Intervals

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Abstract

*Intervals* investigates the complexities of visual perception, using the camera as a tool to document time and light. The photograph is a restricted experience dually existing as a physical impression of light onto a surface and a fixed representation that makes light tangible. Using time and light as my subject and ritualistic gathering as my methodology, I explore the complexities of control and perception as they relate to photography. I collect images of everyday occurrences; and then use those as material to both compress and expand time. I do this to interrupt our understanding of it. Documenting time through mundane moments creates room for viewers to spend time looking at and understanding how light can be perceived and represented in unexpected ways.
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Introduction

Using time and light as my subjects and ritualistic gathering as my methodology, I explore the complexities of perception and systematic ‘looking’. Seeing through a viewfinder is a dichotomy, both revealing and restricting, as it shows everything but through a controlled frame. A photograph shows a distilled moment, a version of the truth, in a way that allows for investigation. Photographing within a system of collecting creates parameters that allow for a specific approach to a study of perception. Rearranging images to explore new ways of how time can be viewed challenges our understanding of the role of the camera in ‘seeing’. The entirety of the process of collecting and curating an image that depicts light and time destabilizes perception and interrupts the viewing process. Light and time are constantly in flux and not something we often think about in a concrete way. In Reductionism in Art and Brain Science, Eric Kandel breaks down and compares the process of scientific study and abstract art in terms of perception and understanding. “As it pertains to vision, perception is the process whereby reflected light becomes linked to an image in the environment, is made enduring by the brain, and becomes coherent when the brain assigns it meaning, utility and value”.¹ It is accepted that things are always changing, yet in our fast-paced and image saturated world I am asking both myself and the viewer to slow down and invest time in understanding and questioning their awareness.

In addition to questioning perception through a scientific approach, I found influence in the thought process behind ritualistic making and looking. Jenee Mateer uses repetitive imagery and post-process manipulation to draw attention to our position in the world and our

understanding of it. Her work is accompanied by poems that preface the images and put the
viewer into a contemplative state of mind as they view the work page by page. A section from
the poem “The Sky is Lemonlime” provided significant influence to the development of the role
of ritual in my own processes.

Light marks the passage of time.
Color punctuates experience,
gives rhythm to our dance.
Perception of place is colored
by circumstance and re-made
by memory into the here and now,
the sometimes was and the soon to be.2

I am interested in creating photographic objects that leave room for interpretation and can
function as both a study of a specific subject but also the creation of new compositions.
Reducing photography down to its essential parts and using light as a fundamental component
creates both an openness and a specificity to the process and its results.

2 Jenee Mateer, “The Sky is Lemonlime,” in Breaking Boundary: Places Real and Imagined
(Staunton: George F. Thompson Publishing, 2018), 47.
Method and Motivation

There are many layers of repetition in both the making and viewing of the work that become reminiscent of both routine and meditation. The act of photographing itself has become an everyday ritual that plays a role in my understanding and reflection of the work. The photographs are collected, organized, displayed, reoriented, manipulated and re-displayed in new ways each time. They are looked at over and over again throughout the entire process and each finished product becomes part of a larger collection that can then be seen through a new context each time. I photograph ordinary, everyday occurrences such as sunrises, thunderstorms, and reflections of light on different surfaces. By presenting an experience that can be defined as a moment – however mundane – into unique parts, I expand time and question the function or value of time inside observation.

Light is a fundamental aspect of how both the camera and our eyes perceive what is in front of them. Breaking time and light into frames that capture a singular moment allows for contemplation through a reductionist approach. As Kandel states, “That is, rather than depicting an object or image in all of its richness, [it is deconstructed], focusing on one or, at most, a few components and finding richness by exploring those components in a new way”.3 By simplifying things down to their most basic parts, complex ideas can be investigated and understood from a different perspective. The impression that light leaves creates an image for both our eyes and the camera. My compositions explore changes in the color, shape, and movement of light. Light becomes the actual focal point in the prints while it is actually represented by mere pigment on a surface. Many of the photographs are inverted and in

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grayscale to remove peripheral distractions and allow the negative space to surround the subject. The light in the images is the ink laid down on paper, as opposed to the absence of it which would normally show the highlights of an image.

