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# Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place

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AGENCY PANIC: A RECKONING OF PLACE

By

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Bachelor of Science, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, South Dakota, 2013

Thesis

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ABSTRACT TEMPLATE (Delete these instructions.)

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Abstract Title

Chairperson: Elizabeth Dove

*Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* may be best described as a type of documentation of a conversation between the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness and myself, one where a mutual language is not spoken but one where some understanding can be reached none-the-less. By moving through the landscape without goals or intentions a physical exchange ensues, a push and pull, a call and response, intimacy is gained through tactile experience. Through the use of wet-plate collodion photography I am able to create imagery that engages directly with the place. Its vulnerability records a conversation between two acting powers, artist and land, the images becomes a record of the agency of the place. The research behind the work investigates the role of anesthetization as a form of domination over land in photography by discussing artists like Ansel Adams and Elliot Porter, as well as the unintentional presence of the agency of land in the images Timothy O’Sullivan. My research also breaches the gap between contemporary place theory and contemporary art. The exhibition of *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* uses photography, writing, and sound as evidence of a conversation between two active agents and challenges viewers to consider themselves in relation to land, landscape, and place.

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## Introduction

On a map the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area appears as a jagged collection of interconnected Helena National Forest quadrants filled with sporadic topographic lines telling tales of erosion and modern geology. Satellite imagery shows burn scars, deep ravines, and white reefs of stone. Research informs of original peoples, white explorers, man-killing fires, changing ecology, and protection under the Wilderness Act. All of this shaped my idea of this place but the true genesis of my knowledge of it began with movement.

A trail starts - Absorbed by water - Creek bed - Ocean floor rises above - Limestone canyon - Walls tighten in - Stream path - Force and time - Fracture of radiant sky framed by cold cesious walls of stone - Emerge into a new world - Ponderosa - Winding trail - Tacky from nights snow - Switchback up - Up - Leave trail for wide gully - Spaced trees - Old trail - Overgrown - Forgotten - Wide saddle - Maintain elevation - Horizontal movement - Around mountain - Into folds - Cold breath of winter hiding in reprieves - Hidden queries of snow - Shoulders of noon sun pouring through the canopy - Thick air of drying forest - Visible border - Burn line - Longview expands - World opens up - Sun abounds - Wary movement - Over dead fall - Pause - Whispering breeze punctuated by the conversation of crows dotting the tops of - Ponderosa pillars - Spearmint breath in the air - Unplaceable - Onward - Follow runoff path - Down now - Jumping steps - Halting steps - Over - Between - Around - Under - New growth - Soft soil - Tilled by gravity - Warm earthen scent rising in sun - Gully bottom - Sanctuary

from burn - A dark snag - Haunting - Up other side - Make way for ridge - Tremendous dead fall - Scorched earth - Holes of burned out root - Up - Tiered climb - Rounding knoll - Gnarled twisted saplings - Burned - Foreboding stocks of spent energy - Up Further - Erosion carved cave - Mineral deposits - Ribs of calcium carbonate - Flowstone - Protected in this leeward side of the mountain - Sheep scat - Faint trail - Leads from protection - Cuts face - Subtle line of movement - Trace a topographic line - Circumnavigation

These physical experiences with land are what shape me, they are what helps me to develop a sense of place and come to understand my position within it. Land has a power to it and the ability to act with specific effect. For me the awareness of power often comes as a sense of unease or anxiety, it's a type of awareness that I am just a part here and not the dominating force. The land has an agency all its own, it exists without us and in spite of us, it helps us understand ourselves, and it is threatened by us.

As we move into the Anthropocene and our relationship to land continues to change, recognition of it as something with agency will help us understand its importance beyond just the surface we live on. My goal with *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* was to exhibit this agency through a multi-sensory engagement with the land. In the following chapters I will discuss my intentions behind the use of specific terms, my own understanding of the importance of place, my process for creating this body of work, how it relates to and was informed by other photographers, and the installation of the final show.



