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## Now Was Too Late

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# **Now Was Too Late**

Kaleigh Rusgrove

B.F.A. Endicott College, 2014

A Project Statement

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

At the

University of Connecticut

2018

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2018

APPROVAL PAGE

Master of Fine Arts Project Statement

**Now Was Too Late**

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2018



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*Fiction is the lie that helps us understand the truth.*

— Tim O’Brian

## **Chapter One: On Seeing**

As a child I was enamored with swing sets. I especially loved the one in my backyard, which I could use any time I liked. I enjoyed it so much that I would sit myself down and pump my legs back and forth for as long as I could stand it. I would observe everything around me in the yard, as my perspective shifted over and over again. From above and below, as the sun shone, then as the light faded to dusk. I sat there at midday when the neighborhood was silent, and in the afternoons as the postman and schoolchildren would pass by the fence. I treasured my time spent in midair.

Eventually my mother suggested I bring my Walkman out with me to pass the time. This gave a soundtrack to the daydreams. It kept me further occupied and the time spent outside soon stretched to hours. I spent much of my free time this way, developing stories in my mind about the on goings of the world around me. When I became tall enough that my feet began to drag along the dirt, I moved to the rope hammock that my family kept slung between two trees close to the fence line.

I have held on to this process as an adult. I still explore by moving my feet, but now they intermittently connect with the pavement. I turn my music on and walk or run through my surroundings. My mind wanders, observing and creating. I think about what I have learned and I plan what to make. Much of my time in graduate school was spent trying to understand why I

make art, and more specifically why I make pictures. The repetition of taking photographs, talking about the resulting images, sometimes defending them, and starting over again, helped me to find the patterns not only in my making, but the way in which I move through the world.

## **Chapter Two: Where I Was**

I spent much of my first two years at UConn attempting to understand why it is I am a photographer. In studio visits I would be asked what inspires me to make a picture, where everything starts, but by the end of the visit I would have less of an understanding than when I had begun. I am unsure whether it was that I truly did not know the reason, or if I could not find the words to express the sheer simplicity of what it is I do. The cinematic quality of my work, and the general lack of a particular focus or theme left me feeling as though I had no real driving force behind my photographic practice.

I have always had a deep love of reading and a more general interest in visual storytelling. I grew up with television and movies as my main source of artistic inspiration, rarely going to museums or other cultural institutions with my family. What I know of narrative has been learned through pop culture. My photographs have often been referred to as cinematic in nature, sparking conversations about directors or movies I may be influenced by. The truth is I have never had a favorite director, nor do I have any interest in film greater than the average human. I have simply spent a lot of time in my life watching things on screens.

My process in graduate school has been a series of trials and errors, each one leading me to a new way of working and a better understanding of my practice. Every time I moved on from one attempt, whether it was conceptually or process driven, I scrapped what came before and

started over. At the time, it felt as if each new group of images was totally unlike anything that came before it.

Now as I stand at the end of these three years, I can trace through these epiphanies and various projects like a map. Though I could not see what was happening from where I stood, each step taken was some evolution of what came before. The studio visits and suggestions eventually coalesced, until the clarity of my process was overwhelming and I could no longer misinterpret it. The pile of experiments I had made rose higher in my studio, evidence of what I had been blindly trying to do. Now when I look to even the earliest images made, such as *Walking Man* (Figure 1, pg. 18), or the four grouped images in *Untitled (Quad)* (Figure 2, pg. 19), there is a clear connection to the work I have hung in the MFA Thesis Show (Figure 3, pg. 19).

*Walking Man* stands out to me as a moment when I recognized that the continual process of witnessing and recreation was the foundation of my process. This collection of images was made in my first year at the University of Connecticut while in an experimental video course. I recorded my husband walking slowly around the courtyard of our apartment from the window. This was an imitation of an experience in which I watched a resident of our complex repeatedly make this same journey every day for many weeks.

A conversation with visiting artist Candice Ivy also comes to mind as a pivotal moment in which I began to better understand my own way of working. Though *Walking Man* had been made nearly one year prior to this visit, I was still unable to verbalize the way I had been working. Ivy came into my studio and immediately questioned why the photographs I was producing at the time lacked any additional figures. Within a few minutes we were discussing the importance of my walking through the world and seeing. I had spent so many years removed

from this type of language – insisting that I prefer to make scenes rather than find them, deciding on moments rather than waiting for the decisive ones. In this conversation, I was reminded that the impetus of my process were the moments where I was witnessing, experiencing the world by moving through it and noting the intriguing times when my mind started to wander most.

