

The Patient Visitor: Recent work from Yale MFA Photography 2021
Organized by John Pilson

September 9 — September 20, 2020

Mickey Aloisio, Ronghui Chen, Tarah Douglas, Jackie Furtado, Max Gavrich, Nabil Harb, Dylan Hausthor, Annie Ling, Alex Nelson, Rosemary Warren

Curator's Statement

The Patient Visitor brings together work by a group of current students in Yale's MFA Photography Program where I have taught since the fall of 2001. The exhibition title is an attempt to capture something related to both our current moment and the allure (and opportunity) that photography continues to hold for artists concerned with temporality, critical attention, empathetic knowledge, and unexplored imaginations.

While the members of this small, intensely photo-centric community of artists mourned the world that requisite social distancing had scattered... it also appeared that the larger not so photo-centric world was suddenly probing some of the more burning philosophical questions familiar to artists and photographers: Is the internet a place? What are the virtues of physical schools, museums, galleries or art fairs? What can we survive without? What institutions are worth rebuilding, restructuring, and revising in a "back to the drawing board" future? The digital revolution and all our connectivities predate COVID-19 of course, but in both small and profound ways, the pandemic has demanded that we finally get around to reevaluating the still newish, experientially screen-based landscape, and the evolved relationships between cameras and bodies, pictures and experiences, mediums and messages.

Among the tragedies unique to the COVID-19 pandemic is the experience of – or simply the dread of imagining – being prevented from visiting a hospitalized friend or loved one; not being present for a birth or at the side of a dying parent; unable to touch, hold, or see a loved one; to not to be THERE for THEM.

I wouldn't suggest a prolonged comparison between hospital visits and "studio visits" beyond pointing out that there is no substitute for being there. I'll always jump at a chance to see musicians in rehearsal, especially classical musicians playing in jeans and t-shirts for the same reasons that I value the opportunity to encounter art in an artist's studio. Every year I attend thesis shows by graduating classes, and as I look at work by artists with whom I've worked for two years I think the same two thoughts: "Isn't this silence luxurious and appropriate after two years of chatter, critiques and presentations," and "I sure know a lot about this person but, in the end, it doesn't matter a bit... in fact I kind of envy the person that just gets to see this work and experience it without knowing anything at all."

These ten artists aren't finished with school and I'm not finished with them but here are few things I know and think and/or feel about each of them:

Dylan Hausthor

The classical pianist Glenn Gould once took to the airwaves in a sprawling, eccentric, and ultimately poetic sound collage titled "The Idea of North." Gould was from Toronto, Canada and as "North" in spirit as the island in coastal Maine where much of Dylan Hausthor's work and ideas have evolved. This photograph combines a wide range of Hausthor's concerns within a single image and gesture: nature and imagination... photography's visual duets

between light and darkness; between manual labour and photographic observation. Berthold Brecht said: "The essence of drama resides in the act of a man in the middle of tying his shoe." Hausthor's approach doesn't so much "blend fact and fiction" as recognizes the suggestive backdrops and quiet dramas, big personalities and moments of disorientation that come with lives lived closer to nature and in his neck of the woods. Art, craft, errands, and games all suggest activities with a beginning, middle, and end. Who knows what this woman is making in the dark? A self-portrait... a puppet? Photography is silent (duh) but occasionally it takes silence as its subject; maybe this photograph is capturing the silent moment just before this nearly finished gollum has had life breathed into it by its maker and begins to speak to her.

Ronghui Chen

These photographs have been selected from a project Chen produced during a period of near complete disorientation and decontextualization. Having swapped his familiar base of operation (and many of his personal subjects) on China's mainland for two years at Yale, Chen has plumbed the existential depths of one of the questions each applicant is asked, with sincerity and genuine concern, at their interviews: "Have you given any thought to what you might do in New Haven?" These photographs of "not quite moved into" and/or perennially transient student apartments at night; occupied and traversed only by a light that is deftly portrayed as transcending categories of "exterior" or "interior"; instead Chen's light appears to be an entity that neither cares nor knows where it is... only that it wants what it wants.

Rosemary Warren

"It's just pictures of people acting" was a favorite put-down/critique of Hollywood Cinema among Dziga Vertov and his crowd of revolutionary Russian art film pioneers. It's the "just" part that feels relevant to a description of Rosemary Warren's recent photographs. Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* managed to find equivalent drama in the street AND the editing room, in a speeding train AND in a camera tripod! While the sum total radical departures from a camera, a frame, a set, and a performance has expanded and challenged the medium... Warren's photographs are welcome reminders of the deceptively simple delights of "just" people, "just" acting and "just" photography. Some would argue that there is a fundamental difference between photographing "the world as it presents itself" and "fabricating photographs based on the imagination." Whatever the tradition (street photography, fashion) or convention (landscape, portraiture) it is ONLY their imagination that will save an artist who is interested in tradition and convention from producing traditional and conventional work. Each of Warren's recent photographs seem both mindful and embracing of the potential for failure and all the ways photography can refuse to be complicit in her fantasies. It's this combination make-believe and near forensic scrutiny that make these photographs both troubling and magical.

Alex Nelson

The great documentary filmmaker, D.A. Pennebaker was interviewed around the time that digital video cameras had become commonplace, and was asked how he felt about the fact that "now with all these inexpensive, easy to use, videocameras... anybody can make a film." Pennebaker smiled warmly and said something along the lines of "I think it's great!" and then, with a sly grin followed up with "well, y'know... there's a lot of pencils out there too... but not a lot of poets." Ubiquity is neither an obstacle nor source of interest when it comes to photography or desire. Alex Nelson's work reminds us that while there might be a lot of photographs of friends, strangers and lovers out there... there aren't a lot of gripping protagonists, larger than life characters or proper villains.

