

HOUSE AND GARDEN

A Thesis

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by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
House and Garden.....	1
Images.....	5
Vita.....	18

LIST OF FIGURES

1	Claiborne	6
2	Tesh.....	6
3	Ruth.....	7
4	Knot Tree.....	7
5	Tie Down.....	8
6	Gypsy.....	8
7	Samurai.....	9
8	St. Claude.....	9
9	Strangle Cactus.....	10
10	Mrs. Huber.....	10
11	Hairdresser.....	11
12	Lavinia.....	11
13	Tire Cactus.....	12
14	Burgundy.....	12
15	Friend.....	13
16	Mr. Red	13
17	Mama.....	14
18	Firehouse.....	14
19	Nikia.....	15
20	OHC Pigeon.....	15
21	Eugene.....	16
22	Edmo’s Neighbor.....	16
23	Treme Religion.....	17

ABSTRACT

The photographs I make chronicle a chronic search for a home and the meaning behind the concept of home. Part landscape, part architecture, my pictures are actually still-lives that represent people. Personalized spaces, architectural oddities, attempts to control nature thwarted; these situations fascinate me and move me. My approach is empathetic.

HOUSE AND GARDEN

"I'm gonna go to Slidell to look for my joy." Lucinda Williams

I'd prefer you didn't, but I suppose you could call it a mid-life crisis. Life looked good on paper. Job, relationship and home seemed enviable. But the apparition that's commonly referred to as happiness is fragile and fleeting. It arrives when you least expect it, and God forbid you try to hang onto it. A time for change had come.

I moved my bed from room to room in my New York apartment. Then I demolished a wall and put my bed there. Unsatisfied, I acquired a car and live in it still at times. A trailer in Western Florida that had belonged to my grandparents provided solace one winter until a friend in New Orleans offered her place for a while. I moved to New Orleans and found a dog. Another friend offered her grandmother's house in University Hills near the LSU campus when I started my studies in Baton Rouge. When they sold that house, I relocated to the student ghetto on State Street. For a while I entertained the idea of an Airstream trailer in Gonzalez, but it seemed indulgent, so I took quarters in a remote complex that had a disturbingly small swimming pool which invited meditation, but not bathing. This period was concurrent with the high season of the Baton Rouge serial killer so I thought it prudent to return on weekends to the relative safety of Orleans Parish where I eventually bought a house. Along the way I made some photographs.

The photographs I make chronicle a chronic search for a home and the meaning behind the concept of home. Part landscape, part architecture, my pictures are actually still

lives that represent people. As a transplant to the South, I have an outsider's view of these scenes. While the curiosity that I bring to the subject certainly has Romantic roots, my aim is to represent it frankly and without censure (despite the inherently censorial nature of photography). I reinforce a grass roots creativity that inspires those who make it and who view it. The ways in which people make sense of their environment are sometimes strange and occasionally touching. Personalized spaces, architectural oddities, attempts to control nature thwarted; these situations fascinate me and move me. My approach is empathetic.

In the early nineties I worked in New York City at *Parents Magazine* as a photo editor. As a thank you for an assignment that I had commissioned I received a volume of photography called *Magnum Landscape*. The legendary Magnum agency was founded in 1947 - more than a century after photography was invented - and its photographers favored the ease of the 35mm camera for making pictures of war, the seaside, or the corner store. They were, for the most part, journalists. The book contained a wide variety of landscapes and the stories they told to these people. It countered the impression that I had formed of classical landscapes that were executed with large format cameras and had originally imitated 19th century painting. I was most taken with some selections in color by Bruno Barbey and Ernst Haas which began to expand my perception of the role of the landscape photographer.

Some time later I was sent a very small book called *Through the Eyes of a Child*. The photographs were taken by children with donated disposable cameras and published to raise

money for charity. They were vivid, raw and undoubtedly honest. The attraction that children naturally have to color and the freedom with which they interpret their world marked the book with a fearlessness that I envied. It was not the idea “if a child can do it...” that I was taken with; it was a sense of possibility and purity of intent.

On the other hand, one of the reasons that I moved away from the city and came to the South was so that I might stop being influenced by the media, other photographers and trends in the field. Not that I would discontinue my education, but that I could possibly stop looking over my shoulder and try to be honest about what my subject matter could and would be. People have often asked me why I moved to Louisiana, and my answer is invariably, “I’m taking the cure.” This could be, and has been, interpreted on many levels. But the main point was to cleanse my palate visually and to shake off any preconceptions concerning a life well led.