## Discussion of terms

In this chapter I will address several key words as well as the title, *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place*. If my recent ventures into creative writing and poetry have taught me anything, it is that language is perhaps the most dualistic medium, being simultaneously intimately direct and wildly pliable. I'll start with the big three: Landscape, Land, and Place, all of which are often used interchangeably but I feel that they deserve very specific and deliberate use.

“Landscape” might be the simplest to set boundaries for. The way I use this word is to address the visual make up of an area. This includes trees, rocks, hill, dale, crag, and river. It is very physical and rooted in human experience. While landscapes do exist without us, they are only named and brought into representation by us.<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Landscape” as something to be moved through or looked upon, both very direct interactions.

With the term Land my use likely gets a bit away from usual definitions. I use the word to describe the earth, yes, but also the ecosystem that is associated with that earth. In my view the land is something physical and that, much like landscape, we invent through our experiences with it. Due to its ever-changing nature, it is something that try as we might we will never fully understand. Land is both specific, small areas and micro ecosystems, as well as general areas of land or even the earth as a whole. Thinking specifically of ecosystems and the interactions between them we can consider how they simultaneously exist on their own as well as in conversation with all other ecosystems, each one directly or indirectly shaping all others. My definition of land could best be described as a terrestrial definition, referring to the shaping

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Wells, “Land Matters: Landscape Photography, (Culture and Identity”, I.B. Tauris, 2011)

elements from earth to animals to ecosystem; whereas my use of landscape refers to the physical make up of the earth alone. Landscape is what we see and move across, land is something we engage with.

“Place” is the term that is the least definable of these three and that is ultimately rooted in place’s presence outside the physical realm. I understand place as something intangible. A basic description would be that it is everything that has to do with an area but also that is influenced by everything outside of the area. And that it is always changing. It is the amalgamation of landscape, land, culture, and history that exists beyond us and along with us, it is contextualized by us and contextualizes us.<sup>2</sup> The nuances of place and how I have come to understand some of the greater complexities surrounding it will be discussed at great length in a later chapter but, first, its boundaries and how I see them identified, require some consideration in anticipation of that discussion.

Place isn’t something that is inherently bound to location. As such its boundaries can be a slippery subject. I find the boundaries of “place” to be best described through the use of metaphor. The best metaphor I have been able to think of for “place” is that of a “fog”. As you walk into a fog, it is difficult to identify the exact point at which you are in it, its boundary is permeable and also continually moving. As you move into it, it moves around you and interacts with you, just as much as you interact with it. The fog is constantly being shaped and shaping that within it as well as that around it. It is never still but its movements are hard to define. Lastly, fog exists without us just as much as it exists with us.

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<sup>2</sup> Soren C. Larsen, Jay T. Johnson. “The Agency of Place: Toward a More-Than-Human Geographical Self.” (*GeoHumanities*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016) 149–166.

I have found this metaphor useful to help me understand place, and its interaction with land, landscape, and myself. Place can contain all of these things and it interacts with all of them, changes them, and is changed by them; just as fog is shaped by the landscape and alters its appearance, just as it is made from the water evaporated from the rivers of the land and how it moistens the leaves and the soil. It changes how we interact with it all, but is also shaped by our influence. We name it.

The phrasing for how an image comes to be recorded has been problematic for me, particularly “take a picture” and its implications of domination and possession. My chosen saying is “facilitate exposure”, this seems the most honest to what I am attempting to do. I don’t want to take anything, the image has to be a conversation. Even “creating photographs” doesn’t seem right as I’m not really doing any creating. I am just setting up a set of circumstances that result in an image affixed to a piece of glass. While I am pointing the camera, focusing the lens, preparing the chemicals, coating the glass, sensitizing the collodion, timing the exposure, and developing the negative, I am not creating anything but I am listening visually and allowing the place to record itself. Keeping this language in mind when I set out for the day helps keep me stay honest in my experience, helps me remember to listen to place speak, and reminds me of the agency of the place.

The creation of the show title: *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* was embarked on with as much fervor as that allocated to any of the other parts of the show. I wanted to create

something that was all encompassing for the show and that eliminated, in my mind, the need for titles of individual pieces.

