

Master of Fine Arts Degree Thesis Report for

ICE FORMATIONS

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By

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My Artistic View

A time span of human's life is extremely short compared to the life of the earth and the universe. Human beings can exist only for brief time, live everyday life in a small range and visit finite number of places in one's life. We are bound by time and space. For example, it is impossible for us to be at multiple locations at the same time. Moreover, you cannot go back to the past, or go to the future. We live in moment in a limited small area of the planet. This obvious and simple fact has shaped my life philosophy: make my own independent choice of where I live and should form a deep relationship with the place. I realized that I needed to put the philosophy into practice when my father died. I started to listen to my inner voice in order to spend a truly fulfilled life in such a short lifetime. I believe my philosophy leads to a prosperous life, and this is one of the major reasons why I live now in Alaska, far from my hometown in Japan.

It is a lifelong journey to explore the places I choose to live, and to build deep relationship between the places and myself. My cameras are my travel companions in the pursuit of this philosophy. They are vital devices which enable me to document my activities, to record my findings and feelings, to produce photographs expressing my visions, and to share them with others. Through my photographs, I often discover things that I didn't notice at the time I made them photographed. I then examine and revisit the subjects or locations again, and take more photographs. This repetition helps me to deepen my understanding of the place, to become fond of the place, and to be a part of the place. Furthermore, cameras allow me to catch a precious moment that will never happen again. No two days or moments are alike. Everything is constantly changing in our everyday life. Cameras are brilliant device to capture the fragileness and ephemeralness in our world.

Our surroundings are not intended to be beautiful. They just exist as they are. Human being, however, can find beauty in them. Not only that, everyone has a distinct sense of beauty. The difference brings about the uniqueness of each person. We value and enjoy the diversity. I would like to share my own surprise and happiness when I find beauty in the land where I live. I believe that the success of my work is entirely dependent on whether I can sublimate my personal aesthetics into universal beauty by the aid of camera and photography.

To take advantage of the full capability of photography, I always try to keep my eyes wide open to new trends as well as eagerly research its history and past works. I apply this knowledge to my artistic expression and try to find my own way in the art of photography.

My Artistic Traditions

After becoming an MFA student, I began to build my photography book library and to learn photography's history and the great artworks of the medium. I own almost three hundred photography books now, and have some knowledge that enables me to trace the rough outline of the history of photography. In the presence of my accumulated knowledge of camera development and the vast quality and quantity of photographs taken by many photographers dealing with rich variety of theme like place, theory, ideology and identity, I feel everything has been done already. In the relatively short history of photography, less than two hundred years, a staggering number of photographic artworks have been accomplished. Photography is not only for art, but for the general public too. The recent popularity of digital cameras has made this trend more ubiquitous. There are photographs of all kinds of styles, materials, forms, colors, sizes and ideas today. What can I do to add to the history of photography today? There is no room for me. I was floored by this realization and I felt there was nothing left for me to do with

cameras or with photography.

While I was gripped by a sense of powerlessness, and filled with a certain sense of despondency, I discovered a photo book entitled “Hokkaido” made by an English photographer, Michael Kenna. I was astonished by the brilliance of his picturesque images and their resemblance to traditional Japanese painting called “Suibokuga”, an ink-wash painting developed from around 13th or 14th century under the influence of Chinese culture. Kenna’s images are made by a classical method compared to the digitally processed images popular today. He uses medium format cameras and silver gelatin printing.

One of his works, “KUSSHARO LAKE TREE, Kotan, Hokkaido, Japan. 2002” portrays a tree standing on snow by a misty lake. The photograph shows the distinct silhouette of the tree



Figure 1: Michael Kenna, *Kussharo Lake Tree, Study 1*, Kotan, Hokkaido, Japan, Toned Gelatin Silver Print, 2002

in a carefully constructed composition. The dignity of an old tree that has stood through many of Hokkaido’s harsh winters is beautifully depicted in this photograph. Kenna says “I like to use the analogy of haiku poetry where just a few elements act as catalysts for one’s imagination.”¹ The influence of Haiku, a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, which traditionally evokes images of the natural world, is visible in the stoically simple structure of the composition and

selection of subjects. “I’m not really interested in making an accurate copy of what I see out

¹ Eodice, Lynne. *Michael Kenna: Traces of the Past, Photos to Inspire*. Photoworkshop.com, Jan 22, 2011, 10:16, accessed May 16, 2014, http://www.photoworkshop.com/artman/publish/printer_michael_kenna.shtml

there”, Kenna explains his works. “I think one of photography’s strongest elements is its ability to record a part of the world, but also to integrate with the individual photographer’s aesthetic sense. The combined result is an interpretation – and the interpretation, I think, is what is interesting – when the subject goes through the filter of an individual human mind and emerges in a changed state – not the duplication or the recording of something.”² Kenna’s photographs are about recording his private experiences and emotions. He does not try to depict characteristics of specific places, but attempts to present the landscape as symbolic scenery, and the image is open to interpretations, like Suibokuga and Haiku poems.