Systems and collecting play an important role in the making and viewing of this work. Each series investigates a recurring event and its photographic outcome is arranged in a variety of ways from grids, to moving images, to three-dimensional representations. As if a science experiment, I set up parameters for how these events are photographed. Creating this process allows for visual consistency, which highlights differences in what is changing from composition to composition. My collection of such imagery and its varying interpretations of light interrupt the viewer and break down the processes of photographing, looking, and perceiving.

The same sets of photographs take on many different forms throughout the work, being shown as grids, moving images, and stacked frames. Each system of presentation offers a new understanding of the subjects and the light they are documenting. In “The Image of Time” by Teju Cole he discusses William Christenberry’s photographs of the American South and their depiction of the passage of time. Cole states that, “What is different is not the subject but the time it was photographed. Looking at such a series confirms that when you make one photograph and, some time later, make another of the same thing, what is inside the frame changes. With the passage of time, you no longer have ‘the same thing’.”

Although Cole discusses ‘taxonomic or typological’ collections of photographs, where the subject remains the same with minute differences, a little differently, a similar argument could be applied to my approach. I am interested in exploring somewhere in the middle of the two ‘types’ of repetitive imagery. By

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compulsively photographing both the same subject matter within a predetermined system the results show a different understanding of time and light.

I am interested in visual perception, specifically the differentiation between what it means to ‘look’ and to ‘see’. To look at something is to direct your eyes towards it, while to see something is to perceive what is before you. Perceiving necessitates viewer input; it is active not passive. My goal is to manipulate the attention of the viewer by moving the process of looking into the act of seeing, thereby compelling the viewer to actively participate with the image. If one becomes aware that they are looking, they have the opportunity to reflect and then ‘see’ what they have been looking at. Viewers have more opportunity to enter the work not considering a specific message, but rather ambiguity, and see things in a way that only an image can offer. In Another Water, Roni Horn offers a collection images of the surface of the River Thames along with footnotes that range from personal accounts, to stories, to questions and musings about the images and what they contain. Although water is clearly recognizable, she is asking viewers to get past what is represented visually and access the unseen. Not only is her process of making based on repetition and ritual, but the viewing also becomes cyclical for the spectator. In footnotes 270 and 817 she states:

This is an image of water. When you look at it, as you are probably doing now, you are looking at paper, and there is no necessary relationship between the two. Yet the paper floats the image of water or facilitates it, and you see before you a water without wetness. As with all images, you imagine what you’re looking at and in doing so grasp it.5

Horn invites viewers to participate in her process of looking and thinking by offering both a visual and written prompt for the viewer to consider. Similarly, my work pushes the idea of looking through a system using experimentation, with different methods of collecting and

5 Roni Horn, Another Water: The River Thames, for Example, (Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2011), footnotes 270 and 817.
presentation, that ask the viewer to invest their time into understanding a new view of the everyday. Horn’s writings feel like a stream of consciousness to the viewer and offer a glimpse into her thoughts throughout the process. This style is present in my own thoughts and resonates with my processes of making, but rather than present the viewer with my own words, I aim to curate an experience that provokes an internal reflection. In looking at repetitive imagery, one inherently begins to compare and notice differences and eventually moves on to more abstract thoughts and questioning that is unique to each person.
Presentation

*Intervals* is comprised of many modes of representation and each of the pieces is composed of multiple images that are documenting recurring events. The variety of compositions collectively creates a dynamic experience and allows the pieces to address light and time in a multitude of ways. I am interested in not only studying ordinary events but looking at them systematically and repetitively to show both their similarities and differences. Light moving across walls, sunrises, and thunderstorms are just a few of the everyday events that I document regularly. The exploration of time as a tangible subject matter results in a visually abstract image, and abstraction leaves room for the viewer to look past representation. Time as a physical object points back at the camera as a tool for observation that works differently than the eye. By methodically documenting moments of change, things can be slowed down and the way we understand and interact with our surroundings can be investigated. Time is depicted in the work in a variety of ways that ranges from moving images to physical space that is taken up by both two-dimensional and three-dimensional pieces.