Mickey Aloisio

On my first trip to Italy I got lost and I had to stop a pedestrian on a dusty Tuscan road to ask directions. In order to give me a full explanation of the route I'd have to take, the elderly babushka woman had to put the two bags she carried on the ground in order to execute a series of gestures, and by the end she had hit just about every mark in the renaissance painting lexicon from *peità* to *adorazione*. It was a reminder that artist might use their imaginations but they are rarely "just making stuff up."

While Aloisio's expanding visual vocabulary freely ranges from the religious to the fetishistic, the resulting photographs inject doubt in places where neither devotional nor documentary images would find useful or appropriate. If all this has left me thinking that Aloisio might share some artistic DNA with Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe... it is critically balanced out by the influence of "unseen" and missing images, the ones that we've been asked to substitute with belief, to take on good faith like, say, the non-existent images of the killing of Osama Bin Laden or U.S. Government sanctioned torture... ideas without images that have played a critical role in the "sentimental education" of artists, such as Aloisio, weened on the internet and the post-9/11 landscape.

Nabil Harb

I don't think anything is necessarily spoiled or ruined when, at the end of the movie, we are given a mountain of evidence suggesting "Oz" was just a dream version of "Kansas." Nabil Harb's photographs (particularly this photograph's collision of ecology, biology, occupied territories, and other abstractions) leaves the impression of another movie... one where somebody, having a tough time in Oz, has a long and complicated dream about Kansas.

Tarah Douglas

Tarah Douglas "reads" surfaces and materiality like an alchemical text and she "speaks" in a spell-like visual language learned from scrutinizing and revising her body's appearance within photographs. From photograph to photograph Douglas's process and approach can feel akin to the less New Age and more historical, practical definition of "mysticism," wherein the seeker bypasses the ideology and convention, the congregation and the liturgy and contends with the source; the story behind the story, a practice where making things up isn't heresy at all but creative observance: inventing within invention, creating within Creation. Sounds highfaluting, I know, but part of Douglas's project is addressing the fact that, in our moment, "The imagination" has become difficult, embarrassing or worse: forbidden.

Jackie Furtado

What came first? Paranoia or Photography? Did the film version of "The Hunt for Red October" come out the same year that the Berlin Wall came down? If not then it was close, and certain things felt new while others things suddenly felt old. I remember seeing that film as an undergrad taking photography classes at Sarah Lawrence College, and being struck by the classical look of furtive, grainy black and white "spy photographs" that provide an early plot point in that Cold War film. I remember being incredulous... "Hasn't spy photography progressed since 1964?" and then feeling a kind of melancholic poignancy in the post-Soviet world, which would surely now find vast archives of filing cabinets overflowing with obsolete or just sort of pointless surveillance photographs.

Jackie Furtado's photographs similarly tease out essential style and subtext from within more than one of the medium's hardboiled day-jobs: the stakeout, the stalker, the joint being cased and the case being built. Somebody said: "In film noir, you know who the protagonist is because they are the only person who doesn't know what's going on." Furtado seems to have the ability to look at just about any corner, backyard or shopping mall parking lot (the more uneventful and dull the better) and describe each seen with the clarity of heightened suspicion and 'situational awareness.' While each of these individual photographs create their subject and atmosphere out of nothing more (or less) than purely photographic composition, Furtado's use of extended rhythmic image sequences introduces ideas of "composition" more familiar in music. And if this work WAS music... I'm guessing it would probably sound like a cross between Bernard Herrmann and Trent Reznor.

Annie Ling

Like Harrison Ford's character in "Blade Runner," Annie Ling often tests and probes (for and within) something called "empathy." Photography, like science fiction, continues to have big empathy issues. It's something critical and dangerous and we look for it, like a detectable substance, like a white cell count, particularly when it comes to photographers and their photographs because in "them" we see technology portraying humanity and how many times have we been warned that all the trouble with violent androids and murderous A.I. starts the moment somebody decides that machines should behave more like humans? Then again, as Ling's various projects often suggest: Asking humans to behave "more like humans" can provide an equally effective recipe for disaster.

Max Gavrich

They say "good design" disappears into the product... and it can seem that, for most audiences, there's a similar definition of "good photography"... it delivers content (artlessly or with a degree of flare) without drawing too much attention to itself. Just yesterday while browsing the feeds, I came across a post by a writer I enjoy who had written about a photographer I admire. The work under consideration consisted entirely of photographs the photographer had made, mostly on the subway; all crisp and legible close-ups of things people were writing, "thumbing" into their phones as text messages and emails. I still haven't read the writer's piece on this work as I'm still pouring over the spectacular amount of, mostly outraged, responses in the comments section of this post. I don't think courting controversy is at the top of this artist's list in his hopes for this work but if a week or a year goes by without photography causing a scandal... that will be the day photography finally becomes like all the other, older, and less troubling art forms. While I read the take-downs and accusations being hurled around in the "comments," I was reminded of what a professor/critic of mine used to say when the group critique of a student's work had gotten bogged down on issues of truth, ethics, exploitation and representation: "It's ALL a fiction. Now, let's talk about your photographs."

There are plenty of valid and totally understandable reasons for an artist seeking to avoid getting things wrong (or getting in trouble) by keeping their bleeding hearts off their sleeves, taking the emotional life and intimate experience out of their equations... I just don't believe any of those reasons would be valid or understandable to Max Gavrich.