early 2004, I learned that the two students had rescheduled their exhibitions, enabling me to use the entire gallery in which to display my work. I had the unique opportunity of a solo thesis exhibition, which meant that I could control the mood in the gallery through lighting and print placement. Additionally, a PowerPoint presentation could be projected on an entire wall as an adjunct, yet complementary piece in the exhibition.

With the cancellation of the other two students, the opportunity for making larger prints immediately presented itself and Greg outputted multiple print sizes. After hanging them on the gallery walls, I determined that an eighteen-inch high print would be the best dimension and that ten prints would adequately fill the space while still leaving the viewers 'hungry for more.' Greg and I began working together to achieve the highest quality prints possible. Instinctively, we knew that outputting large digital prints from 35mm film would produce grain, which was a quality I wanted. Due to their size, I found that, once printed, the visible dot gain of the images (often a criticism of digital prints) could serve as yet another layer of meaning in the series; the dot gain echoed the chalk particles on the boards, highlighting chalk as an important visible element of the chalkboard series.

I had four goals for the final visual display of the gallery space. First, the visual display had to complement the aesthetic sensibility of the images. I determined the gallery lighting would be a tight spot on the print so that the concentrated beam would be in the center and begin to taper away, reminiscent of the flash lighting used in

documenting the chalkboards. Secondly, the framing of the images would play a major part in their effectiveness and needed to be perfectly chosen. Patti guided me to the best framers I've ever used – Gateway Framing. They helped me select a black shadow box frame in which the print would appear to be floating in space. The framing highlighted the concept that these prints were precious, beautiful objects. In addition, the black mat and frame exaggerated the appearance of the white chalk marks on the boards, creating a sense of depth and contrast. It also enhanced the remnants of partially erased words and numbers on the boards. Thirdly, the prints were to be displayed with great distance between them, so that the viewer could focus solely on one print and then physically walk to the other print. This approach paralleled my journey from walking around campus from one chalkboard to the next. In the final determination of print size, I wanted scale to create an aura of objecthood, rather than enhance its literal nature as chalkboard. Thus the final dimension of the prints were quite smaller than the original. Together with the unique framing method, the prints would have a substantive presence in the gallery. A presence supported by the centralized focus of the lights that singled out each framed object. I created three distinct sizes, from square format to panoramic dimensions. They were 18 x 18", 18 x 28", and 18 x 38".

An integral part of my thesis exhibition was the support received from Patti's Digital Workflow class. At the beginning of the spring quarter, she asked if I was interested in my work serving as a project for her students, whose assignment was creating a book. I eagerly accepted, offering my *Airplane*, *Chalkboard*, and a new *Adhesive* series, begun in January 2004, as source material. What started as a book project quickly turned into an entire exhibition support of posters, handouts, gallery guides, postcards, video interview, and PowerPoint presentation. Through Patti's leadership, the class

rallied around my thesis exhibition like it was their own and sacrificed countless hours to make sure everything was complete in time for the opening, that was scheduled for April 22nd. The experience of working with the class was one of the greatest experiences during my studies at RIT. I could not have asked for a better 'gift' than the one Patti and the class afforded me. Needless to say, the exhibition materials received high praise from faculty and students alike. One of the highest complements came from a fine art photo undergraduate student who sheepishly confessed to me that he had stolen a poster off the wall to hang in his dorm room. Soon, I began noticing more and more posters missing.

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The opening of my thesis exhibition was on April 22nd, 2004, and it was a success. Faculty, students, and a few strangers complemented me for a job well done during the opening and in the hallways in the weeks following the opening. The majority of comments mirrored the sensibilities and goals that I had hoped viewers would take away from the work.

In an exhibition comment book, several viewers had an aesthetic response to the images that took part in the transformative orientation pursued in the prints. For example, a viewer noted, "I've seen you around but we haven't met. First, I would like to say that your images are truly wonderful. At first, I was like, who cares, they are simply marks on a blackboard, but on closer inspection, it was the quality of the automated eraser stepping on the block of black that made a more than 'human' impression. I don't know what the marks mean, but for me the movement seen as the

chalk spreads across the surface reminds me of what it means to be human, to be emotional. The quality in which each drawn blackboard comes across spreads over different personalities, spaces, and states of mind and being. They are sort of the missing link between the ‘impression’ and the ‘mark.’” Another viewer commented, “I love how you see the world, love the simplicity, beauty, and purity of it. You have found such honesty – This is our lives turning to dust, fading away. And it’s overwhelmingly beautiful. P.S. The texture and grain drives me wild!” These two responses, as well as many more, expressed to me either verbally or in the comment book, reinforced that the images of erased chalkboards had achieved my goal for my thesis work – to present work that when contemplatively viewed conveys a transformative experience closely aligned with the spiritual.