Recently, I read an essay about Georgia O’Keefe. The essay concentrated on the efforts that she made to be honest to herself and to her perception while working in New York and tell of her eventual flight to Texas. “O’Keefe is neither crusty nor eccentric. She is simply hard, a straight shooter, a woman clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees.”¹ Her persona, documented and sentimentalized by Steiglitz, had nothing to do with her work. And she found, in turn, that the art circle that she was surrounded by in New York stood ready to compartmentalize her work with the character that they had assigned to her. Now, I have not been documented nor, to my knowledge, romanticized, but I do find a

¹ Didion, Joan, The White Album, “Georgia O’Keefe”, (1979). New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

thread of common thought and action in the essay that directly relates to the process that I set for myself. True, I put myself in the position of being scrutinized by returning to the academic arena, but by leaving the media frenzy that is New York I gave myself the space and time to discern what was honest in my work.

One of the first photographs that fit the bill for this body of work is *Ruth* (Fig.3). When I came across the scene, a white and yellow house with a dead tree painted white in the front yard, I was struck by the stubborn optimism of the homeowner's approach. To take a photograph of the yard wouldn't be enough to convey the spirit of the project. What I perceived as an impulse by this individual to impose order onto her environment, I chose to reinforce with the formal structure of this image. I continue to make pictures with this aim in mind.

America is a nation obsessed with home improvement. *House and Garden* offers an alternative to the menu served by glossy magazines and celebrates individuality. Nobody would paint their house and fence to match their car because they thought it was the right way to do it. (Fig.17) They did it because it brought them great joy. And it shows. The straightforward nature of the subject matter has a direct correlation to the approach of these photographs. The square format that I favor is a stamp of the foot, a period. The color is an exclamation point and the cropping so that you might hear me better.

I'm still working on my house. I'll show you a picture.

IMAGES



Figure 1: Claibourne



Figure 2: Tesh



Figure 3: Ruth



Figure 4: Knot Tree



Figure 5: Tiedown



Figure 6: Gypsy



Figure 7. Samurai



Figure 8. St. Claude



Figure 9: Strangle Cactus



Figure 10: Mrs. Huber



Figure 11: Hairdresser



Figure 12: Lavinia



Figure 13: Tire Cactus



Figure 14: Burgundy



Figure 15. Friend



Figure 16. Mr. Red



Figure 17: Mama

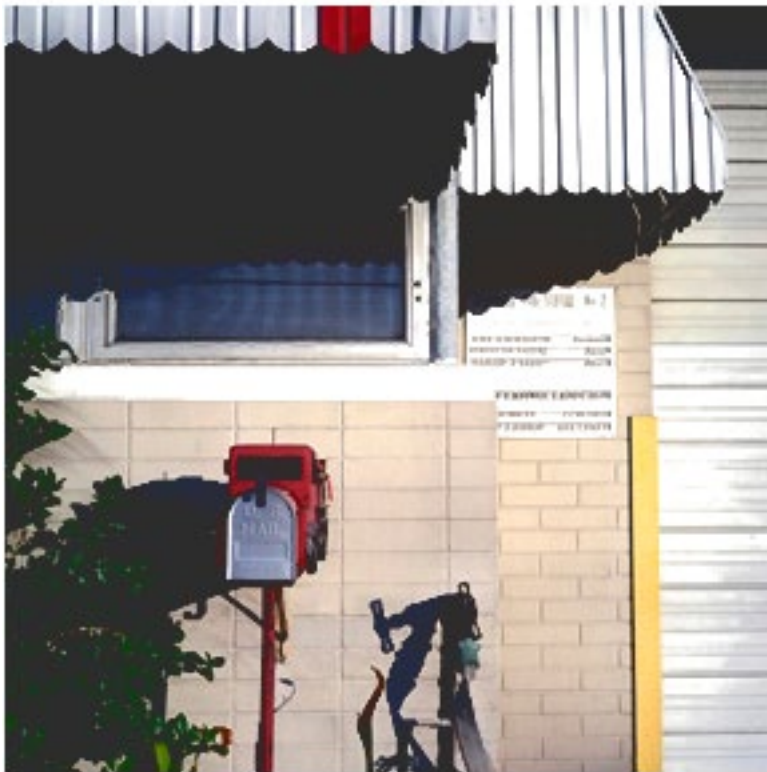


Figure 18. Firehouse



Figure 19: Nikia



Figure 20: OHC Pigeon



Figure 21: S. Eugene



Figure 22: Edmo's Neighbor



Figure 23: Treme Religion

VITA

Since receiving a bachelor of arts degree in visual arts from the State University of New York at New Paltz in 1984, Patricia Cassidy has studied at Pratt Institute, The School of Visual Art, and The International Center of Photography. For fifteen years she had a successful career as a photo-editor/producer in New York City. In 2001 Ms.Cassidy moved to southern Louisiana to pursue her photographic interests and currently lives in New Orleans with a catahoula cur called Gil.

NOTICE OF DOCUMENT CHANGE:

This vita has been changed at the request of the author December 5, 2011. Changes approved by dean of The Graduate School.