I make work the way I do because it's the same thing I did as a kid sitting on a swing set. Creating small stories or editing what I witness is the way I function and process my surroundings. In my practice I recreate observed moments, but insert myself or other characters into the scene. I used to think I did this because it made the making of the image harder, and to me that made it more valuable. Though I find this to still be partially true, inserting a character into a narrative is also the most similar to my mental processes while looking. I am not just witnessing, but also dreaming of the ways I can use the space in which I exist.

## **Inspiration & Influences**

I came to graduate school to make stronger work, and very specifically to make images which were no longer as heavy-handed as my previous photographs. From the beginning, I expressed an interest in making images that were more “ambiguous”. I strove to make images that did not hit the viewer over the head or become too pointed in their narrative. Finally, having a sense of the force behind my practice allowed me to dedicate myself to photography in a way I had not been before.

When I look at the work of Alec Soth and Rinko Kawauchi, I see images that I wish my own were more like. They are seductive in their simplicity. Though I would categorize my past

work as loud or theatrical, I have always been attracted to work like theirs, photographs I would describe as quiet.

Soth's work is beautiful, and the conceptual frameworks of his series' are fascinating, but his work has stayed with me for the most basic of reasons. In my quest to create ambiguous work, Soth's images act as a reminder to vary the types of images I am making. My focus on careful planning of images in my prior work made my process almost mechanical in nature. This kept me from making anything close to the more complex narrative photographs I admired and hoped to create. Stumbling upon the series *Niagra* (Figures 4-6, pg. 20) in my second year of graduate school reconfigured my thinking on what types of images I could be allowing into the self-created constraints of my practice. Having considered the focus of my photography to be self-portraiture for many years, I instead began to think not only portraiture, but also still life and landscape could all cohesively come together in a series. When I lost my attachment to the figure, I freed myself to make work of a range of subject matters and become looser in the making, getting me closer to the elusive images I was searching for.

Kawauchi has served as a reminder that even the most mundane moments and subjects can make an incredible photograph. Though I have always noticed the visual occurrences around me, I had stopped taking the time to photograph them. This goes back to the idea of making my process harder for myself: I would not photograph whatever caught my attention in the moment. In doing so I was missing the allure of that space, and the beauty of how it was when first seen. Most importantly, I would often lose the light of that moment. These moments, like the fallen together still life on a window ledge (Figure 7, pg. 21) or seeds spit from a slice of watermelon, would be passed by, captured only in the mind if not for Kawauchi's consideration.



I have also been influenced by my time in the classroom while at UConn. Working with intermediate photography students, many who have never stepped foot in a darkroom, was a reminder of my own shortcomings in my practice. Week after week I would enter the classroom and remind my students that their subject matter was not the only focus of the image, but the way the image was taken had just as much weight. This reiteration made me look again at my own process, and I realized that just like these new students, I too had become too focused on the subject matter and forgotten about light.

I started making work more regularly, using my cell phone while out on walks and anytime I didn't have my "real" camera nearby. So often we are told that the trick to becoming better at your own medium is to make a lot of whatever it is you make. Over the last ten years I had let my interest in staging come before my love for photography. Finding and making pictures once again became part of my daily routine, and in doing so I finally found my way back to narrative again.

### **Chapter Three: Business as Usual**

One of the greatest challenges I faced coming to this program was developing a story on which my work was focused. In the past, I worked from literature, or invented small vignettes that did not extend beyond singular images. In retrospect even my undergraduate thesis was linked in concept, but remained individual moments as opposed to chapters of the same plot. There was no beginning, middle, or end. Though each individual image was intensely orchestrated, there was no organization to what I was doing. This made creating series of work nightmarish, and any attempt at developing plots short-lived.

I continued seeking out narrative through my entire first year in graduate school, but finished the spring semester without any clear direction. Without a clear sense of how to proceed, my practice came to somewhat of a halt. I struggled to actively make work during my first break in the summer of 2016. I spent much of my free time listening to podcasts and reading, something I recognize now as being regenerative and helpful in leading me to new interests and subsequent subject matter. I also spent time watching documentaries, including *Chasing Ice*, which follows National Geographic Photographer James Balog's Extreme Ice Survey expedition, as well as *Mission Blue*, which chronicles oceanographer Sylvia Earle's campaign to protect the world's oceans from overfishing and pollution. I believe having spent so much of that time watching and listening to environmentally focused media helped prepare me for what came next in my practice.

