

**UNTITLED**  
**BY**  
**MATT GEHRING**  
  
**THESIS**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts**

Rochester Institute of Technology

---

Dan Larkin, Committee Chair

Date

---

Willie Osterman, Committee Advisor

Date

---

Alex Miokovic, Committee Advisor

Date

February 8, 2010

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	ii
<b>Abstract</b>	iii
Introduction	1
390 .....	1
Illusion .....	4
Abstraction.....	8
Infinite and the Sublime.....	10
Difference .....	12
Photography's Role.....	14
Process .....	16
Color and Aura.....	17
Installation .....	18
Experiencing the Exhibition .....	23
Untitled .....	24
Conclusion	26
<b>Selected Bibliography</b>	27

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Dan Larkin, my thesis committee chair, and committee advisors Willie Osterman and Alex Miokovic. Dan, you always found a way to challenge me and re-direct me when I got lost, and for that I am grateful. Thank you for helping guide me through my time at Rochester Institute of Technology and for your support as a friend. Willie, you always approached my work from a different angle, one that I usually never thought about or saw. Thank you for always helping me see things in a new way. Mostly, thank you for your honesty and friendship. Alex, thank you for all your help with the visual and written thesis. Your assistance theoretically and historically has been invaluable.

Throughout my time at Rochester Institute of Technology, many colleagues and friends offered vital feedback and advice. A sincere thanks to Therese Mulligan, Karen Van-Meenen, Keith Johnson, Michael Frank, Cassie Worley, Jayson Bimber, Katrina d'Autremont, Toni Pepe, Jessica Marquez, Nicola Kountoupes, and Juli Lowe.

Finally, I would like to recognize the incredible support of my family. I extend heartfelt thanks to them for never doubting me and always encouraging me to reach my goals. Without them, this experience would never have happened.

**UNTITLED**

**BY**

**MATT GEHRING**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the understanding and visual perception of photographs. My work investigates the role that difference plays in one's ability to perceive depth between planes. Through the visual representation of various temporal phenomena, it is possible to begin a discourse about difference, in relation to perception. This thesis document and the accompanying exhibition address themes of illusion, abstraction, repetition, and the infinite. All of which can be affected by subtle variance in color, light, and orientation. These slight variations affect how a viewer perceives the other photographs in the exhibition. The ambiguity of perspective in the images relies heavily on the abstract qualities of the man-made object, but also on the shifts in perception that occur due to visual differences. These differences are only apparent because of my serial approach to the series. Without the capability to directly compare and contrast, the ideas discussed here would not arise.

## **Introduction**

For the purpose of this document, my thesis work is referred to as *390*. This is to allow for ease of reading and to help clarify which body of work I am discussing. The work remains untitled, and this will be addressed near the end of this document.

My thesis consists of eleven large-scale photographs of the sky, framed through a man-made structure. The same formal composition is present in each photograph, as all the images were taken of the same subject. These images address elements of depth and abstraction. The infinite depth of the sky has been compressed into a two-dimensional plane (the photograph). By abstracting the form of the man-made structure, and orienting the images on the wall in a new way, an ambiguity in perspective arises. As the viewer moves from one image to the next, subtle differences begin to effect how he or she understands the photographs. It is my goal to illustrate how visual differences can alter a viewers understanding of photographs. The exhibition is meant to be experienced as an installation; the viewer is encouraged to spend a lengthy amount of time with the work, in order to fully discover the subtle nuances that exist.

### ***390***

I would first like to briefly discuss how my work evolved into the series that will be discussed in this document. The works that I have done during my years at the Rochester Institute of Technology have been the most influential and the most directly related

bodies of work to my thesis. The first series that I created focused primarily on concrete structures, and more specifically, concrete as building material. I began an investigation of the characteristics inherent in the concrete material that were closely related to the function of each structure. However, through discussions about the work, it began to shift toward the apparent fragility of a seemingly strong and solid material as I attempted to show the decay of the material. In my opinion, these topics of decay and change were not visually addressed in the photographs. There was little to no real visual proof of this decay or deterioration that was so prevalent in my discussion about the work.