In the *Storm Series*, a thunderstorm is photographed with ten seconds between each image over sunrise or sunset for as long as the storm is predicted to last. The final piece consists of the arrangement of the images in a grid that creates a singular image composed of many (Fig. 1). It offers the opportunity to take in a large span of time at a glance while also creating an alternative landscape for the viewer to invest themselves in. The largest of the storm pieces is composed of five, forty by sixty inch panels, that take up an entire section of the wall (Fig. 2). This extreme scale allows the viewer to more closely examine the individual frames that make up the entirety of the work. With benches present in front of most of the works, viewers are invited to sit and take in an alternate perception of a thunderstorm. Of the current twenty-eight
pieces that exist in the series, four were selected to be shown as smaller scale pieces to show the ritualistic process of photographing storms. They demonstrate the similarities and differences that can result from the routine of documenting a singular event.

The grids, stacked frames, and moving works are all composed of photographs of light and shadows on the wall. The images themselves repeat in the different representations and offer an alternative understanding of the same event. The time between images is based on how fast the light is changing. While some expand a short and fast moment of time, others compress longer and slower movements. The grids are the most straightforward presentation of the images of light and are vinyl placed directly on the wall. Of the three grids present in the space, two are in color and located near projections that show the same set of images (Fig. 3). The third is a singular line of black and white images that face the stacked frames (Fig. 4). Similar to the storms, the two sets of presentation allow for a different approach to each. The smaller grid can be viewed quickly as parts that make up a whole and the extended line can be viewed piece by piece as the viewer moves along the wall.

The moving images present are stop motion videos comprised of hundreds of photographs used to expand a singular moment. A collection of fractions of a second create a direct reference to time in their duration as a video and also offer a controlled approach to view the way light can move. The stop motion animations include all the images collected and the presentation is comprised of photographs of light, displayed with light, that also interact with the light present in the space. The end result offers a layering of light and perception that is continually changing, despite its use of the same photographs. The viewing experience not only has the potential to change each time one is in the space but also offers the opportunity for the space to affect its presentation as it is displayed in new light settings.
The three-dimensionally stacked frames break down the moving images and represent a view of the same imagery that involves volume and distance. The inverted photographs printed on transparency depict only the light present in each of the frames without any of the other details that exist in the space. They present both time and light as physical entities that can be interacted with in a more physical way than the two-dimensional work. The perspective changes as the viewer moves which draws attention to the static nature of singular images and invites the viewer to compare and notice the way they perceive the same documented events (Fig. 5-6). The frames consist of seven to twenty photographs pulled from a larger collection of images taken over varying lengths of time. They are placed at eye level and allow the viewer to move around the pieces and continually see things from a new angle (Fig. 7). The layered transparency creates a suspended space that viewers can not only see through but also see how light interacts with and changes their perception.

Also present in the space is a site-specific piece that invites the viewer to sit and watch the light move across the wall in a manner similar to my process of documenting. There are black vinyl shapes that represent the placement of the window light on the wall on a specific day and time that will overlap with the light as it passes through the windows into the space (Fig. 8). Due to the earth's continual movement, the light will never overlap exactly, but the marks provide a physical representation of the light that can be used as a reference point. Time spent with the piece can vary, but the goal is to pose questions about ‘real’ time and what it would be like to sit and stare. Trying to see the subtle movements compared to the other experiences of time and light that are offered in the space provide the viewer with a moment to slow down and reflect or meditate on what is before them.
Discussion

Creating new ways of visualizing the everyday or mundane has been explored by many artists throughout time. Artists such as Claude Monet, John Baldessari, Penelope Umbrico and Meghann Riepenhoff have explored ideas that are in line with perception and understanding through looking at the everyday. These artists and their works have influenced me greatly in their ability to reframe the ordinary through repetition and systematic collections. Monet’s Water Lily and Haystack paintings inspired to me look repeatedly early on in my artistic career. It is a part of my practice that has continually made an appearance, even when unintentional. The process of perpetual looking to discover something new provides a challenge that essentially has no end and no right answer. Artists like Baldessari and Umbrico make work that appears orderly within a largely intuitive practice. The idea of setting up parameters to both make and collect photographs allows for a system of making and viewing that promotes a collaboration with our surroundings. There is partnership between artist and subject that is always in flux and creating a set of rules can break it down into work that look both outward and inward. The cyanotypes Riepenhoff creates are both meditative and abstract representations of how our surroundings interact with us. In a practice that has endless possibilities, rules or limitations can create an environment with more room to explore and investigate the tools we use to make and reflect.

