

DANIELLE AVRAM
KRISTY FEET
MARK LUTHRINGER
LUTHER SMITH
DIANE MCGURREN
DYLAN VITONE
LUPITA MURILLO
TINNEN
BYRD WILLIAMS



local / e

PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO





The exhibition *locale*, curated by Associate Professor Marilyn Waligore, presents the work of artists who document a familiar location or emphasize a sense of place. The selected works in this exhibition, featuring photography and video, reveal complex spaces, social interactions, and cultural and historical perspectives. Represented artists include Danielle Avram, Mark Luthringer, Diane McGurran, Kristy Peet, Luther Smith, Lupita Murillo Tinnen, Dylan Vitone, and Byrd Williams. These eight artists, from Texas, California, and Pennsylvania, provide insights into how one defines *place* or experience of space. They rely on information produced by the camera lens to address topics such as: the acknowledgment and preservation of our fragile environment; the resilience of communities to social and economic pressures; and the relationship between photographic representation and visual perception.

While scholars such as Jonathan Lipkin discuss the "instability of the photographic act,"¹ that "the intervention of electronic technology has severed the tie between the photograph and the world,"² the jury may still be out regarding the function of the lens. The camera eye can be used to acquire an objective image relating to our experience of the world. In an era when photographs can be transformed with increasing ease, what prompts photographers like Thomas Struth, and the artists participating in *locale*, to embrace the unaltered image? Critic Daniel Birnbaum has noted the adoption of digital technology by artists Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky who produce "complicated scenarios montaged out of a multiplicity of shots, thus loosening the indexical link between picture and reality." By comparison, Birnbaum continues, photographs by Thomas Struth "may seem astonishingly conventional."³ Of the artists featured in *locale*, only Dylan Vitone employs a variation on digital montage, although he refrains from editing the "breaks" separating the individual images within his scroll-like panoramas. By pushing aside conventional genres of interior, landscape, or architecture, one may envision a nuanced framework for considering how photographs reveal a sense of place. These artists employ optics to reveal and to describe, often with specificity. The connection between the photograph and the world before the camera--Birnbaum's "indexical link"--persists.

Due to the conventions of duration and optics, photography and video retain a special connection to time and place. The word *locale* or *local* refers to place, to a position. Photographic practice often involves note-taking, providing an indication of when and where a photograph was shot. Markings on Luther Smith's negatives reveal, in the unexposed image border, the specific location along the Trinity River and date--month, day, year. This notation implies that the site may change. Mark

Luthringer's photographs of Ridgemont reveal *no place*, an "invented" cityscape that mirrors the homogenous design of developments across the United States. In Luthringer's Ridgemont time and place are generic rather than specific, but we can assume that these architectural forms and ornamentation date from the beginning of the 21st century, in newly minted strip malls located within suburban sprawl. The camera lens, relying on one-point perspective, fixes the position of the photographer/viewer in relation to the subject. These artists choose to make this relationship, among photographer, spectator, and subject, multifaceted.

Photographs can reveal our relationship to place, and provide a contextual-cultural, social, historical, personal. We continue to rely upon the camera lens to record our individual and collective experiences. In her discussion of Thomas Struth's photographs, historian Ann Goldstein remarks, "By self-consciously forefronting the process and ramifications of the act of looking--and seeing--Struth, too, engenders an active spectator, not through the strategy of distancing or playing with possible truths, but through intimacy that invites the spectator to share an interest in conditions that affect us as both observers and observed."⁴ Like Struth, these artists exhibiting in *locale* adopt strategies to engage the viewer in the act of seeing: Kristy Peet enlarges small details to pull the viewer in close; Danielle Avram slows down time to invite contemplation; Lupita Murillo Tinnen portrays subjects that remain hidden from view; while Mark Luthringer highlights details that escape everyday consciousness. The shared goal of these artists appears to be one of encouraging a heightened awareness, a sharpening of perception. From social issues to urban planning, these artists educate, comment, and foster discussion through their presentation of images.

Reflection on our relationship with the environment is the subject of works by Luther Smith and Danielle Avram. Luther Smith, of Fort Worth, Texas, for seven years has recorded the Trinity River, an under-represented feature of the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, extending beyond those boundaries to cover over 550 miles.⁵ His panoramas remind the viewer of our collective need to preserve our natural environment, a fragile wilderness that often exists, almost unnoticed, adjacent to urban centers. Smith's use of a panorama camera echoes the classic American landscape photography of 19th century practitioners such as Carleton Watkins--known for his use of a mammoth plate camera. Like Watkins, Smith explores bilateral symmetry, documenting a mirror image, a reflection of the monolithic form in *Trinity River at Northside Drive, Fort Worth, Texas*. Smith celebrates the elegant