Kenna’s photographs of Japan stunned me, but gave me hope at the same time. His artistic sense and point of view as an outsider to Japanese culture capture the subtle details of Japanese scenery that people native to the land, including myself, often overlook. The encountering of his works gave me the hope that I might be able to find something new in the Alaskan landscape, a land that was foreign to me. I see Kenna as a model for my own desire to express my vision of non-native (to myself) landscape through photography. He has his own style and ways of expressing his ideas, and approaches to the medium. They allow him to create artworks in a unique and original way. I renewed my determination to find my own distinctive style as a graduate student living in the foreign landscape of Alaska. Furthermore, his works not only encouraged me to pursue my own style in photography in the Alaskan wilderness, but also reinforced my artistic attitude toward the art of photography. I believe artwork should not over describe its subject. Kenna’s images do not seem to specify particular places or time. Instead, he takes advantage of fog or snow to hide the background and remove any recognizable features.

² Jensen, Brooks. *Interview with Michael Kenna*. *Lens Work*, no.50, December 2003 [Canada: Lens Work Publishing, 2003] 56.

His photographs look simple and tend to abstract the essence of his subject in a way that is very thought-provoking. This strategy fits into my own philosophy of art. Good art leaves room for viewers to use their imaginations. The viewer adds the final touch to the piece and completes the artwork. Kenna's artworks contribute greatly to my establishment of my artistic style in the art of photography.

Photography as medium

Photography is completely dependent on camera devices. I have come to think about the device, or camera, in a new way while seeking my originality and artistic philosophy in the art of photography. What does a camera do for humans? Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher of communication theory, said in his media theory "All media are extensions of some human faculty-psycho or physical."³ Borrowing his theory and applying it to a camera, one can say that a camera is an extension of the eye and memory function of brain, because a camera enables us to capture an image and allows us to preserve the moment as a picture more optically than our eyes and brains can. I started to explore the relationship between art and photography based on the theory of Marshall McLuhan.

Our eyes provide our brains optical information. Based on the information gathered by the eyes, our brains can visually perceive the world surrounding us as a comprehensive whole and preserve it in our memory. Through a lens, finder and camera body, a camera can frame the world around us. This procedure with a camera is very similar to the function of our eyes and brains. An image created with the aid of a camera resembles the vision which our eyes and brains

³ McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* [United States of America: Bantam Books, 1967] 26.

provide, but there are differences. Humans cannot fix our sight nor focus on our entire view, because our eyes are always moving and can only focus in the center area of the sight. We also don't live in the past, nor stay in a particular moment. We live only in the present and feel reality as a continuous and steady stream as time flows. On the other hand, a camera device can capture images with the entire field of view in perfect focus. The entirely focused image eliminates the depth and creates a flat two-dimensional surface, which is impossible with the human eyes. A camera also enables us to fix the view and capture a scene in front of us as a framed image in a time span from a fragment of one second to several seconds, minutes, hours or longer. While the time span differs according to each photograph, the captured picture shows an image of a length of time through a specified format like square or rectangle. These functions of cameras are different from our way of seeing and enhance our capability. Photography has a photographic reality as we have human reality.

For example, Ansel Adams explored the capacity of the camera to achieve his pre-visualized image in his mind and in his works we find beautiful photographic reality. He