I am interested in reorienting the way we see light as it interacts with our surroundings by methodically collecting images over varying spans of time. Light not only indicates the passage of time, but also creates and manipulates our sense and understanding of space. Similar to the qualities of light, Roni Horn describes water as ‘…a form of perpetual relation, not so much a
substance but a thing whose identity is based on its relation to other things…’.

While this idea relates to our understanding of light and space, we do not actually ‘see’ light as a physical being. We can only see because of light, but we also understand depth and shape based on how the light interacts with the objects surrounding us. The camera furthers this perceptual interpretation by flattening space that can be arranged into compositions which draw attention to light and time as objects.

I explore visual perception by drawing attention to how the eye sees differently, as opposed to a tool that simply documents light. This is not a question of whether the eye or the camera is more ‘correct’ or ‘better’, but rather I ask for the viewer to more broadly question how the perception of their surroundings are constructed. I am interested in the role the camera can play in breaking up the process of perception directly related to ordinary events that occur every day, such as light being reflected on a wall. The images are both documenting and reframing what is before them and allow for more time to be spent with a singular moment. Vija Celmins uses photographs as references to create drawings and paintings but describes the photo as being “an alternate subject, another layer that creates distance. And distance creates an opportunity to view the work more slowly and to explore your relationship to it.”

The presentation of all of the images rather than whichever the artist deems to be the ‘one’ or the ‘best’ puts some separation between the work and personal aesthetic of the artist. Importantly, encouraging perceptive interaction from a viewer is best accomplished by achieving objectivity in the work. While it is impossible to completely remove myself, maximal removal of the artists’ hand through

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7 Meredith A. Brown, “Vija Celmins: In the Artist’s Words,” in Vija Celmins: To Fix The Image In Memory, ed. Gary Garrells (Yale University Press, 2018), 234.
systemization for the final presentation presents the opportunity for ambiguity and discovery for both myself and the viewer. Systems provide rules to both follow and break as a viewer and a maker. They provide a baseline that allows for order and reason beyond intuition. Celmins is continually adjusting her process to challenge her understandings of perception. In describing her work, Briony Fer states that, “Placing the emphasis on the work’s abstraction pushes the discussion in the direction of her process and its capacity to confuse us.”

Likewise, I am interested in provoking a feeling and an experience that is unique to the set of images that are collected based upon a system of looking that leads to questioning perception.

The idea of collecting imagery under the principles of science and then implementing them in artistic practice is how Diedrich Diederichsen describes the expression of ‘third photography’ and answers the question, how often something exists in the world:

Countless times and just once. This is assumed in the scientific-journalistic act of fact-finding by way of a photographic apparatus, a camera, that physically and reliably documents a piece of the world as real. A piece of the world, once and once only. Countless times can only be the result of an act of reception, in which this once-and-once-only is read by someone who has seen something similar before. The series confirms him or her in this view, and other artistic measures reinforce the conviction. Of central importance here is the mode of art, which means: I’m willing to invest my time; I’m prepared to experience an object that reflects someone else’s interests; I give it my attention and don’t expect anything in return. As a recipient, I am generous. But then I do get something, after all – truth.

The ‘truth’ however is a subjective term and my goal is not to determine an ultimate truth through photography, but rather question how many ways something can be ‘true’.

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Alternatively, how many ways can one thing be represented or perceived within a photographic context.