The experience of graduate school taught me to trust my intuitions, believing that my work can embrace transformation within myself and others. I also realized the importance of working as a team with the support of my professors Therese Mulligan, Jeff Weiss, and Patti, as well as my peers.

CONCLUSION

As a photographer, the act of taking photographs is my quest to experience spiritual revelation. I want to discover a transcendent element in found objects and recognize in them a spiritual level of meaning. My handling of artistic skills as aesthetic pursuits in photographic art provide me with a personalized approach to seek, and hopefully realize, this spiritual dimension within myself and the world.

The chalkboards represent my walk with God for the past ten years. I have always believed in God, but drifted from Him and a path of self-revelation. This resulted in a spiritual emptiness. Today, as a practicing Christian, the patterns of my life have changed: I began to walk the 'straight and narrow' path toward spiritual enlightenment taught by Jesus in the Gospels. The line in the middle of the chalkboard in *Untitled #210* (pl. 6) reminds me of the purity of my walk with God. The line is straight and surrounded by the glow of the flash, symbolizing the divine presence of the Holy Spirit, which is omnipresent in my life. The articulated grain of the prints suggests the heavenly realm of God. This image represents the culmination of my journey as a Christian.

The series is a symbolic story of my walk as a Christian, visited by trials and tribulations. Throughout this journey, I am trying to wipe away my past while searching for spiritual truth and purity, eventually resulting in an unblemished clean slate.

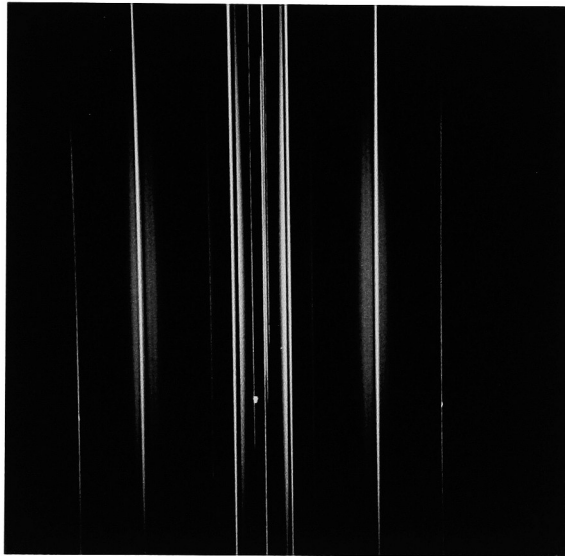
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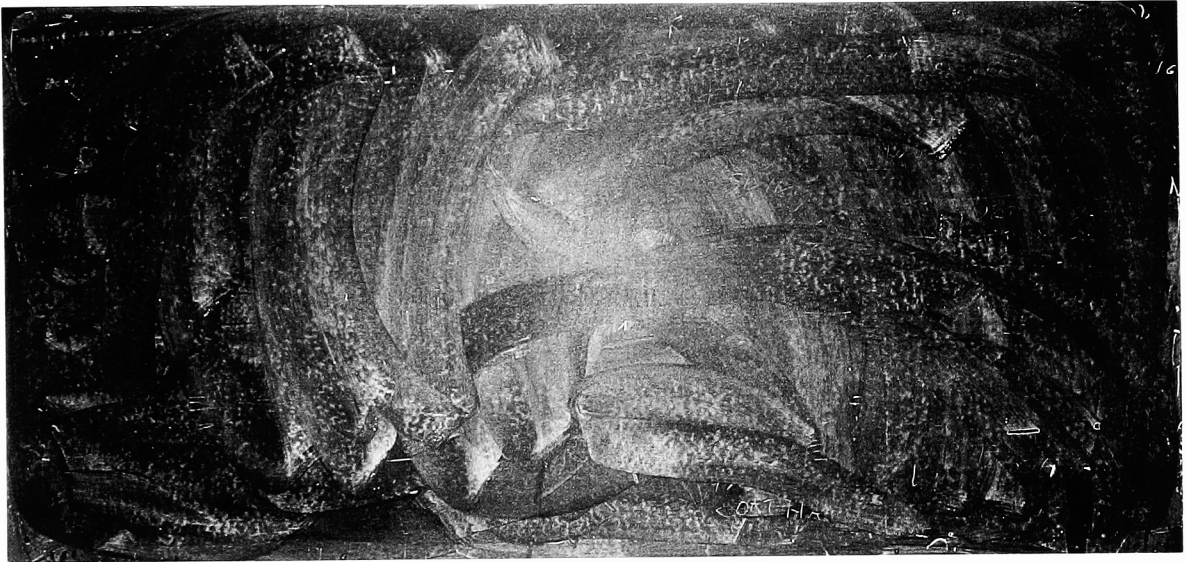
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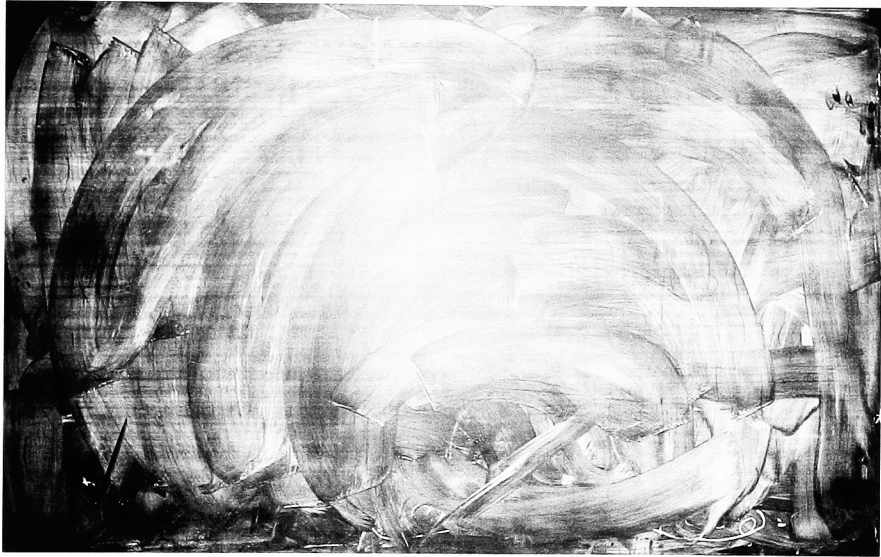
Untitled#11a
Plate I