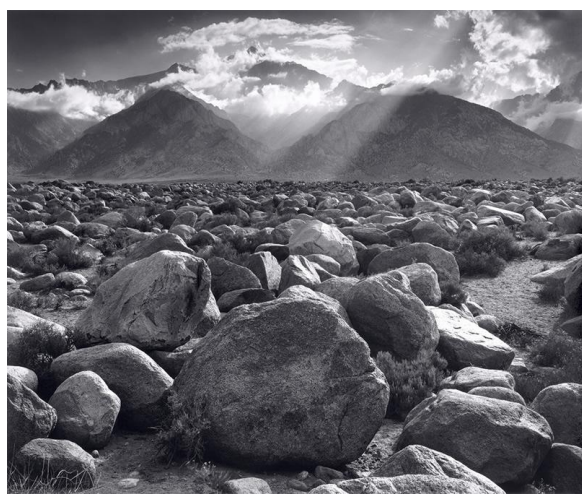


Figure 2: Ansel Adams, *Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada from Manzanar, California*, Gelatin Silver Print, 1944

explained in his book, “I drove my station wagon to a place I had often visited. Never before had the conditions been right for me at this location, but this time there was a glorious storm going on in the mountains. . . . I pointed the camera down a little and tilted the back to hold both the near rocks and the distant peaks in sharp focus.” and “several times I moved the car a few feet to position the camera precisely for

the composition of boulders and peaks.”⁴ His photograph (Figure 2) and explanation reveal that carefully set-up compositions, precise focus, and a critically decisive moment are the key to achieving this pre-visualized image. The characteristics of his photographs, accomplished by Adams’ deep knowledge and abundant experience, are derived from the camera’s function which is the enhancement of our way of seeing. As Ansel Adams and many others, photographers have traditionally pursued the photographic reality and have enjoyed the pictures produced by a camera device which has expanded-functions of human vision. And now, it’s my turn. How do I take advantage of photographic reality?

One of the characteristics of the expanded-functions of the human vision, flatness, has been important attribute of my works. Recently, I have realized that I have tendency to use this visual flatness, which is also common throughout the history of Japanese art, in my photograph’s composition. Born and raised in Japan, I was strongly influenced by Japanese artists like woodcuts printmakers like Hokusai Katsushika and Hiroshige Ando who made great landscape woodcuts prints called “Ukiyo-e” in the Edo period and Japanese painter like Korin Ogata who represents the mid-Edo period art. Their works have bold and asymmetric compositions, objects depicted with simple black lines, finite colors and a sense of flatness. After realizing my tendency, I started to consciously take advantage of the ability to change our 3D space into a 2 dimensional space. The camera is a perfect device to flatten the space thanks to its monocular view.

Figure 3 is one of my images captured in Hokkaido, Japan. The red gate surrounded by severe nature and covered by snow during winter is the entrance to a Shinto shrine. The Shinto tradition worships natural forces and sees natural entities like mountains, rivers, trees, rocks,

⁴ Adams, Ansel. *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs* [Canada: Little Brown and Company, 1984], 68.

wind, and lighting as Shinto gods. When I took photographs of the gate, I could have chosen a



Figure 3: Ryota Kajita, *Gateway #1*, Hokkaido, Japan, Archival Pigment Ink, 2011

shallow depth of field to make the background sky and the sea blur. This would emphasize only the gate and signify its sacredness and a respect of the local residents. However, I did not adopt this method. Rather than emphasizing the main subject using “bokeh” effect (the visual quality of the blur areas produced in the out-of-focus parts of a photographic image, especially as rendered by a particular lens), I set the aperture

to the narrowest setting and tried to focus on the entire visual elements sharply as practiced by Ansel Adams. As a result, the gate standing out on the large rock, the stone sitting in the foreground, the mountains rising over the sea, and clouds floating in the sky are all in clear focus. Every single piece seized by the film has its maximum details to reveal the texture. All are uniformly rendered in a single surface on film. The flatness brought by the sharpness creates equality among visual elements, and conveys the unity between humans and nature. The religious icon constructed to wish fishermen a safe voyage and the bounty of the ocean merges into the surroundings. Utilizing the flatness, one of the expanded-functions of human vision the camera uniquely provides, I depict the relationship between the Japanese fishermen and nature, and its pure and quiet spirituality.

Series of Ice Formation

While developing my aesthetics and the photographic methods mentioned above, I have