From here, my work evolved into what I consider a more direct approach to the topic of deterioration that I was just beginning to address with my previous work. In the series titled *UR*, I began explore the subtle ways in which a seemingly still place “reacted” to the effects of time, geographical location, weather conditions, and other temporal phenomena. This was my attempt to initiate the personification of concrete, to illustrate how an inanimate object seemed to react to various temporal phenomena. And, to me, it became exactly that; simply about concrete and how it appeared to change as a result of weather conditions and light variations. I am not saying that I consider *UR* a failure, but I found it difficult to uncover the true intention and meaning behind the work. I wanted the viewer to contemplate more in regards to what he or she was observing—I wanted to challenge the viewer and I wanted the viewer, in turn, to question their own understanding of how one visually perceives photographs.

*390* is a direct evolution from the series *UR*, thus there are definite similarities but also differences between the two bodies of work. The similarities might be somewhat evident when comparing one to the other, as both are executed in the same fashion—each body focuses on one specific subject from one congruent vantage point. Both deal with varying moments of time and the differences that arise due to change. In both, light activates the space differently, resulting in varying visual representations of the space. However, as previously mentioned, *UR* was more about concrete itself and how it “reacted” to varying temporal phenomenon (weather, wet, dry, etc.). My thesis work, *390*, has departed from the material characteristics and personification of concrete and instead addresses one’s visual understanding of photographs. While light still plays a vital role in *390*, it isn’t so much about how it lends volume to man-made *structures*, or the surface of those structures, as it did in *UR*. Instead, subtleties in light, or color, affect the apparent volume of *space* (depth within a photograph). My thesis work also deals more with elements of abstraction and minimalism than the series *UR*. This leads to an added ambiguity that requires more commitment by the viewer to gain access to the images. There are elements of visual perception, disorientation, and abstraction that play vital roles in the success and realization of *390*.

My thesis work addresses themes inherent in the use of the photographic medium that allow access to various understandings of visual representation. *390* investigates how various moments of difference affect the viewer’s understanding of depth in a photograph and how the two-dimensionality of the medium also begins to play its role—it emphasizes the flatness of the medium as it breaks down the infinite depth of the sky.

Thus, 390 also addresses themes of visual perception—an understanding of what is observed.

## **Illusion**

The sky is an ever-present element of our world, yet it is in many ways physically intangible—it is so distant and never reveals to us its physical traits or surface (if it indeed has one). We tend to only understand it visually. Through the juxtaposition of the sky with a tangible man-made surface I am drawing attention to the depth between planes, but also to how one visualizes space in a photograph. Through visual differences, both in the sky and on the surface of the man-made object, perspective begins to become more ambiguous. There is a play between finite and infinite depth (near and far) that occurs because of the way in which the sky has been framed. Thus, the plane of the sky often appears as if it is a physical surface that is in various positions of depth in relation to the man-made frame. In these images, the sky is no longer simply a background, but an active field of visual experience—it is exactly *there*<sup>1</sup>. This is due, in part, to the function of the photograph as a two-dimensional object, but also to the way in which the sky has been juxtaposed with a structure that has an actual surface. Visually, the viewer can now begin to access the sky as a surface, and the changes that take place as if they are happening on a *surface*, not necessarily in space.

---

<sup>1</sup>Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Fable of the Place," in *James Turrell: The Other Horizon*, ed. Peter Noever (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1999), 51.

“Something that shows no variation in light reflectivity is perceived as featureless. In a featureless visual field, you can perceive neither objects nor depth and distance<sup>2</sup>.” In many of these images, seen individually, the central part of the photograph (the sky) shows no variation. Thus, the viewer creates their own sense of depth because they are familiar with what it is that is being represented and know it indeed has depth. The viewer is now able to witness the non-emptiness of the “blank” central part of the photograph (the sky) as it changes and appears to exist at various perceived distances from the plane of the man-made structure.

This illusion of depth is not far from James Turrell’s skyscapes, as participants in these works often feel a similar effect of the sky being a surface that is level with the plane of the frame that he has constructed<sup>3</sup>. In these pieces, Turrell builds a room-like structure that has a cutout in the ceiling, often square or elliptical in shape, that allows a direct view of the sky. The viewer enters the space and often feels as if he or she could reach up and touch the sky, as if it has a physical presence. Many of Turrell’s works revolve around illusion and depth perception and these pieces have been a great influence on *390*, however I do not construct the viewing spaces and alter lighting situations to demonstrate this illusion. I have found a man-made setting where a similar play on perception takes place naturally, and have gained access to such a phenomenon by using the photographic medium as a referent to actual experience. Although I am not saying that I believe that my images function as optical illusions in this direct sense, Turrell’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn M. Bloomer, *Principles of Visual Perception: Second Edition* (New York: Design Press, 1976), 129.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bright, "When Light is Lost, Life is Lost," in *James Turrell Eclipse*, ed. Sharmini Pereira (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1999), 9.