As I drove down main street one day that summer, a radio show host came on air and announced that scientists had come to the conclusion that we have passed the point of preventing climate change. The host went on to say it was agreed that the focus within the scientific community should instead shift to mitigating the effects of global warming. This fact was thrown out onto the air without any further discussion, and the next top forty hit began to play immediately after.

That announcement and moment in time feels representative of the world that we are living in. We exist in a time when our demise both as a species, as well as the planet on which we reside, is part of daily conversations, but the horror of the situation has been normalized. Our administration denies that changes to the environment are even occurring, and in many ways is moving us in the complete opposite direction from progress and hope. As a result, the general

public feels uncertain where they stand in regards to climate change, and unsure as to what is the truth and how to proceed.

Throughout the summer, this interest in the environment and the ambiguity of the future kept creeping back into my thoughts. How could I make work about this? I was drawn to the subject, as it seemed of vital importance. I thought back to the documentaries I had been watching and remembered thinking, as many of us do, that I hoped I could someday make an impact on our world too. As romantic as that idea seemed, I had never attempted to make work that spoke to any type of issue outside of my own life and interests before. I thought back to a group critique the semester prior, in which Professor Ray DiCapua had raised his hand and asked “Why should I give a fuck about how you feel?” I felt this subject matter could be an answer to that challenge, and move me from making work which was focused on myself.

When the fall semester came, I set out to make work about climate change. I began making photographs that felt somewhat like a middle space between what I liked to make and an attempt to address my growing interests in the environment. I developed a character, a one-dimensional woman who was meant to be, in my mind, the last woman on earth. I sent this character out into the environment, making a preliminary series in which she was exploring a dystopian future, though in an environment which looked very familiar to current day. I was influenced by the thought that were humanity to die out the earth would flourish.

A major downfall of this series was my attempt to change too much at once. While searching for a new conceptual direction, I was also altering the way in which I hung my work, testing new grids and images that continued through multiple frames. I was interested in how an image that continued through multiple frames could convey a grander sense of space as well as a passage of time, as seen in *Reservoir* (Figure 8, pg. 21). I also did not know much about

environmental issues beyond what I had read in the media and online. I was naively trying to make photographs about something difficult to understand without seeking an education beyond basic background knowledge.

I also had not fully formed any sense of the narrative, but was instead treating myself like a paper doll that could be plopped into any given scenario. It felt like a huge step back to the work I was making prior to grad school. I was exploring the landscapes most familiar to me, hiking trails and the Connecticut shoreline, but choosing to avoid traces of other humans from the photographs to speak to the isolation of this character. The conceptual context, my interest in the environment, became lost with so much removed from within the frame. I had reached the point of *too* ambiguous. I needed to find my way to a place somewhere between intensely pointed and utterly vague.

#### **Chapter Four: Broadening the Realm**

The most important lesson of these experiments was that they revealed I am not always capable of working on my own. I was making work the same way I always had, just with a new subject matter. I realized what I desperately needed to shape the narrative was the help of experts in other fields.

I first sought out the assistance of a faculty member of the Department of English at UConn, Ellen Litman. Writing helped to solidify structure and create rules for my world and better understand what exactly I was trying to say with my work. To create a written piece required a world that existed beyond the confines of the frame or the pages. I had always avoided this in my photographs, focusing on one instant rather than the development of a larger story.

Even in the shortest pieces of fiction this was impossible, as questions would arise as to how a reader would respond to a created world.

This is where I first heard of developing a set of rules for a given world, a technique often used in writing science fiction. By setting clear guidelines for what is possible and impossible in a fictitious realm allows for a more tangible and believable sense of place. This would become increasingly more important to me as over time I realized I was most interested in the moments when my work fell directly between fact and fiction to the point of its authenticity being indistinguishable.

However, as an integrated part of my practice, writing never felt like exactly the right fit. I loved the contemporary fiction and creative non-fiction we read each week in class, but none of the pieces ever felt like a mirror of what I was trying to accomplish. There was always the barrier between the page and the world. I came into each experience of reading knowing what was to come, labeled as fiction or non-fiction or memoir. I was never stuck in a moment of wondering if what lay before me was completely imaginary or from true events.

