DARK GARDEN

by

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Introduction

My art practice is a method of thinking through the defeatist rhetoric oozing from overwhelming problems and imagining alternative narratives: ways of being in the world that are thoughtful, loving, caring, and furious. Dark Garden is a project about change, about bearing witness, acknowledging what is becoming different while trying to appreciate the way things are day to day. The images are attempts to capture the beauty that still exists despite the ugliness of the human world. There is beauty, too, in humanity, in our ongoing capacity to love and forgive, even if it feels sometimes like this is vanishing from the world. Dark Garden tells a story in images taken from my own experiences, images that communicate the murky interrelations of between people and the complex systems of life we are a part of, using art as a means of relaying these ideas and feelings telepathically to the viewer, a process ecocritical theorist Timothy Morton calls “spooky action at a distance” (Morton, 81). The images depict things I’m afraid to lose: people, places, environments, experiences, possibilities. The project describes how the body carries the anxiety associated with an uncertain climate future, and how the tension of premature grieving for imagined futures, vanishing species, and dying forests surfaces between people and their environments.

I think of the project as an imagining of alternative narratives, imagining how “attentive practices of thought, love, rage, and care” might look, clashing with the present narratives of “apocalyptic panics,” “disengaged denunciations,” cynicism, and despair (Haraway, 11). It is a story stemming from a place of love, care and gratitude for people and the environment, while making room for the shadow side of unknowing, the specter of anxiety, the acknowledgement that we are in an era of immense change. As the project has evolved, the imagery has darkened, and the narrative has changed. Shape-shifting into its next iteration, I think of the project as an
interpretive document of a world that is turning into a new thing, as everything eventually turns into something else. This visual meditation is not a passive acceptance of change, but an open recognition that change occurring.

I understand my practice and my relationship to the materials I use as a process of gathering. Techniques, varieties of equipment, varieties of materials like different film stocks or papers. I prefer to have a broad range of choices to pull material from to develop my projects. I shoot widely and broadly, from my own life and everyday encounters. The importance of cutting, editing and sequencing is essential for my work. The meaning of my project comes out of the arrangement of images, rather than through a specific concept or illustration in the individual images themselves.

My work falls within the tradition of still photography, and *Dark Garden* is composed primarily of medium and large format, digital and film photography, presented in framed and mounted inkjet prints and printed, hand-bound artist books. My choice of equipment and materials is first and foremost a formal one. The depth, detail, and quality of large format film images appeals to my personal tastes and visual language. The view camera is a tool that requires a slow, considered approach to image making. Slowing down the process of taking pictures achieves a greater state of presence and attention to the moment I am focused on. Viewing the scene through the ground glass demands careful consideration of all four edges of the frame, deliberate decisions of what to include and exclude, and the arrangement of elements within the frame. I am more interested in finding the meaning in an image that can be reached through slow exploration of a scene or a collaboration with a subject, rather than in reflexive reaction to a decisive moment.
A picture begins with a mental image, a previsualization that I try to find or reconstruct in the world on the ground glass, finding arrangements of familiar scenes and objects to create a moment of new experience. My choice of analog materials is intentional though it is traditional. I choose to use film because it what I prefer to work with to make pictures, due to its formal qualities and being more fun to use than digital equipment. I am coming out of a photographic tradition associated closely with these specific techniques and materials. Finding a place for myself within the tradition, I can build from that foundation to find my own way of seeing and communicating my ideas through photography.

I learned several techniques for bookbinding, including sewn and pasted bindings, cover design and construction, cloth hardcover binding. In making my books, I learned sequencing and editing for photo books, printing for book formats, and studied the use of different papers for printing and explored different materials for bookbinding. Essential to learning this new skill is the understanding of how the choice of material and structure of the book become part of the experience of the work itself and create a dialogue of meaning with the images. The technical challenge of arranging photographs to form a narrative, story, or concept relies on my having learned the interpretation of how my photographs speak to each other and work in sequence to form new meanings. This challenge also applies to developing a body of work and designing for exhibition, learning how choice of paper, framing, size, and arrangement convey meaning. I’ve learned to pay attention to the nuanced ways that images interact and speak to one another.