work has influenced my way of thinking. I respond to much of Turrell's work, as being about depth between planes and this is of primary interest to me. I am interested in how our visual understanding of depth (and perhaps the understanding of a place) is affected by a variety of visual stimuli, and how photographs can allude to, or suppress the illusion of depth. In these photographs, there are varying levels of "surface" from one image to the next that affect how the viewer perceives the space and its illusions of depth.

It is inevitable that photographs will at some point (by some viewers) be understood as direct references to what it is they represent. Although this is heavily dependent on the subject of the photograph, as some are more easily abstracted. But is it possible to avoid this direct relationship to the thing photographed? It is difficult to completely break it down, as many viewers will continue to see a photograph of a tree as being *that* tree. However, with *390* I have challenged how the viewer relates to and understands the objects that have been photographed. This challenge is accomplished in two ways. For one, I have photographed this location in a way that the viewer becomes unfamiliar with what has been photographed—it becomes difficult to definitely say, "this is a picture of *that*." This is primarily due to the abstract qualities of both the photographic composition and the structure itself. There are, of course, definite recognizable aspects of these images such as the sky and some sort of man-made object. But, these clues alone are not enough for the viewer to gain access to a direct relationship of the object being photographed. "People perceive space and distance best when the visual field consists of familiar objects that are situated in familiar relationships and

shown in familiar contexts<sup>4</sup>.” I have adopted this theory of visual perception and applied it to the perception of these photographs. Although the things represented may be recognizable, the way in which they are shown and the relationship that is formed is not one that is necessarily familiar to the viewer. Because of the ubiquitous nature of the sky, it is difficult for the viewer to assign a specific location to the image based solely on the representation of the sky, and the man-made object has been represented so abstractly that it too becomes difficult to “identify.”

The other aspect of this work that challenges the viewer’s understanding of the space is repetition of form. Each photograph has the same formal composition where the sky is framed by a man-made structure on two sides. As a result, the viewer becomes less concerned with what is being photographed and more concerned with the differences that are apparent from one image to the next, and how those differences affect their understanding of the space. Because there is so little information about the location photographed, the viewer constructs his or her own explanation and understanding of the space. This ambiguity is of utmost importance to me. I want the viewer to have to create his or her own understanding and experience of this work, one that is not based solely on what is being represented. Without an easily recognizable reference to an object in space, the viewer is left to contemplate this work in a more subjective manner. One that is less concerned with *what* is being represented in the images, and more with how the work is *experienced*, and how difference alters the viewer’s perception of each photograph. However, this ambiguity is not present if the viewer has visited the location

---

<sup>4</sup> Bloomer, 121.

photographed. For example, some viewers were actually familiar with the location and had personally been there on separate accounts (not in relation to my thesis). Therefore, this so-called lack of information about the location photographed was not true for them. For those viewers who know the location, these images now (perhaps more than ever) serve as a referent to actual experience.

### **Abstraction**

As previously mentioned, the abstract characteristics of both the composition and the structure are vital to challenging the viewer's understanding of these photographs. These images, on an individual level, are visually commanding and powerful. This is due partly to the scale of the prints (and their vertical orientation) in relation to the viewer, but also to abstraction. They command contemplation because they are so simplistic, and without this dedication to thought, the viewer is left with a simple composition of geometrical shapes and solid colors. With a prolonged experience, the viewer can discover various elements within each image that lead to a certain understanding of the depth between planes. As he or she studies the subsequent image, his or her previous understanding of the space might be challenged or vice versa.

This prolonged attention necessary in experiencing a work of art is perhaps more common to large-scale abstract paintings; for example works by Mark Rothko, who has become a large influence. When I think of spending extended amounts of time in front of an image I first think of Rothko and my own experiences with his paintings. I was in

London at the Tate Modern the first time I saw a room full of Rothko paintings. The room was very dimly lit and the paintings were quite large (as most Rothko's tend to be). The longer I sat and looked at one painting, the more I began to see, understand, and experience—colors began to “float” and there seemed to be a depth to each painting. Interestingly enough, moving from one painting to another still required the same amount of dedication to viewing. In my images, I too believe that each image requires a certain amount of commitment to viewing, however (as I already mentioned) each subsequent image is affected by the prior image—each one limiting and defining the others—something that I don't see functioning as much in a room full of Rothko's. There is more interaction and comparison between each image in *390* because of the repetition of composition.