Professor Alison Paul encouraged me to try making my own book, one which functioned in a way that could incorporate text and image to fall into a similar place as my singular photographs did. At this point I was in my second creative writing class with Professor Litman, this course focused on hybrid narratives. My first attempt as a book felt like a step backwards, as the text became illustrative for imagery and any sense of ambiguity was lost. My second attempt was much more successful, as I shuffled text and images to piece together something which followed a common thread but had no distinct unifying structure. I printed the text on vellum so that a glimpse of each image could be seen as the text was read, joining the two elements together and removing the possibility for the text to dominate (Figure 9, pg. 22).

I was smitten with the book for all of one week. I loved it because it was precious, something that had finally brought the writing and the photographs together. And though in many ways it was successful, I had absolutely no desire to try to recreate it. I wasn't tethered to the form of the book or the objectness of it. The bound pages now seemed an unnecessary container for my ideas. I was sure that there must be some way to hold on to the disconnect which came by placing partially unrelated text and images together in the solo photographs.

At this time I was also enrolled in an entry level Natural Resources with Dr. Tracy Rittenhouse. I felt it necessary to develop a stronger knowledge base of the actual science behind climate change if I wanted to create a more believable world for my narrative. I was surprised to find that sitting in on this course also strengthened the ethical and philosophical approach to this project that had been part of my initial interests.

In the first few weeks of the semester, I sat down across from Dr. Rittenhouse, and for an hour we discussed what a series of conceptual photographs about climate change might look like. She was as uncertain as I was at the time. I used these meetings as an opportunity to ask all the questions I had which were not covered in the course, and Dr. Rittenhouse in return offered a more candid and personal response.

One of the most important conversations happened during our very first meeting. I asked Dr. Rittenhouse to help me understand what could be done to stop the destruction. She looked at me and said, "It's actually very simple" and drew a diagram of the carbon cycle, describing each part, "we need to stop mining fossil fuels." This moment changed everything for me, as it moved the issue from something confusing and out of my comfort zone into something I think a vast majority of the general public could understand. It also started to point to the issue being rooted in something beyond science. To make that change, to stop the mining of fossil fuels, the world

as we know it would have to change. To make these changes, people would need to sacrifice and adjust and learn a new way of life.

Another influential part of the course came in the form of our required reading, *The Sixth Extinction* by Elizabeth Kolbert. The book itself was helpful, but I found listening to Kolbert speak as a guest lecturer and again at a student panel the following day to be insightful and spoke more directly to my process. Much of the conversation revolved around how to present information. The consensus, and what Kolbert seemed to focus much of the talk on, was that many scientists struggle to present their research in a way that is understandable to the general public. As a journalist, she sees this as an opportunity to act as a mediator, shedding light on issues of concern that may not be discussed outside of the scientific community while mining source material for her own writing practice. The discussion also revolved around the intended audience for the book, and how *The Sixth Extinction* functioned in educating that audience. The agreement in discussion in my studio, in class, and even from Kolbert herself seemed to be that the book was geared towards a generally like-minded audience who would likely be receptive to the ideas which she was expressing. The goal was not to turn a staunch climate change denier into an activist with one read.

This has affected the way I have come to think about the function of my work, as I do not consider my photographs to be illustrative of an issue. I would hope that a viewer would leave my pieces with more questions than answers, especially in regards to their own way of functioning in a world of business as usual.

I expected to learn from Dr. Rittenhouse the hard facts of climate change. Her focus on ethics and the mess that is humanity helped shape the work I've made and given me the permission I needed to stray from presenting the photographs strictly as documentary or artifacts.

I could see myself working and working and working for months on end on this issue (which I have) and still have room left to grow (which I do). There were no confines or predetermined routes to take. It was freeing. I had not forced myself into strict confines of a narrative, nor had I wandered into a realm without any sort of rules with which to shape the narrative from which I was working.