Byrd Williams, *Blue Fence*, Dallas, Texas



MAY 2, 1990 #3 TRINITY RIVER OVER RT 34 ELLIS COUNTY TEXAS

Luther Smith, *Trinity River over RT 34*, Ellis County, Texas, 1990

composition and beauty inherent in the landscape, but he replaces the icons of the Yosemite Valley with skyscrapers of steel and light. The contrast between an expansive landscape and nocturnal city lights fuses references to the 19th century American frontier with the contemporary cityscape. Overhead delicate lines, produced from aircraft at night, score the sky. These markings, photographic records surpassing the capability of human vision, foster our meditation on the locale in which we reside. In *Trinity River over RT 34, Ellis County, Texas* a line of spectators gather to view a flooded highway, evidence of the ability of nature to overwhelm manmade structures. The river creates an expanse of reflected light. The viewer participates in shared amazement as the dotted lines of the roadway sink into the glass-like surface of the water.

Also invested in documenting the landscape is Canadian Danielle Avram, whose mesmerizing video of the Saskatchewan prairies, *Improved Earth*, evokes her own childhood memories, while emphasizing the experience of time. The beautiful yet harsh environment of the western Canadian prairies offers solitude with its expansive windswept vistas and the potential for a direct a connection to the land. Avram's project affirms her awareness of this contrast, as a former 12- year resident of the area, "Prairie residents respect the subtle beauty of their environment because they know how quickly it can disappear."

⁶ Danielle Avram's field recalls the one recounted by John Berger in *About Looking*; he states, an experience of a field "exists at a level of perception and feeling which is probably preverbal." ⁷ Avram strives to recreate this phenomenon, while acknowledging her upbringing in a sparsely populated landscape. The emptiness of the space and the sense of quiet provide a respite within the gallery. As Avram notes, " 'Improved Earth' refers to a now-obsolete term used by the Canadian government to describe the building of dirt roads in the western prairie provinces in the late nineteenth century. Improving earth by converting it into roads enabled the flow of agricultural production and created small communities across the region." ⁸ She documents the Great Sand Hills of Sceptre, Saskatchewan, a protected environment. Avram's *still* video describes subtle changes of textures captured by the frame. Her installation affirms

her response to the landscape, "The ability to see for mile upon mile is a special experience." ⁹ Gradual, undulating movement traverses the entire screen surface, as the wind transforms grass, clouds, and tree leaves. Different references to movement are depicted simultaneously within the video frame: the glacial speed of the clouds; the agitated, irregular waves of the tree leaves; and the consistent motion of the prairie grass. The fluctuations of the windspeed add another level of variation. The flickering sunlight and progression of clouds, which slowly dissipate in the sky, attest to a transformation over time. Berger states, " The visible extension of the field in space displaces awareness of your own lived time." ¹⁰ For a moment, the spectator becomes transfixed, transported to both a specific place, Canada, and to a memory of the shared experience of expansive sky and land.

Danielle Avram, *Improved Earth*



Diane McGurren, *Rural Notions, Parker County, Future Texas Diesel Power*





Artists Dylan Vitone, Diane McGurren, and Lupita Murillo Tinnen document communities. The long digital panoramas of Dylan Vitone pull the viewer onto the streets, and into the businesses, institutions, and recreation centers of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a once prominent urban center now located in the nation's rustbelt. Vitone shoots and digitizes film to generate his panorama compositions of the city where he resides. Each frame records events to render a narrative on the hopes and despairs of these urban inhabitants. From interiors of a small shop, meeting room, school, and roller derby to street scenes of concert goers, summer revelers, and train workers, Vitone strives to present an expansive document of the city. He includes elderly shopkeepers and young debutantes. In *Medallion Ball*, rows of women enveloped in silky white fill the interior of a room, their presence exuding optimism. The future community leaders and mothers of the next generation of Pittsburgh residents pose demurely, turn in hesitation, or return the camera's gaze with confidence. By contrast, in *Dockfight*, the barren space suggests a lack of energy, perhaps frustration, among teenage residents of an urban center lacking a clear vision. The repetitive appearance of the young men suggests the sameness of everyday life, leading to boredom, demonstrated by an empty staring and squinting back at the camera. Finally, in *Prize Catch*, the aimless teens of *Dockfight* reappear to witness a fish just pulled from the river, serving as a symbol of opportunity. Vitone's uncanny ability to raise Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" to the power of ten, combining multiple points of view from a single location, expands upon the tradition of street photography. Here the document of place becomes complex; the final image now records the space surrounding the photographer and reveals events that have unfolded over time. Vitone describes how the city and its residents respond to a local economy affected by deindustrialization, by striving to diversify and reinvent themselves.¹⁰