Barnett Newman has also become a large influence to *390*. Although many of Newman's paintings have a similar composition to my images, each canvas being divided into sections of vertical colors or “zips”, that is not why I am interested in his work<sup>5</sup>. I have been most influenced by critical discussions and responses to his work. For example, Richard Serra was quoted in response to the work of Barnett Newman saying, “When you reflect upon a Newman, you recall your experience, you don't recall the picture<sup>6</sup>.” That *experience* of an image is vital to *390*. I want the viewer to experience these images on an individual level, and have their perception be affected by the changes that take place in each photograph. Newman writes a great deal about the notion of place

---

<sup>5</sup> Ann Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," in *Barnett Newman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," in *Barnett Newman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 86.

and the visual experience of his paintings and how, to him, they are what he refers to as, “a single experience,” meaning an individual one<sup>7</sup>. This singular experience draws attention to the various understandings that will ensue based on the individual encounter by the viewer—the amount of time that each viewer dedicates to the body of work, and any expectations that he or she already brings to the work.

### **Infinite and the Sublime**

The infinite is often a difficult concept for many people to grasp (including myself); yet we are constantly surrounded by infinite depth (although that could be argued by those who believe the universe indeed has a limit). With *390*, one of the themes that I am addressing is the ubiquitous and infinite nature of the sky, and its relation to the sublime. Such a link between the infinite and the sublime is not an uncommon one. In the book *Sticky Sublime*, a collection of essays that address the presence of the sublime in our contemporary world, such a relation is widely discussed. In his essay about the sublime titled “Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart,” Thomas McEvelley states “hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach toward infinity...” The section continues stating, “...Which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds<sup>8</sup>.” It is here where my work addresses elements of the sublime. McEvelley’s statement claims that if one can perceive something’s limits then it cannot approach a level of greatness, or the sublime. However, I believe that the concept of

---

<sup>7</sup> Shiff, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas McEvelley, “Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart,” in *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 62.

compressing infinity into an object whose boundaries we can perceive is in itself sublime, as it is difficult to grasp the idea of flattening infinity. The sky depicted is no longer infinite because we are now able to perceive its bounds—its surface. The elements in my images are no longer seen as infinite; the photograph challenges the infinite qualities of the sky. However, because of the nature of the photograph as a medium of illusion, depth is still alluded to. Thus, a challenge to the relationship and interaction between what is seemingly “near” and “far” arises. Due to the concept of flattening the ever-present and infinite qualities of the sky into a tangible surface, our understanding of the sublime and of the photographic medium are directly addressed. What remains is a challenge to illusion—an infinite space has been represented as a surface, yet in many cases the images still allude to depth between planes.



(Fig. 1)



(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)

## Difference

It is said that change is the most critical physical and physiological factor in our ability to perceive at all, and this implies evidence of the passage of time<sup>9</sup>. My thesis does not directly address the passage of time, as the viewer will not necessarily experience a direct correlation to the progression of time. Instead, *390* focuses more on visual differences and how they affect the viewer's perception of photographs. Although these variations occur at different moments in time, they are more a result of differences in light, color, and weather. Change is the act of something *becoming* different, implying some sort of action to do so (the passage of time). Difference, as I address it in my thesis, deals with features that distinguish one image from another. This does not necessarily imply an act of change, or progression; instead it represents visual distinction. However, in many cases these changes are very subtle and often overlooked at first. For example, at first

