Unseen, Unnoticed

Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

My project is a body of photographic work that consists of four sub-bodies. The greater theme is the idea of things unseen and unnoticed. Each of the four smaller bodies of work deals with a scenario of things that go unseen and unnoticed. Sub-body ‘A’ deals with the unawareness we have of what is in our environment. Sub-body ‘B’ involves our unawareness of others’ lives. The microscopic components of objects in the biological world are the focus of sub-body ‘C’. Detection of beauty amidst destruction is the subject of sub-body ‘D’. In many ways I have incorporated other areas of my academic studies, besides that of photography, into the various sections of work. This was done either through the subject matter, or the thought and issues raised by the images. Each body of work has larger questions or implications other than just the photographic image of lines, shades, and shape.
Honors Thesis Analysis

The entire process of the Honors Thesis has resulted into the broadening of my educational experience. It has challenged me to go further in my understanding and participation in the educational process. This began with the contemplation of an original idea and topic for a photographic project without being given an assignment or suggestive boundaries, thus forcing me to be creative. The seeking out of an advisor within the photo department has required me to interact with superiors and professionals in the area of photography. Deciding how to go about producing the finished body of work has placed the responsibility of finding out information about different films, time exposures, printing and presentation techniques, and accessing needed equipment on my shoulders. Constructing a schedule for completion has been a test of my own discipline. In all, this Honors project has been a test of, and hopefully demonstrates, my educational and personal maturity and development through more than the final images but through the process itself.

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Sub-body ‘A’ depicts a display of black and white photos taken of people who were unaware of the presence of the camera. These shots were taken in stores, on streets, in restaurants, and various other places. This perspective of unawareness addresses the idea of how unaware we are of our surroundings. These photos demonstrate how we take our surroundings for granted and at times do not see what is really there due to the mindset that we have of not anticipating its’ presence.

This collection of photos also demonstrates how individuals change for viewers. The expressions, postures, and appearance of the subjects are captured as they naturally are. The individuals are not posing for the camera or saying ‘cheese’. One can compare the demeanor of the subjects in sub-body ‘A’ with those in sub-body ‘B’ who were well aware of the lens being pointed at them. It is easily seen how individuals ‘put on faces’ and make deliberate poses when they are aware of someone’s eyes upon them. Although this is not a new realization, it is a question as to why poses are necessary and a ‘natural’ occurrence when one is aware of someone watching. How would we view each other if our natural state was being expressed at all times without the deliberate gestures that we use in the presence of others?

Sub-body ‘B’ consists of black and white snap shots of college students here at Ball State University. On the picture the subject’s have written a response to the question, “What is something that has been significant in your life, has had an influence on you, whether it be a person or an experience?” The format of taking a photograph and then having the subject write on the print is similar to and influenced by the work of Jim Goldberg. Goldberg is a photographer who has photographed many people in extreme living conditions (i.e. very rich, very poor) and then has sent the photos to the individuals
and has had them write a response on the print. In my photos, instead of the subjects being of extreme environments, the more common idealized circumstance of college life in depicted. Through these portraits and the corresponding response to the question, I intended to address the issue of how we are unaware of individual's lives and past experiences. Many times what we would guess about a person’s life/experiences/exposures from our first impression are quite off base. These photographs show that by asking bigger/personal questions we have the potential of receiving a more realistic perspective and understanding of an individual. An example of this would be the photos of both Todd Cress and Tyson Runkle. Both of these college students speak of the life changing event of their mothers dealing with cancer. Although the outcomes of their mothers’ illness were different, both have been impacted by the occurrence. With out asking, I would have never known about that influence and experience in either of their lives.

Another aspect of sub-body ‘B’ is seeing how people have responded to different occurrences in their lives. An example of this would be the photo of Ashley Mills. Here is a picture of a girl who lost here mother to cancer at a young age and, at the time of this photo, was again dealing with another mother, her step-mother, battling breast cancer. Yet, she is an individual of high spirits who is excited about life. This is reflected in her response written on her photo. I think this is an example of how people are not always what we assume. This girl has gone through a lot of loss and pain in her life, yet she is not depressed or angry or mad. Circumstances do not have only one type of outcome on a person. Results of experiences are varied.
Sub-body ‘C’ depicts color images of the micro world of the little things in life that contain so much beauty yet are rarely consciously perceived. These photos touch base with my major of Biology and allow me to show a connection between art and biological science. These photos include images of human skin of both the scalp and the sole of the foot, dogfish skin, Amphioxus liver, cycloid and ctenoid scales, and contour feathers, among others. The intricate structures of these subjects are visually stunning and have a great affect on the function of the bigger systems that they help to compose. As I took the photos of projected mounted slides, I was constantly amazed by the artistic quality of the subject matter. The lines, the colors, the movement, all reminded me of pieces of art work that I would see in an art museum. The microscopic world directly influences everything in the macroscopic world. The tangible items in this world that we take conscious thought to are made up of so many smaller parts that are rarely thought about.

Sub-body ‘D’ is a selection of black and white photographs addressing the connection of black verses white. These photos were taken amongst the remains of a garage that had been badly charred by a house fire. Yet the images are a documentation of the beauty that remained within the destruction. The photos display a great deal of black space verses white reflection or invading light. Here the idea is how we are unable to detect the one with out the presence of the other. One cannot detect a black object on a black background without the presence of reflective light. In the same way, we are unable to see white on white without the presence of the darkness of a shadow.

This principle can lend itself to other issues or ideas. One is that of good and evil. Is the knowledge of one dependent on the presence of the other? For example, in
case of a Christian perspective, were Adam and Eve aware that they were in paradise without having anything to compare it to? Will those in heaven be aware how wonderful it is without the presence of darkness to contrast it with? Will those in hell be aware that they are in hell if darkness and evil is all that is present? This question can also be asked to that of social standards. As a Western culture, we have an expected standard of living with expected presence of modern conveniences. When we look at another culture without similar living conditions, many times the people of that culture are viewed as lacking in some way. However, if that society is unaware of what they do not have are they 'missing' anything as far as they are concerned? In order to appreciate or to be aware of something, must you acknowledge or experience the contrasting opposite or a variant degree of that something?

This particular project on the unseen and unnoticed has provoked me to be more conscious of the things around me. It has also led me to recognize and address my own presuppositions in my observations and thought patterns in everyday occurrences. On top of personal character critiquing, this photographic project has, in ways, incorporated many of my areas of study. My photo minor is clearly being addressed within the realms of the project. In addition, sub-body 'C' allowed me to intertwine artistic perspective with biological subjects that I have been exposed to through my Biology and Pre-Dental majors. However, the content of my photos addresses issues that I have become more sensitive to due to my Religious Studies, Native American Studies, and Anthropology minors. It is so common for individuals, myself included, to be unaware or insensitive to others because we disregard the value of looking at people and how they respond and react to the experiences they have had.
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