Diane McGurren of Weatherford, Texas, documents the enduring traditions of townships within Parker County, areas "which seem to resist progress."¹² Her combination of image and text provides a narrative; timeless visions of Texas myth are interrupted, on occasion, by the mingling of a pioneer past with contemporary culture of the present. The practice of the rodeo, at the center of culture in Texas rural areas such as Parker County, is experienced at twilight. In *Rural Notions, Parker County: Future Texas Diesel Power* the silhouette of a young boy riding a mechanical bull suggests the conflicting desires among a younger generation--exposed to the rush of bull riding as well as video games. Traditions, to be continued, must be shared, practiced, and handed down to the next generation. The silhouette, a shadow cut-out of the boy's figure, suggests a hesitancy in terms of predicting the future of bull riding. The small figure, overwhelmed by the sky, raises one hand, proof of his tenacious grip on the saddle. The image also documents the act of raising one's hand, to volunteer, to contribute to the preservation of these customs in the rural American West. McGurren includes lines of wall text in her installation providing views of the "myth" of rural Texas from different perspectives--first person account and third-person commentary. She crafts language to augment the visual with sounds from the landscape--cattle and cicadas--to provide a multilayered description of Parker County.¹³

In her color photographs Lupita Murillo Tinnen of Plano, Texas, provides snippets of domestic interiors, framed details of the everyday, to portray the culture of recent immigrants from Mexico. For Murillo Tinnen the home becomes the "protective space" for undocumented immigrants. "Unable to step out and see everything, the viewer sees these details from inside the protective space, looking outward."¹⁴ Murillo Tinnen embraces shallow depth of field, rendering the details of personal objects and interior decor, while the rest of the domestic interior appears out of focus or becomes cropped entirely. In *maniqui* a mannequin head appears on a vanity dresser, implying that the owner, represented as a blurred female figure in blue, works as a beautician. The objects become the literal references to these individuals, who partially conceal their identity. The immigrants are positioned beyond the lenses' depth of field or camera frame, hidden from view, so the spectator obtains limited information about the subject. The lens approximates the restricted spaces inhabited by these undocumented workers, and by extension acknowledges our limited ability to fully comprehend their lives--as residents of one country and citizens of another. Similarly in *sonando*, the reliance on blurred motion renders the figure indistinct. In each case we are reminded of the presence of the subject through indirect means. *sonando* presents a sheer, ruffled drape, which frames the gold floral pattern of the bed linens. The mirror on the back wall appears in focus but presents an empty reflection. The devices used by Murillo Tinnen are conventions that encourage the spectator to look closely, but upon inspection the view is circumscribed.

Kristy Peet, Byrd Williams, and Mark Luthringer encourage viewers to become more aware of how they perceive space, especially in the context of daily life. The difficulty of locating oneself in an environment, "about being far away from what is familiar,"¹⁵ is referenced by Houston artist Kristy Peet. Her enlarged views prompt us to reconsider our everyday intimate surroundings--a bathroom drain, a bed pillow--and the process of "acclimating" to an unfamiliar space. Images from the *Uncertain* series suggest "the theme of being rooted versus being completely untethered."¹⁶ Fragments from personal spaces are ones that we see daily, as in the unmade bed. The disheveled sheets and pillows suggest transition. The folds of the sheets and depression in the mattress and pillow are molded to conform to the shape of a human body, emphasized through the use of shallow depth of field. These small intimate spaces are near, yet imply an emptiness. The locations of the bathtub and bed accumulate a record of the inhabitant, through the shedding of skin or hair. Delicate strands of hair are caught by the drain, near a circle of rust, isolated against a field of white porcelain. Likewise, a pricked and bleeding finger documents a small but painful event, and evidence of human presence. The spattering of red blood defines an irregular shape against a stark field of white and black. The *Uncertain* series records events, situations in a state of flux, minute fragments of human existence in a personal and intimate space.

Byrd Williams emphasizes visual perception in his cityscapes of the Dallas, where he resides. His abstract mapping of space achieved through careful framing and image sequencing offsets detailed photographic illusions of urban architecture, rendered by the camera lens. He engages the viewer to re



spond to the complex visual record he describes in his triptychs, rather than emphasizing the city itself. Williams explores some of the same techniques as Thomas Struth, investigating the possibilities of proximity and distance, prompting the viewer to reflect upon urban spaces and their sense of confinement. A brick wall stops our path; a rail guard limits our passage. The navy metal rail in *Blue Fence, Dallas, Texas* traverses three separate frames documenting downtown Dallas from different vantage points. The blue line that Williams "draws" through all three frames, to provide a method of image alignment, exploits optical illusion. At the same time the horizon line within each frame exists at a different height. Experiments with perspectival systems and serial imagery fosters the spectator's reflection on optics, vantage point, and the photographer's use of framing and composition. Conventional architectural photographs tend to emphasize one-point or two-point perspective. In Williams' *White Wall, Dallas, Texas* a brick plane obstructs the central view, which pushes the eye toward two adjoining panels, leading in separate directions. An arrow sign extends this play by guiding the eye back into the center panel. Implied is the existence of an unseen road behind the wall, connecting the two streets. Williams produces "segmented spatial constructions" informed by the processes of abstraction involved in Analytical Cubism, the reduction of three-dimensional forms to two-dimensions.¹⁷ His three panel *White Wall* alternates between deep and flat space, leading the viewer into a complex visual puzzle.