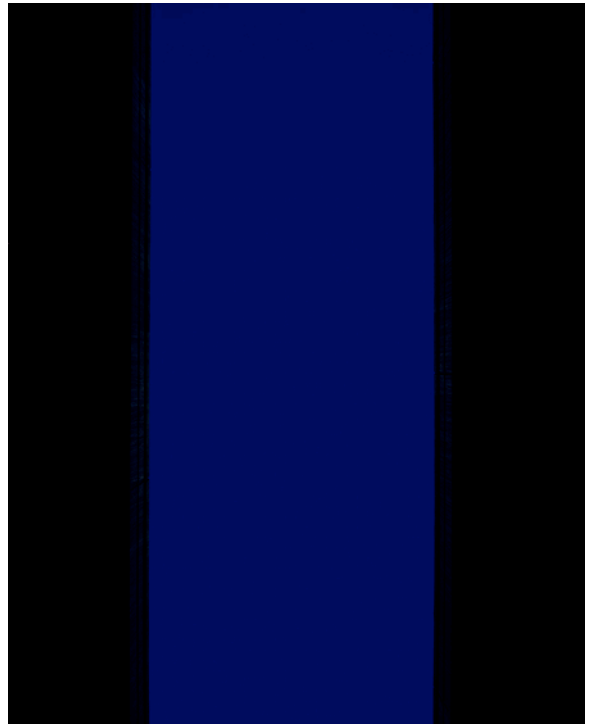
---

<sup>9</sup> Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1985), 9

glance figures 1-3 may look almost identical (especially when they are separated from each other in the gallery). It is only under close inspection and comparison that the viewer comes to recognize the subtleties in each image.



(Fig. 4)



(Fig. 5)

Not only do these differences make the viewer closely examine each image in reference to others, they also affect how the viewer understands the photographs. A small detail in one image can affect how the viewer initially perceives the next, and so on. This constant comparison and shift in features affects the viewer's overall understanding of the photographs. For example, one image may have an illusion of depth between planes (Fig. 4), where another may seem utterly flat (Fig. 5). Another subtle difference that can easily disrupt the viewer's perception occurs in figure 6. In the majority of the images, the right edge of the man-made structure is lit. In figure 6 it is the opposite. At first glance, the

viewer might feel slightly disoriented, but not recognize the source of this reaction. Something as simple as a change in light can completely throw off the viewer's visual perception of a photograph. He or she may now question whether or not the image has simply been flipped to achieve such a difference. All of the differences, from one image to the next, ultimately affect how the viewer experiences the installation.



(Fig. 6)

### **Photography's Role**

In many ways, this series is about the photographic medium itself. It challenges how we experience, read, and understand photographs. In this body of work themes of difference, illusion, and the abstract are addressed; all of which are also aspects of the medium. If one contemplates *390* as a discourse about photography itself, one begins to understand

how it challenges the illusionary characteristics of the medium that we often expect from a photograph (i.e. illusions of depth and space).

In many of these photographs, the sky and the concrete structure seem to be utterly inseparable and completely flat, where in others there is an illusion of depth. Yet how is it possible for a two-dimensional object to be understood as three-dimensional? It is, of course, not the photograph itself that is observed as being three-dimensional (and this is widely understood), but the representation of the objects in the photograph that *allude* to depth—it is an illusion. Since it is impossible for the photograph itself to physically have depth, it can only allude via the representation of a space that has depth. I am directly addressing this issue by illustrating the fluctuation that takes place in our perception of depth. All of which are initiated via the abstract qualities and two-dimensionality of the photographic medium—its surface.

*390* also draws from and is closely related to abstract painting. Photography is generally understood as a medium of illusion (e.g. depth) where abstract painting, according to Clement Greenberg, is a genre that uses the material flatness (the picture plane) and surface of the medium as a means to disrupt [illusions of] realistic pictorial space<sup>10</sup>. I feel that I have accomplished a similar effect via the photographic medium. I have taken what is usually recognized for its representations of pictorial space, and reduced the imagery to that more related to abstract painting, bringing attention to the compression of space and the surface. The illusion in these images is now less related to

---

<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Pollock and After*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Routledge, 2000), 68.

the visual reference to spatial depth and perspective in a general sense, and instead challenges the viewer's preconceptions of photographic perspective.

## **Process**

The location that I have selected to photograph is critical to this body of work and to the themes addressed. The way in which I have represented this location in the photographs speaks highly to the way in which I discovered the space. Of utmost importance is the minimalist appearance of the structure and its seemingly flat features<sup>11</sup>. My chosen composition pushes this minimalism and flatness to the next level via the photographic medium. I have chosen to represent this place in a way that pairs it down to abstract forms of solid shapes and often, solid colors. There are a few reasons why this works visually. First, as mentioned above, is the minimal amount of detail that allude to the actual depth and size of the objects depicted. Secondly I feel that I have chosen a composition that speaks to the flatness of both the sky and the man-made structure. The way I have photographed this location almost entirely removes visual references to spatial depth and perspective in a general sense. In many photographs, landscapes especially, there tends to be some sort of vanishing-point perspective that alludes to depth within a scene and in the photograph. With these images, the element of perspective is some-what lacking, thus leaving the viewer contemplating the space in a more abstract way—there is an ambiguity of perspective.