sought my own subjects through interactions with the Alaskan landscape. Many attempts were made, and I have found the most magnetic subject keeps me captivated. This subject is the ice patterns appearing on ponds, lakes and river in the beginning of winter around Fairbanks, and I decided to make my photographic series “Ice Formations” be my MFA project. The photographs were taken over the past four years with a medium format film camera, which allows me to capture delicate details of the ice. Many of these are frozen bubbles of gases like methane or carbon dioxide trapped under ice. When lake and river water freezes, it turns into ice slowly from the surface and traps the gases. The bubbles create unique geometric patterns. The actual diameter of the ice formations in my series is about 10-30 inches. Because methane gas is considered as one of the fundamental causes of greenhouse effects, scientists in Alaska are researching these frozen bubbles in relation to the global climate change. The window to find the ice pattern is short, because the ice is quickly covered once the snow falls. The water also shows other beautiful patterns in fall and winter. Snow falls on lakes and rivers, freezes, melts, refreezes and creates unique organic patterns on ice. The vapor in the air freezes as frost and grows intricate ice crystals. I want to capture the beauty and the dynamic changes of water in nature. The images are black and white with slight tint of colors. By minimizing colors, viewers can focus on the elegance of the forms and shading created by clear transparent ice and white frost.

We see various forms of water throughout the seasons in Alaska. I hope that the images of dynamic changes of water captured in my series would help viewers feel connected to nature, and inspire their curiosity to natural phenomena and invite them to explore the geometric beauty in the details of the organic patterns. In our everyday life, there is beauty and wonder. However, many are subtle, ephemeral or too small to be noticed. Photography enables me to pay attention

to those moments and subjects, take more time to observe them, examine from different angles and understand them more deeply. Wandering around looking for ice with my camera reminds me of treasure hunting in my boyhood. I used to run out into the woods after school hours. Exploring places that made up my neighborhood was an adventure and I enjoyed leaving my footprints on unknown areas. It was fun and uplifting enough to satisfy my young, innocent curiosity. As an adult, photographing ice has its roots in those childhood adventures. It's in that spirit I strive to know the environment deeper-and genuine curiosity propels me to be involved in the place I live. It's a dialog between nature and me. The photograph is the treasure I take from hunting my surroundings, and through photographs, nature reveals its secret beauty to me and I can share them with other people.

Exhibition of Ice Formations

I have built more than 40 light boxes to present the ice images with LED backlighting. The frame size is 21" x 21", which shows the ice patterns close to their actual size, and the ice-pattern images are printed on high-resolution translucent film, "Epson DisplayTrans Backlight Film Plus", specially designed for backlight display. I sandwiched the printed image with two sheets of glass and slid them into the front side of the box along a slit which I made on the inside. The image on the film is illuminated by 13 LED strip mounted on a foam core board which was slid into the backside of the box. In the gallery, 40 boxes are placed on the floor, displayed in groups of 3 to 5 boxes, and separated to allow the space for wheelchair access. I tried to set the groups in an orderly and organic pattern on the floor, and connected each boxes with electric codes.

Putting the framed images on the floor was an experimental attempt, and was challenging

for me as an artist. I chose to do so to mimic the experience of looking down and seeing these wonderful ice patterns, at this size, in nature. Holding a solo show in about 26' x 35' single space is a rare opportunity for a student, and I decided to take the risk. I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity and make an installation which would invite viewers to explore my images and to have the joy I felt as I discovered the ice patterns. I hope the viewers feel fun and excitement, and wonder the beauty of nature. Furthermore, it would be the greatest pleasure if my images would inspire viewers to open their mind to new ways of seeing the world and to be aware of the harmony between humans and nature.

Conclusion

Being immersed in photography for three years has reinforced my passion for its expressive nature and made me realize that this art form will be my lifelong medium. At the same time, however, I have felt that my photographs don't fully reflect the plaintive feeling I sense from the medium. I have generally focused on forms and capturing the visual beauty of my subjects. My works lack a melancholic mood, which I consider the fundamental nature of photographs.

Immediately after the instant we photograph, the moment has already passed and the subject has changed. We are in the present that was future at the time we photographed. In a continuous stream of time, the human brain builds up an intangible perception called memory, whereas photographs present the past moment and space as a concrete fixed picture. The memory in the human brain will fade or alter while photographs indefinitely retain the precise visual information they record. In that sense, a human belongs to the present and lives in the future. Photography is deeply connected to the past. The image preserved in a photograph makes

us vividly recall the moment when we were there at that time in that space, and we will never encounter the moment again. Consequently, we sense immense nostalgia from photography. Thus photography is naturally endowed with a potential to evoke melancholy. This is a great attribute innately bestowed on the photographic reality, and I think it's the key to develop new artistic expressions in my photography. I hope to consciously create photographs that evoke the wistful feeling in viewers' mind.

I will keep exploring the medium and search for the better way to sublimate my personal feeling and aesthetics into a universal appreciation. In that way, I can call myself a photographer and live my own life.