### **A Momentary Shift in Perspective**

As I took classes and worked with faculty outside the School of Fine Arts, I found my time researching and writing to be pulling me away from my art practice. Knowing that this research was important to my growth as an artist, I shifted the way I was working to keep myself in the habit of producing images while working on these other projects. I started photographing the neighborhood near my apartment where I ran. I was first drawn to this place because it reminded me of the neighborhood of my childhood, apart from the fact that there were never any people in it. There were homes and cars, but during the first year I explored this place I never saw a single resident working in their yards, pulling into a driveway, or even peeking out behind a window curtain. I visited this “ghost neighborhood” nearly every day, and it became both the focus and location of multiple stories written while working with Professor Litman.

Along with photographing the houses I walked past, I also started collecting pictures of the trash and other detritus I found on the streets I ran along. I began to think of these photographs as evidence, and imagined that if I were to compile all of these images together, they may begin to explain the mystery of the ghost neighborhood. I used my cell phone, which I had never before considered a camera. It was convenient, and being able to shoot something



immediately ensured that it would not be picked up or swept away by the time I returned with my “real” camera. It removed my opportunity and impulse to arrange and create, and my practice instead became about documenting things and moments exactly as they were.

I presented the work in a line along the wall and wrapping around a corner, suggesting a narrative structure to be followed, though there was no plot. One image in particular was pulled out and dissected in critique, a personal favorite of a basketball trading card that I had seen lying in the grass beside the sidewalk and chosen not to photograph (Figure 7). I planned to return for it the next day, but overnight a snowstorm blew through and covered any trace of the card. I couldn't stop thinking about what the card was doing there, writing about it and looking for it each day as I passed the spot where I had initially seen it.

When the snow melted I was elated to find the card had survived the storm. It sat neatly on the grass. I centered it in the frame as I did with the other evidence, took my photograph, and was on my way. The reading of this image was that it appeared staged, as if I had placed the card there to suit my narrative purpose. I was shocked, as this work felt to me the complete opposite of my normal mode of working. In the moment I was confused and concerned as to what this meant for my practice, as nothing felt as far from my carefully constructed vignettes as taking cell phone pictures of actual garbage. It took time to realize, but arriving at a similar outcome from a dramatically different process was a turning point in my practice.

## **Chapter Five: Beyond Background Knowledge**

As I have worked towards making images that are looser and more ambiguous, I have simultaneously put more restraints on my practice. Finding resources to pull information from

provides the source material from which I can derive a narrative structure. Having a point from which to draw from that is not completely of my own creation has freed me to focus instead on the actual image making, editing, and sequencing. I reached out to Dr. Rittenhouse and other Natural Resources faculty as well as the director of the UConn Herbarium, Dr. Don Les, to see if there were facilities I could photograph in the area. Dr. Les pointed me in the direction of the New England Wild Flower Society in Massachusetts.

I was fortunate to have connected with Elizabeth Farnsworth, who invited me to their seed drying and storage facility in Whately, Massachusetts. I was also able to meet with Michael Piantedosi, who is the society's seed bank coordinator, to photograph seed collection along the Connecticut shoreline as well as the actual seed bank at Garden in the Woods in Framingham, Massachusetts.

At first I felt a need to be truthful in my presentation of the images of these facilities, which was a step backward in the progression away from the freedom I had found in the making. I felt that the photographs I made of the seed bank at the New England Wild Flower Society needed to respect the work being done there, and somehow that was equated with presenting them for what they were. But I was unhappy with the work presented in this way; it felt like an entry-level documentary photography assignment.

I am thankful for a studio visit in which *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel was introduced to me (Figure 10, pg. 23). Seeing photographs not even made by the artist being shaped by intention completely flipped my mindset on the imagery I was working with. I could use the images I had made of the seed bank, as well as many others I was making along the way. I was again indirectly given the permission I needed to use the photographs to craft the story I wanted to tell, not just present the truth of what I had experienced. I removed myself from my

interactions in the spaces and began to look at the photographs in the way I had with the detritus from the ghost neighborhood; as evidence.

Approaching the work this way made the narrative less direct, which allowed me to incorporate work not made at the seed bank. I reached out to the department of Plant Science Transgenic Plant facility, which happens to be located directly behind our studios on the UConn Depot Campus. My window looked out towards their building, and throughout my time at UConn I had seen trays of plants disappear and reappear on the tables within their fence lines property, but not much activity otherwise. It was not until I started making environmental work that I began to notice the occasional lab coat clad student making their way in and out of the greenhouse.