Untitled#101
Plate 2



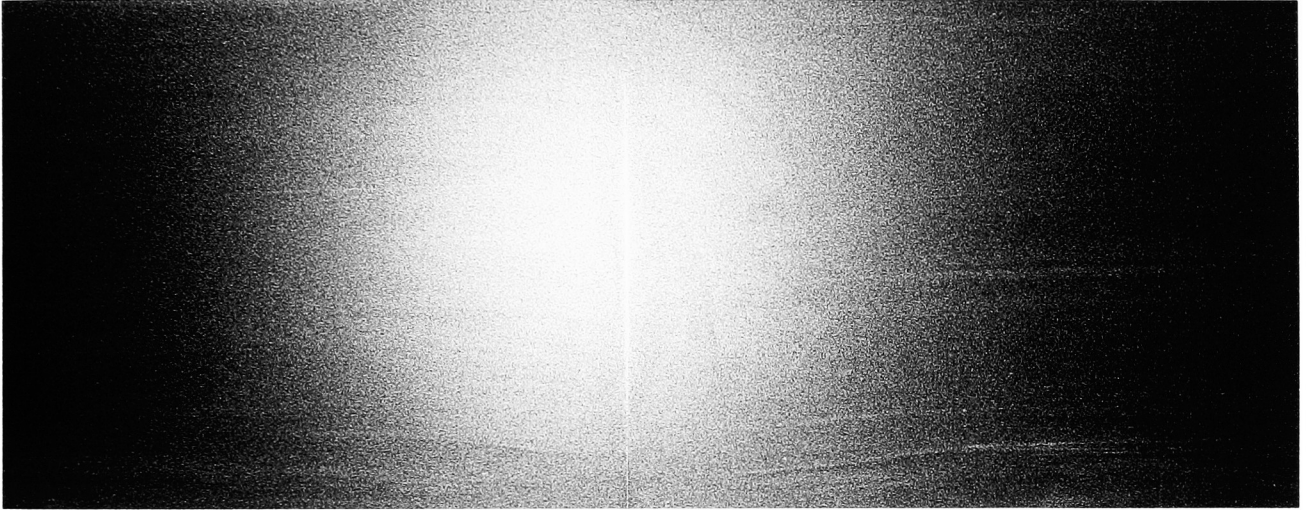
Untitled#401
Plate 3



Untitled#102
Plate 4



Untitled#201
Plate 5



Untitled#210
Plate 6

HIGH DENSITY

CD-RW 80

COMPACT DISC REWRITABLE



10X
Gigaset

High Speed
disc
rewritable



700MB/80MIN

CONTENTS