---

<sup>11</sup>Although, there is a definite connection between Minimalism and *390*, I am using the term minimalist primarily as a descriptive term, not as an all-encompassing term for the Minimalist movement.

My photographic process is vital to the realization of *390*, and looking back at some of my previous work, it can be seen that my process has become somewhat of a ritual to me. In fact, my process has become very systematic due mainly to the type of equipment I use (which can be seen in the repetitious and formal approach to this body of work). If it were not for this systematic approach, this series would not be what it is. I personally relate my process to that of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their study of various utilitarian structures. Their approach to photography is very formulated and exact, something that is not foreign to my workflow. I photograph using a large format camera that allows me the control necessary to maintain a very systematic practice of making images. This formulated approach speaks directly to the serial display of my images and also to the study of difference. However, though my process may be similar to that of the Becher's, the final outcome is quite different. The Becher's images become quite cold and distant as a result of their formulated approach, whereas my images remain more expressive. From my own ritual of picture making, it is possible to begin to understand this series, and the changes that take place, as being ritualistic to the location I have photographed. I have begun to understand this place as a ritual of change varying on a daily basis from light to dark and wet to dry. Thus, it is only appropriate that I approach this location with the same ritualistic method.

### **Color and Aura**

It is only recently that color has become an important part of my process, and without color this body of work would not function as it does. *390* relies heavily on subtleties,

and perhaps most importantly on differences in color. What at first may appear to be a solid color form in the central part of the image (the sky) gradually reveals its slight variations. The same can also be said about the changes from one image to the next. For me, color adds an aura, or a level of emotion to these images that would not otherwise be present. For me, as the photographer, I would get excited about specific colors that were present when making specific images and I can remember having emotional reactions. However, these images do not represent *specific* emotions that I want the viewer to experience. I want the viewer's experience to be more open ended. Yes, I made each photograph for a specific reason, but that is not directly linked to the experience that I want the viewer to have.

## **Installation**

Directly related to my process and the serial approach of this body of work is the installation of this series. Again, this has all been greatly influenced by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. The Becher's have created a vast photographic inventory of various industrial buildings including: water towers, coal silos, and blast furnaces. The photographs are subsequently organized into various series based on the type or function of the structure. The photographs are then often arranged into grids or rows. For me, this serial display and juxtaposition gives the viewer the ability to perceive differences in seemingly similar objects. Because of this serial display, the universal architecture of numerous buildings of the same type can be understood as being significantly different from one another. They have photographed visually similar forms and displayed them in a way that allows access to visual differences only via juxtaposition. It is left to the

viewer to discover those subtle differences in order to realize the individuality of each structure. Not only does it highlight the sculptural qualities of the architecture, it also reveals variation.

In the same way, I have used a serial approach to allow the viewer access to differences amongst images that at first glance might appear quite similar. Ultimately, it is left to the viewer to discover those subtle differences. This serial approach definitely plays a large role in how the viewer discovers and understands the space photographed, as each subsequent image is affected by the previous image—each one limits and defines the others. Although each image does function individually, its qualities are significantly more evident when seen in context of the entire series.

Returning briefly to the work of Barnett Newman, In *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, John Coplans states, “Many paintings by Newman are similar to one another—yet at the same time each painting is vastly different from any other. Each asserts a different solution and expresses a different mood. One painting may be somber, even dark; another highly keyed<sup>12</sup>.” Just like those paintings by Newman that are compositionally similar to each other, I too have displayed images that bear a similar resemblance to one another (albeit in a more direct and serial approach). However, for the majority of his work, with one of the few exceptions being his series titled *18 Cantos*, Newman’s goal was not necessarily to display a series of paintings for the viewer to

---

<sup>12</sup> John Coplans, "Serial Imagery," in *Abstract Art: In the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Frances Colpitt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31.

compare and contrast. (This is much like the experience I had with the Rothko paintings being so individual and not defining the other paintings).