Working in this facility was the exact opposite experience of my time at NEWFS. I was given a brief tour and overview by one of their graduate students and then allowed to roam the facility. This allowed me to remove myself from the exact purpose of Petri dishes full of seeds or colorless plants growing within test tubes. I returned to the studio armed with images to which I felt no personal attachment, and interspersed them with the images that felt weighted with the interactions I had at NEWFS.

At this time, I also began to incorporate self-portraiture back into my practice. I missed the time I spent in front of the camera, and felt that I could reinsert the human narrative, maybe even my initial “last woman on Earth” plot from the year prior. Instead of a dreamlike woman in a white dress, I portrayed a female scientist, donning a hazmat suit configured from a mask and coveralls purchased online. It was not important that it function properly, but that it looked believable enough from afar.

## Chapter Six: Where I Am

I came to an interdisciplinary program with the intent of creating more elaborately staged photographs. Yet moving outside my comfort zone and trying new ways of working and making things which were not straight photography only helped to bring me back to the medium. The more I was told to push the boundaries, the more I craved making big beautiful prints of the moments I was witnessing and imagining in my day to day life.

The body of work I have presented in the thesis exhibition *Close Third Person* achieves what I came to graduate school to try and find; photographs that are curious, and the smallest bit fantastical. They also serve some greater purpose, and that has made the making even more worthwhile. When I reflect back to the work I came in making, the self-portraits of my undergraduate years, there is no space beyond the singular story presented in each vignette.

I am still just capturing what I have always spent time noticing, like the way the sun falls across the grass at the end of a good day. But my pictures also now point to something more. They no longer simply say “look at this beautiful thing,” but also “look at this beautiful, terrible, awful thing” too. And most importantly, they make you wonder why I’m telling you to look at those moments at all.