My technical skills have developed dramatically over the course of the program, with an enhanced understanding of film and digital processes, photographic techniques, and image sequencing. I have learned how to be intentional about my choice of technique and material to contribute to the overall meaning of the work. I have taken new directions with the addition of
digital video and book arts. I have pushed myself to photograph in new, uncomfortable ways, attempting to give up technical control in favor of a more interpretive, less technically precise way of making pictures. I have learned to shoot self-reflectively, undergoing a constant process of creation and evaluation. My understanding of photography as an art form has dramatically improved over the course of the program, so my parameters for self-evaluation have become more sophisticated.

There is a balance of color and black and white photographs. Black and white image contain a rich range of tones, with particularly deep blacks. Color photographs tend toward warmer, uniform tones, rather than brightly contrasting colors. The execution of each image is technically precise: sharp, dynamically lit. Compositions are balanced, with some images containing specific elements that draw the viewer’s attention, while others lead the viewers eye throughout the scene. There is a poetics of loneliness and isolation. Environments are mutable, shifting, ebbing, while the distances between people contract and swell.

**Being Ecological: Affective Imaging of a Changing World**

I am interested in imagining how people can live ecologically, exploring questions of how we speak, write and think about global warming. I wonder about methods of coping with climate anxiety, and how to approach the challenge of visualizing global warming, of making art about a phenomenon that defies comprehension. I am curious about what living in an era of massive ecological change feels like, considering the contrast between what it means to live a human life and the massively quantifiable environmental destruction of the global life system we are a part of. These questions are provoked by my own climate anxiety and fear for a livable future. I have turned to art a means of expressing and coping with these emotions, and through
the study of how we use language to understand climate change, I hoped to develop my own understanding and share new discoveries for engaging audiences emotionally. *Dark Garden* represents a process of coping with the profound powerlessness I feel, making use of these emotions, using the best tools for communicating ideas I have.

I believe it evident that the climate crisis is the most pressing problem human beings face, and without a more effective means of storytelling to relate the scale of the problem, adequate action is impossible. I’m interested in imaging new stories that aren’t just mired in cynicism and despair. Timothy Morton’s concept of ecological *attunement* provides a useful tool for challenging conventional thinking about the relationship between human and environment:

“Once we start embracing difference not as a rigid separation but as uncanny affinity, we see that humans are more like nonhumans, and nonhumans are more like humans than we like to think – and those that two phrases do not quite add up” (Morton, 110). In *Dark Garden*, the rigid separations break down, creatures are depicted as inhabiting familiar and strange environments equally, and what is human comes to resemble what is nonhuman.

My method of storytelling through this project relies on piecing together a narrative from a flow of images. I use photography to reference what stands to be lost in a changing world, and to imagine what stands to be gained from embracing change. The environment and subjects I have constructed in *Dark Garden* are bound together as a tangled web, rather than a hierarchical tree of life, drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway’s conception of the “chthulucene” as a term for the contemporary paradigm. In the chthulucene, life is a thread between all beings, a “tentacular” arrangement of systems “made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen –yet” (Haraway, 11). This is the world I evoke in my project,
one that challenges aspects of human-centered ecological narratives while visually describing the changing, uncertain landscapes and the beings which inhabit them.

Ecocritical Approaches to Art

Through the study of ecocritical theory, object-oriented ontology, ecological writing, and ecofiction, I challenged my own preconceptions of nature, ecology, and climate change. My research into ecocriticism and ecofiction has relied on the ISLE journal, Orion Magazine, and the work of authors such as Richard Powers. I research different perspectives and approaches to ecocriticism such as the work of Alexa Wiek von Mossner based in affect theory and cognitive psychology. My archive of research reinforces my work by providing diverse models for environmental storytelling, challenging my work by complicating my preconceptions of nature, ecology, and climate change.

By repeatedly photographing the same people, the camera becomes invisible over time as my subjects grow used to its presence, inviting a certain vulnerability from them. The editing process requires finding visual elements that bond, allowing images to come together in an evocative way. Once I have allowed that process to unfold, I interrogate why those bonds or associations happen, and revise, allowing meanings to flow and shift until a satisfying narrative sequence is achieved.

I research my subjects through experiential encounters which provoke questions and further my curiosity. An encounter may be a walk in the woods or down the street. An encounter may be a book, a song, a meme, a puddle, a conversation, a turtle shell, a party; anything that gives me pause to ask myself a question or reminds me of another encounter. My practice of looking is informed by less indexical varieties of research, such as artistic influences, literature,
poetry, podcasts, and self-inquiry. The encounters I am sensitive to are moments of intimacy and contradiction: moments that point to a romantic conception of the natural world and the bonds among living things, unhinging naïve images of a fallen world, expressing vulnerability, authenticity, and de-centering human life within the ecological mesh.