When utilizing a serial approach for a body of work, sequence can also become somewhat ambiguous. Although there might be an apparent start or finish to view a series, or a certain way that the viewer enters a gallery, the actual sequence in which the viewer moves from one image to the next will likely shift. This will, of course, depend on the gallery space itself, how the viewer enters the gallery, and in what order the viewer chooses to view the images. In the case with the grid display often utilized by the Becher's, the images can be read in any direction: up, down, left, right, or diagonally. In a similar way with a linear arrangement, such as with my work here, the discovery of a detail or difference in one image can lead to the viewer reevaluating other images in an order of their choosing. This cycle of reevaluating images can continue on and on. So, although there is an entrance to the gallery, the order in which the viewer experiences the images will most likely change with prolonged viewing and comparison. My goal is for the viewer to want to reevaluate specific images based on discoveries in others. Without this serial approach and ambiguous sequence, evidence of difference would not be apparent and the ideas discussed here would not arise.

Another aspect of the installation that changes the viewer's experience of the other images is the single horizontally oriented image. This image breaks down the expectations and spatial understanding by the viewer due to the vertical orientation of all the others. As the viewer enters the gallery, he or she is confronted by a strong vertical

orientation. As he or she begins to construct his or her own visual understanding of the space represented in the photographs, they are challenged when they reach the horizontal image. This image directly addresses orientation, or perhaps re-orientation. It draws attention to the fact that these images are oriented the way they are because of choice—that there is the possibility that these images have no “correct” orientation. This challenges the viewer and makes them question their own understanding of the space; the horizontal image also generates the desire to, once again, reevaluate the other works based on this new orientation. This effect is largely possible due to the abstract qualities of the photographs. If these images represented a space that the viewer could more easily grasp, this challenge to orientation and to the viewer would not be possible.

I am not suggesting that viewers will feel bodily disoriented when they are viewing *390*, but the viewer can become *visually* disoriented as to how and what they are looking at. As previously stated, these images became re-oriented as soon as they were hung on the gallery wall. The chosen orientation references the verticality of the body, but contain no horizon line for the viewer to understand how space is being represented. I think it can be easily recognized that the sky is being photographed, but the exact angle, direction, and location are not apparent. The familiar relationship between the ground and the sky has been removed, and is now relegated to the relationship between sky and man-made frame. The viewer is not presented with any visual evidence of the “correct” orientation of this location.

As a viewer enters the space, the first thing that he or she is most likely to recognize and react to is the size of the prints. The scale and vertical orientation as reference to the viewer's height is vital to 390. Viewers are immediately confronted with images that are roughly the same size as them, resulting in a slightly overwhelming experience. Seeing one of these images as a smaller print does not create the same sensation. I wanted the viewer to feel this sensation with the goal that this would, in turn, make the viewer want (and need) to spend a longer time with each image. Also, because I was representing such a large and infinite space (the sky) it was a logical decision to make such large prints as an attempt to convey the vastness that each photograph represented.



(Fig. 7, Installation View)



(Fig. 8, Installation View)

### **Experiencing the Exhibition**

It can be assumed that a large percentage of viewers have at some point learned that a photograph is “a type of picture generated by physically standing in front of an object (photo theory p. 422).” It is my goal to break down the viewer’s desire to discover the reality of the original situation, and to become more involved with what they are experiencing in the gallery—a reaction to the stimulus at hand.

This body of work addresses the way in which I want the viewer to experience the photographs on the wall. I do not necessarily want the viewer to consider what it would be like to be in the place photographed—I am not attempting to transport the viewer to this location. Instead, I am beginning a dialogue about photography and the effects that visual differences have on perception. Of course, as one can surely imagine, being in this location is vastly different to that of experiencing this body of work. First, I have chosen

an orientation that is not really possible when in the space. The structure is above the viewer, making it impossible to experience the location as it has been represented and re-oriented in the gallery. Secondly, and this is perhaps the most drastic difference, is the sound that exists in this place. Being in the actual location the viewer is enclosed by sound, a sound whose source is not directly visible since it comes from above. It is hard not to be consumed by the sound, and this drastically affects one's experience of that location. The gallery experience is quite different as there is a silence and stillness to the work as it hangs on the walls. These changes reconstruct this location in a new and abstract way, allowing me the ability to address issues of illusion and visual perception via the photographic medium. I want to challenge the viewer, put them in a situation where they do not necessarily understand this place *visually*, and force them to read it subjectively.