“Agency”, this is a term that I use for its typical meaning but nonetheless the decision to use it required a great deal of thought. The Oxford English Dictionary describes Agency as: “Ability or capacity to act or exert power; active working or operation; action, activity”<sup>3</sup>. In relation to land, I interpret this in two significant ways, spiritually or scientifically. Spiritually the land can be understood as a mother earth archetype acting with its own will towards specific goals. Scientifically the agency of land can be thought of as an ecosystem striving toward homeostasis, every part working together and separately towards the continuation of existence.<sup>4</sup>

Along with agency, I have paired “panic”. Panic, a derivative of the Greek god Pan, is described by the OED as “Of fear, terror, etc.: sudden, wild, or unreasoning”<sup>5</sup>. Pan was the god of flocks and herds in a time when there was more wildness in the world. Panic was often associated with wild fear brought on suddenly and by an unplaceable source, or Pan.<sup>6</sup> So in the context I am using it “Agency Panic” the panic is a questioning of what is the controlling force or whether there is any.

The second half of the show’s title, “A Reckoning of Place” was the first part that I committed to. I was searching for something that really described my quest to understand place

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<sup>3</sup> “Agency | Definition of Agency in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/agency](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/agency). 2018

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Panic | Definition of Panic in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/panic](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/panic). 2018

<sup>6</sup> “Pan.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pan). 2018

and that addressed the multifaceted approach I was taking, I think “Reckoning” is the obvious choice for this venture; “the action or process of calculating or estimating something”.<sup>7</sup> This speaks to this seemingly fundamental human need to divide, specify, and calculate in the process of trying to understand. The use of “of” might not be quite so obvious, but essentially I was interested in it as a reference to the intangibility of “Place”. If I had used “with” which might have been more expected I would have been undermining my specificity of the use of “Place”, changing its meaning to be something much more tangible.

To summarize, *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* means that this body of work is that of a multi-sensory multifaceted quest to understand a place more thoroughly. It is ultimately something Larsen & Johnson described as a “placework”<sup>8</sup>, something maybe best understood as collaborative documentation of the relationship between The Gates of the Mountain Wilderness and myself.

## **Place**

Over the course of my time at University of Montana the study of how I relate to and understand place has become an obsession. My specific interest is in our relation to the areas we define as wild, more specifically the areas in the western United States that are designated as Wilderness Areas. Here focus will be given more specifically to how I relate to place from a position of privilege, how I intend for this work to promote a specific type of relationship with place, and the responsibilities that come with these relationships.

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<sup>7</sup> “Reckoning | Definition of Reckoning in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reckoning. 2018

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

My personal history with wild lands is important within the context of this body of work as it has played a great roll in how I have come to relate to these types of places. I was born and raised in rural Wyoming, the second son of a rig hand and a school teacher. My childhood was spent trying to improve our little piece of desert, picking rocks from the land surrounding our house, building fence, and planting trees that didn't want to grow. I was taught to think of land only in monetary ways, how many head of cattle it could support or barrels of oil laid beneath its surface. I took land for granted, it was there for us, I believed we owed it nothing.

Though I was outdoors a great deal I wasn't terribly "outdoorsy" as a child. Our family didn't go on hikes (unless with guns), we didn't go to the lake, or go sightseeing. We did however spend several weeks each summer rafting the white water of the West, this is where I first was introduced to wilderness. Torrential serpents of emerald water pulsing their way deeper into the earth's crust raising canyons of shear stone above them. At night the rivers paths were echoed in the stars, a million times brighter when contextualized between the walls of the canyons. Rafting will always remain for me one of the most sensible ways to experience land, it's all about understanding the waters path, moving with it, and allowing its hydraulics to deliver you safely. These experiences instilled within me a deep love for the chaotic beauty of the land and an appreciation for wild places.