The concept of locale, a place with specific features or characteristics, is challenged by the work of Mark Luthringer, of Oakland, California. His *Ridgmont Typologies* series, the product of his obsessive collection of architectural details in newly built communities, suggests that we may be entering a world where "sense of place is being obliterated." His fictitious city Ridgmont represents Anytown, USA, "all places being one place."¹⁸ With Luthringer, the work embraces the really familiar, the totally banal, the invisible field of vision in our suburban environments, populated by structures designed by anonymous corporate architects.

Luthringer describes the series as a response to consumer culture: The typological array's inherent ability to depict prevalence and repetition make it the perfect technique for examining the excess, redundancy, and meaningless freedom of our current age of consumption. My underlying intent with this work is to answer the question implied by the title of Robert Adams's book *What We Bought*: If there is some kind of big sellout occurring, what are we getting in the deal?¹⁹

Luthringer's typologies continue the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, adopting the grid format to invite viewers to analyze each set through noticing contrasts and similarities within each set. However, rather than archiving the disappearing industrial landscape like the Bechers, Luthringer documents new structures, which point to our collective resignation to the sameness of strip malls. His archive of *Menu Boards* goes one step further, suggesting that the predictable nature of architectural ornamentation seen in new developments parallels the menu selection at ubiquitous drive-thrus. We are what we consume, on levels both visual and culinary. The *Menu Boards* serve as a tablet,



Kristy Peet, *Uncertain (finger)*

a marker, without presenting a new message. Pulling up to the fast food menu, the purchaser become part of the assembly line, by ordering from a limited range of choices. Rather than become discouraged by this overwhelming depiction of monotony, blogger Amara Holstein affirms, "we prefer to see it as a challenge; a call to arms to start changing this bleak landscape, one building at a time."²⁰ Luthringer pushes his collections to the limit, to reveal the predictable nature of these mass-produced designs, and of our shared environment. If every place looks like any place, then how do we identify where we are or who we are?

Together these artists complicate rather than simplify our notion of landscape, cityscape, interior, by providing multi-faceted views of environments that challenge our preconceptions. They uncover the invisible--located right around the corner, readily accessible to the unaided eye.

--Marilyn Waligore, 2007

¹ Jonathan Lipkin, *Photography Reborn*. New York: Abrams. 2005. 6.

² Lipkin 9.

³ Daniel Birnbaum, "Paradise Reframed." *Artforum*. May 2002: 145.

⁴ Ann Goldstein, "Portraits of Self-Reflection." *Thomas Struth, 1977- 2002*, essays by Douglas Eklund, et. al. Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art. 2002. 172

⁵ "The Trinity River." Texas Christian University Press. 7 Sept. 2007. <http://www.tamu.edu/upress/books/1997/trinity.htm>

⁶ Danielle Avram, Artist's statement, 2007.

⁷ John Berger, "Field." *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon Books. 1980. 193.

⁸ Avram.

⁹ Avram.

¹⁰ Berger 197.

¹¹ Dylan Vitone, Artist's statement, 2007.

¹² Diane McGurren, Artist's statement, 2007.

¹³ Diane McGurren, email to the author, 7 Sept. 2007.

¹⁴ Lupita Murillo Tinnen, Artist's statement, 2007.

¹⁵ Kristy Peet, Artist's statement, 2007.

¹⁶ Peet.

¹⁷ Byrd Williams, Artist's statement, 2007.

¹⁸ Mark Luthringer, personal interview, 5 July 2007.

¹⁹ Mark Luthringer. "Ridgemont Typologies." Homepage. 7 Sept. 2007
<<http://www.markluthringer.com/RidgemontTypologies/taillights.html#>>

²⁰ Amara Holstein. "Images of Suburbia." 31 May 2007. Dwell Blog. 7 Sept. 2007
<<http://www.dwell.com/daily/blog/7679902.html#>>

Byrd Williams, *White Wall*, Dallas, Texas





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Gallery Talk

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Lupita Murillo Tinnen
(above) *sonando*
Dylan Vitone (upper front)
Prize Catch, detail
Mark Luthringer
(lower front) *Menu Boards*

