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The Shape of a Semester: Exploring a Photographer's Intuition

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SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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Department: MABE (Mechanical, Aerospace, and Biomedical Engineering)

Faculty Mentor: Baldwin Lee - Art

PROJECT TITLE: The Shape of a Semester: Exploring a Photographer's Intuition

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: [Signature], Faculty Mentor

Date: 5-6-7-03

Comments (Optional):
The Shape of a Semester:
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Abstract

This project is a representative sampling of my creative efforts as a photographer. My goal was to explore my natural instincts and intuition as a photographer. I began by examining my previous work and recognizing the merits in it. After spending a semester taking and developing pictures, I have improved my technical skills both with the camera and in the darkroom. I found two major themes in my work: shape and relationships between people. I learned that my best work is done with people as my subjects. I also learned that my instinct is planned, not spontaneous; that is, I attend an interesting event with the purpose of taking pictures, instead of taking pictures of interesting subjects at random times and places.
The Shape of a Semester:
Exploring a Photographer's Intuition

Grace Harrington

Wednesday, May 7, 2003
Introduction

I first acquired an interest in photography when my parents gave me a fully manual camera for my thirteenth birthday. My dad is an excellent amateur photographer, and was excited that we shared the same interest. I learned about light, setting the camera’s aperture and shutter speed, working with moving and still subjects. I loved every minute of it. I was fascinated by the camera’s ability to freeze a moment in time, down to 1/2000 of a second, and the interesting images that resulted.

Though I used my photographic skills through high school (as a yearbook staff member) and college (working with the rowing team scrapbook), the first opportunity I had to use a darkroom was in Photography I, which I took in the fall semester of 2001. Learning to develop and print my own photographs opened a door into a totally new aspect of photography for me. I had used black and white film before, but never with such consistency or intensity as that semester.

Last fall, as I contemplated potential subjects for my senior honors project, I realized that I wanted to branch out into something different from the topics relative to my major (Biomedical Engineering) or future career (medicine). My immediate instinct was to turn back to my beloved pastime of photography. I signed up for Photography II, both to take the class for its own sake and to aid in my work for my senior honors project.

For Photo I and II, I was fortunate to have the same instructor, Baldwin Lee. He agreed to serve as my faculty mentor for this project. When we discussed possible topics for my project, I had considered trying to focus on one specific idea or theme as I took pictures this semester. Baldwin suggested a better idea, which was to take any pictures, following my intuition as to what subjects to photograph. Later, I could find themes in my work. With this in mind, I have been able to take pictures of whatever my instinct told me would be an interesting photograph, no matter how disconnected the subjects were to each other. I have also improved my technical skills with the camera, such as composition and exposure, and in the darkroom, such as printing and borders.
Recognizing that the best teacher in photography is one's own work, I have used class critiques and suggestions from my pictures to move forward, building on my strengths through the semester. I look back on this time and see two major themes in my work from the semester: shapes and relationships between people.
Photographs

Analyzing a whole semester of photography was a very different experience than simply choosing the best of my work. I was able to look at all my work at the same time and look for themes in the pictures. It was difficult to choose not simply what I considered were the most successful photographs, but instead to look at them as representative of themes and the progression of those themes through the semester.

The two themes I found were shape and relationships between people. In the first set of photographs, the shapes of the subjects are explored. The photographs are more than just a picture of an object; they are an investigation into the shape of that object, and why that object is interesting. Several different techniques, including composition, depth of field, and perspective, are used to accentuate the shapes explored.

The second theme is relationships between people. In the second set of photographs, people are presented not as mere portraits but as emotional beings interacting with one another. Some of the same factors from the shape theme come into play, such as composition and depth of field. With a more difficult subject, however, these photographs better show my abilities and instincts as a photographer.
Shape

In the following photographs, the theme of shape is explored. The photographs are ordered chronologically.
Relationships Between People

In the following photographs, the theme of relationships between people is explored. The photographs are ordered chronologically.
Conclusions

By far, my favorite pictures from the semester have been those with people as my subjects. I have learned that people are some of the most difficult, but the most rewarding, subjects to photograph. I also learned that I am very non-spontaneous in my photography. At Baldwin’s suggestion, I carried a camera with me almost wherever I went for about a month; however, I took less than a roll of film. I do my best work when I decide ahead of time to take pictures of an event, then attend the event without preconceived notions of what the pictures will look like, but exploring the event with a fresh eye and an open mind. In the future, I hope to use my experience with this project as a foundation for further work with people as my subjects, and investigate various aspects of representing people in photography.