## **Untitled**

Part of the illusion and ambiguity of this body of work relies heavily on the absence of titles, and I deliberately chose to leave all the images untitled (I also left off any wall labels in the installation). This reasoning came from looking at and reading about the work of Richard Misrach in his "Sky Book." Misrach talks about how images of sky without land have the potential to be quite disorienting (similar to my work). However, to fight this disorientation Misrach titles his images with very specific information regarding the location that each image was made. For example, if he pointed his camera in the general direction of a specific constellation, he identifies it in the title of the

image<sup>13</sup>. This gives his viewers the ability to create a sense of place based solely on the titles. Titles “help the viewer to ‘choose’ the correct level of understanding, leading the viewer to attend to some signifieds in the image and avoid others<sup>14</sup>.” *Untitled* is a way for me to withhold information from the viewer, and force them to create their own subjective understanding of the work.

Considering the lack of titles results in a large amount of commitment required from the viewer to make their own decisions about the work, this might hinder their experience. Because of the abstract nature and the subtle qualities of this work, there is a great amount of dedicated viewing required from the viewer. It is difficult for any artist to ensure that their viewers are going to spend extended amounts of time with the work. Perhaps the addition of titles might help capture the viewer and allow them to contemplate the images for a longer period of time. To me, it is hard to say that one way is better than the other. I think that the viewer is more responsible for his or her own viewing, regardless of titles.

---

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "Excavating the Sky," in *The Sky Book*, ed. Richard Misrach (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2000), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Sabine T. Kriebel, "Theories of Photography: A Short History," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.

## Conclusion

I understand that some of the themes discussed in this document could be said about all photographs. For example, all photographs suppress depth onto a two-dimensional surface. I am not saying that only my photographs do these things. However, it cannot be said that *all* photographs address these characteristics critically. I feel that I have created images that exemplify the qualities inherent in all photographs. Many images allude to depth with inclusion of some sort of vanishing-point perspective. Such images, therefore, show evidence that the medium is capable of rendering perspective. In *390*, the images deal with a different type of depth; depth between planes. Instead of using the photographic medium to visually show depth (perspective), I used the medium to address its own characteristics—its flatness. The goal of *390* was to exploit these qualities and directly challenge the viewer's preconceived notions of a photograph and the depth they often allude to. In my images, the infinite depth of the sky is deconstructed and relegated to a flat plane, referencing the surface plane of the photograph. The subtle differences from one image to the next further affect how the viewer perceives depth between planes. In this way, I feel that I have brought the medium's own attributes to the forefront of this body of work.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.
- Bloomer, Carolyn M. *Principles of Visual Perception*. New York: Design Press, 1976.
- Bright, Richard. "When Light is Lost, Life is Lost." In *James Turrell Eclipse*, edited by Sharmini Pereira, 7-49. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1999.
- Colpitt, Frances, ed. *Abstract Art: In the Late Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. "The Fable of the Place." In *James Turrell: The Other Horizon*, edited Peter Noever, 45-56. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1999.
- Gooding, Mel. *Abstract Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Towards a Newer Laocoon." In *Pollock and After*, edited by Francis Francina, 60-70. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Irwin, Robert. *Being and Circumstance*. Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1985.
- Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Kriebel, Sabine T. "Theories of Photography: A Short History." In *Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins, 3-49. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- McEvelley, Thomas. "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart." In *Sticky Sublime*, edited by Bill Beckley, 57-83. New York: Allworth Press, 2001.
- Minkinen, Arno Rafael. "The Collaboration of Heaven and Earth." In *Close Landscapes*, Andrea Calabresi. N.d. N.p.
- Mitchell, W. J. T., ed. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Schmidt-Wulffen, Stephan. "Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places*." In *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, Stephen Shore, 7-15. New York: Aperture, 2004.
- Shiff, Richard. "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect." In *Barnett Newman*, edited by Ann Temkin, 76-111. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Solnit, Rebecca. "Excavating the Sky." In *The Sky Book*, edited by Richard Misrach, 9-27. Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2000.

Temkin, Ann. "Barnett Newman on Exhibition" In *Barnett Newman*, edited by Ann Temkin, 18-75. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.