Figures

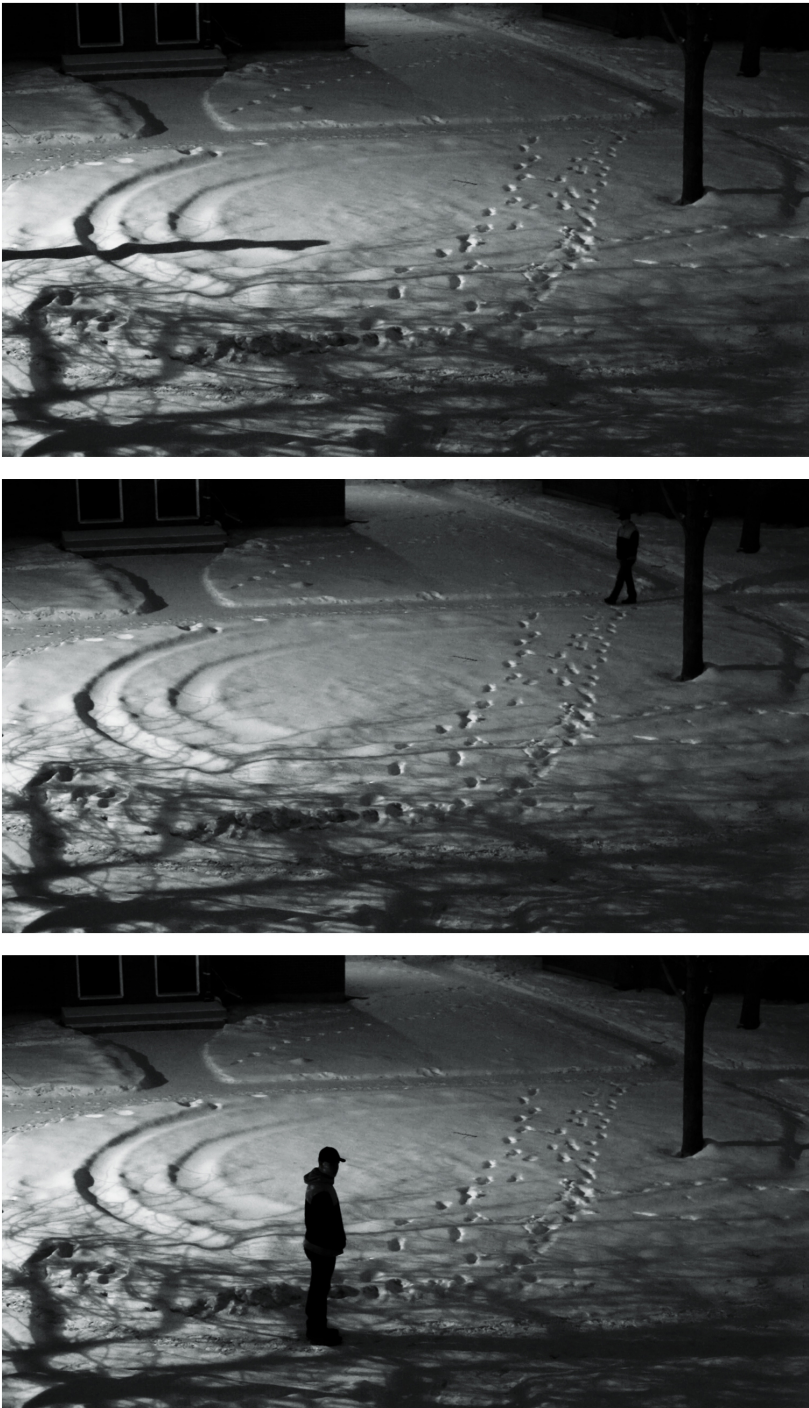


Figure 1: *Walking Man*, 2016, Video Stills



**Figure 2:** *Untitled (Quad)*, 2016, Archival pigment prints



**Figure 3:** Installation View, William Benton Museum of Art, 2018





Figures 4-6: *Niagra*, Alec Soth, 2005



Figure 7: *Cui Cui*, Rinko Kawauchi, 2005



Figure 8: *Reservoir*, 2016, Archival pigment prints



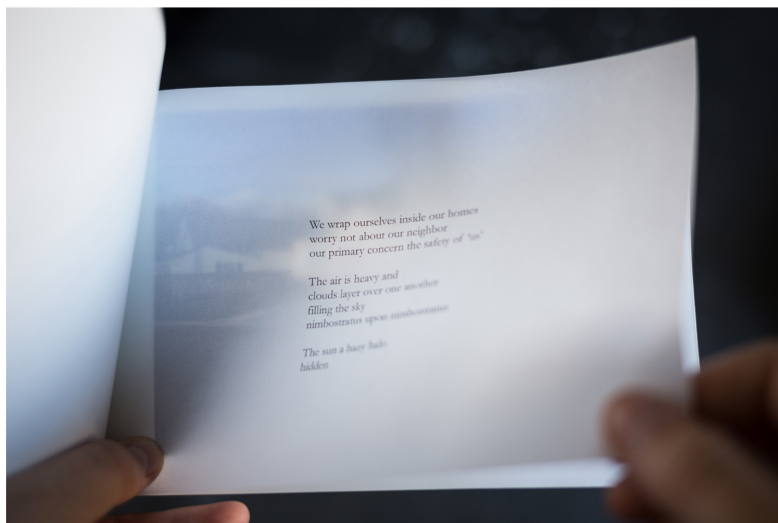
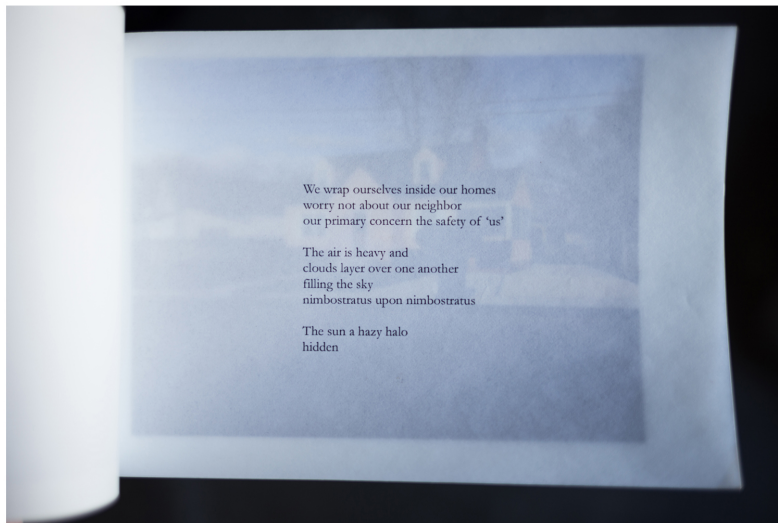


Figure 9: *a recipe for violet jam*, 2017, Archival pigment prints, vellum, thread



Figure 10: *Evidence*, Mike Mandel & Larry Sultan, 1977