Furthermore, there is a system present for the viewing experience that guides the viewer through the piece and on to the next. The moving images provide an infinite amount of time that can be spent with a piece while the gridded images provide an unending visual system for the eyes to follow and interpret the movement of time. Out of necessity, all of the works have some sort of beginning and end, but the order of viewing is not critical to the goal, rather the varied presentations provide a cyclical experience for the viewer to be involved in with no defined end. The grids flatten and order what is natural in a logistical way while also providing an illusion that creates a new image as a whole.\(^\text{10}\) Similarly, Liz Deschenes work explores the ‘difference between mechanical and human vision’ and how each viewer will experience something different interacting with objects, light, and space.\(^\text{11}\) She invites viewers to move uniquely with each piece and bring their personal experience and understanding to that specific interaction. In a similar vein, I am interested in the continually changing environment and how it can affect the viewing experience. As the light changes each day, so do the pieces themselves along with how viewers understand and perceive them. This continuous fluidity means that every time an image is taken in by a viewer, they inherently become a part of the process and the cycle continues to repeat itself.

There is much that can be learned from repeated investigation into a singular subject. The way we learn to live, understand, and survive is based on a system of repetition, response,


\(^{11}\) Eva Respini, “Mirror with a Memory,” in *Liz Deschenes* ed. Lucy Flint (Boston: DelMonico Books, 2016), 17
and reflection. Through this we learn to speak, to read, and gain a process by which to make new discoveries and apply them to the next set of things we wish to learn. The act of repeating actions is present in each of our artist practices and shows itself in many ways. I am interested in a very literal interpretation of repetition and understanding. Through repetition and installation, artists like Liz Deschenes are interested in challenging the notion of the image’s ability to encapsulate a moment through a single image. Influenced by her approach, I am pursuing a parallel idea through recurring images that push against the possibility of there being a single ‘decisive moment’. My artist practice consists of not only photographing the same events, but also looking at the same images and challenging myself to see them in a new way each time. I apply a similar process to many areas of my life and am driven by the infinite discoveries that I continue to make while looking, reading, listening, and watching the same things over and over. Learning is a cyclical process that has no beginning and no end but offers a different path for us all. In my work, I am inviting viewers to temporarily become a part of my ritualistic process of looking and documenting what is around me.
**Reflection**

Though *Intervals* represents a finished articulation of the work, it is also a pause that reveals that there are still many more avenues to explore. One of the things I am interested in testing is my own stamina as well as those of my viewers. Recently, questions of how long I can photograph the same subjects and how many times they can be looked at have become an integral part of my understanding of the making of the work. It is a test of endurance, like many things in life, and I am challenging myself as well as my viewers to stop and pose questions about how we spend time and how we understand what we see. This system can be applied to many facets of life and a multitude of different subject matters.

In another way, I am investigating how little content can be provided in an image and still provoke thought in a viewer. Through photographing the ordinary and mundane, there is a responsibility placed upon myself and invested viewers to take more time to notice what is around them and how they respond to or understand it. Questions of awareness and how it is measured have permeated the making and installation of the work. The challenge of noticing how one spends time and what they spend it ‘looking’ at. Throughout the installation, I made many decisions by responding directly to the space and spent a lot of time thinking about how much it affects the viewing experience. Moving forward, I imagine that this process will begin to play a much larger role in the work as it becomes more experiential and installation-based.
Bibliography


Appendix

Figure 1: Nicolette Bonagura, *Storm XVIII*, 40 x 27”, archival pigment print, 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 2: Nicolette Bonagura, *Storm XXI*, five 37 x 60” panels, archival pigment print, 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 3: *Intervals* (Gallery View) (pieces: *looking in, reflections – stop motion animation, reflections*), 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 4: Nicolette Bonagura, *Refractions*, twelve 16 x 20” vinyl prints, archival pigment print, 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 5: Nicolette Bonagura, *interruptions*, 12 x 9 5/8 x 66”, Baltic birch plywood and pigment on transparency, 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 6: Nicolette Bonagura, *impressions*, 15 x 7 3/8 x 63”, Baltic birch plywood and pigment on transparency, 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 7: Nicolette Bonagura, *Intervals* (Gallery View), 2020. (Image by Artist)
Figure 8: Nicolette Bonagura, *seeing through* (site-specific installation), 25 x 8’, black vinyl, 2020. (Image by Artist)