Prerequisites to my encounters are travel, the company of particular people, solitude, or communion with non-human beings. My encounters through wandering are largely intuitive. Experiencing the desire or impulse to make work, I step out the door to walk and photograph until exhaustion. Encounters in nature might entail meditation, dancing and body work, or offerings. I choose locations that provoke my curiosity, particularly places that are strange and novel to me. I return repeatedly to familiar locations to study variations wrought by light, weather, season, or human action. Photographing the same close friends and family with whom I’m already comfortable allows for a greater depth of honesty in my work. The people and moments I encounter are taken from my own life as I live it, or crafted as a collaborative performance between photographer and subject.

Alongside the encounter itself are decisions of what equipment or materials to use and making the photograph or video itself. The material process follows, wherein the images are realized as objects through processing film, scanning, archiving, darkroom and digital editing and printing. I make small prints of as many images as possible, spreading out and sifting through them to find what relations or narratives emerge. Pairs and sequences of images are drawn from patterns and associations in content, geometry, tone, texture, symbolism, or by intuition. My conceptual research comes into play at this stage, to inform how these patterns convey the overall narrative. Through the process of sequencing, cutting, and editing images
from the narrative, I search for my intended meaning while withholding the overall conceptual framework to avoid being explicitly didactic.

The final stage of my methodology is giving form to material and narrative by creating artist books and framed prints for installation. Further material research is required for exploring the qualities of different papers, methods of printing, bookbinding materials and structures, print mounting, and building frames. I consider how these choices impact the relations between individual images and the narrative's meaning. The book structure is particularly important because I am interested in how the structure itself informs the narrative, as well as how the structure becomes part of the story itself through the experience of interacting with the book as a material object.

The exhibition is composed of four large-scale images, forty-two-by-fifty-five to sixty-inch inkjet prints on Photo-Tex adhesive-backed polyester fabric, mounted directly to the gallery wall. The large adhesive images serve as context for four framed portraits hung between them. Finally, there is one wall dedicated to collection of images hung salon-style, with five sixteen-by-twenty-inch framed inkjet prints encircling one twenty-four-by-thirty-inch framed print. The salon-style wall contains images of bodies and water, evoking calm and bucolic scenes, and introducing a hint of anxiety in the depiction of floods or the suggestion of rising water. The first of the large polyester prints is a self-portrait as a body among tree roots, followed left-to-right by images of a body in a bare interior space, a pair of hands holding a knife, and a portrait of a subject in tears. Two more polyester fabric prints sit on joining corners, one showing piles of cut timber and the other a landscape of a road stretching into the horizon dotted with wind turbines, and the sun rising into a red, smoke-filled sky. A sixteen-by-twenty-inch landscape and a twenty-four-by-thirty-inch portrait are followed by a final large print of a misty, snow-covered
landscape populated by bare trees, and a lone figure in the distance. The pictures are gradually spaced further and further apart, as if the imaged are being disentangled from one another. The sequence generally follows summer to winter, abundant to barren, warm to frozen, and a gradual draining of color.

At the center of the adjoining three walls, there is a white pedestal containing the artist book for the project. The book is eight-by-ten inches, inkjet printed on Japanese washi paper, bound drum-leaf style with a book cloth-wrapped board cover. The drum-lead binding is comprised of individual sheets printed on one side, adhered edge-to-edge to create a seamless spread, so the image is uninterrupted. This style also lends itself well to the use of the thinner, more delicate washi paper, which is not suitable for double-sided printing or heavy gluing.

My photographs are a kind of stylized diary, a combination of documented life encounters and metaphorical constructions. I stage scenes of bodies in nature, printed at large scale to evoke the contrast of human presence and absence in the environment. I include emotionally resonant portraits of the people closest to me, to fixate on the distance between the subject and myself, referring to the presence of a degree of emotional distance in intimate relationships. This layer of meaning speaks to the deeper relational divides across human social relationships in this moment; the isolation and endemic loneliness. The photographic encounters represent presence, taking a moment out of life’s flow to appreciate and feel gratitude for. They evoke human qualities of love, beauty, anger, care, and thought, referring to the grave potential of this historical moment; documents showing what is at stake/what stands to be lost, or what might be gained. These different layers of meaning flow together in book form to create a narrative of change, evoking the emotions that surround it: fear, grief, and disquiet, in tension with love, joy, and gratitude.
Works Cited