In adulthood my understanding of wilderness has developed, nurtured from my own unique experiences with it. It is now something I would never take for granted but rather something I am constantly considering in relation to myself and society. I have developed a belief that just the existence of wilderness is crucial to us all. In *The Abstract Wild*, Jack Turner argues that our wilderness experience reminds us of our connection to nature, that "the

reciprocity between the wild in nature and the wild in us, between knowledge of the wild and knowledge of the self.”<sup>9</sup> The wild is crucial to our understanding of ourselves, it helps us to understand our place in the world, not of masters of a domain but as a part of a system.

The idea that wild is crucial to us is something I have struggled to show with my artistic practice. I would create photographs influenced by my experiences with places, believing that I was doing them justice, but the images were always just aestheticized photographs of light reflecting off of a landscape, they fell so short of being authentic representations of the actual experience (Figure 1). I was failing to listen to the land, my images were not truly in response to the place, they were in response to my experience of the place. There must be a conversation, an open dialog between person and the land. Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* reaches deep into this idea of acting in response to a place. She addresses indigenous traditions of asking the land for permission before and giving thanks after harvesting from its bounty.<sup>10</sup> She speaks directly to harvesting food but what struck me was that I was harvesting photographs. How could



Figure 1: *untitled*, 2015

I ask permission to photograph a land?

I couldn't. Well maybe I could but I wasn't sure that I could hear a response. I didn't speak the language, somewhere in the depths of all that transpires the answer to

<sup>9</sup> Jack Turner. “The Abstract Wild”. (University of Arizona Press, 1996.)

<sup>10</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer. “Braiding Sweetgrass”. (Milkweed Editions, 2013.)

my question was lost. This doesn't mean that the answer was "no" just that it was beyond my comprehension. I could listen to the land as I moved through it, acting in response to it, learning it through movement. But I couldn't recreate that in regards to photography, it was too quick, too impersonal. My interests began to shift to slow processes, photographs that showed time. I felt that the longer the exposure the longer the conversation, the more room for the voice of the place to manifest. Works like of Chris McCaw's *Sunburned GSP#410*, Yukon, 2010 (Figure 2) where the sun has exerted its energy and power so much it burned through the photographic paper itself speak to this idea.

I shifted my own work to slower and less controlled processes, looking for that chaos, that loss of control to manifest in hopes that with the loss of my agency the places will come forward. I had been reading texts like Debora Bright's *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography*, Lucy Lippard's *Lure of the Local*, and Rebecca Solnit's *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, critics whose writing shaped my understanding of land art, but I shifted to writings on the cutting edge of place research, I took a greater interest in what is going on in contemporary geography, and wondered how my work could



Figure 2: *Sunburned GSP#410*, Chris McCaw, Yukon, 2010



contribute. The bibliography of *The Agency of Place: Toward a More-Than-Human Geographical Self* became my reading list. This article also restructured the language I used to talk about my work. For so long I was concerned with how I could show things about a place in a meaningful way, and not how I could seek out ways to allow a place to speak for itself in its own language. How could a place maintain its “agency” throughout the artistic process? These ideas inspired me to search for ways to allow places to exert more influence on my images, I wanted to facilitate discussion, and to record the untranslatable language of non-human agency. I feel wet-plate collodion allows me to do this.

Reading Edward Casey’s *The Fate of Place: a Philosophical History* introduced me to the idea of the “geographical self” and greatly challenged how I thought of myself in relation to wild places.<sup>11</sup> The idea that we are contextualized by places, that it is a conversation between self and place through body, fit directly into my experiences with understanding a place through movement and yet fail to reach understanding in other ways. A “More-Than-Human Geographical Self”<sup>12</sup> is something I continue to struggle to comprehend in relation to myself and my relationships with places. That place comes first and grants us existence not only challenges my own hubris but also my spiritual belief. I struggle to imagine a higher power even if that power is the earth. And if there is a higher power it must not be in command anymore or else how has the earth gotten so fucked? At what point did we challenge the power structure so much that we stole its agency and shifted to become the dominate force? We obviously have a duty to care for the earth but was it granted, assumed, or something else?

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<sup>11</sup> Edward S. Casey. “The Fate of Place: a Philosophical History.” (University of California Press, 2013.)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

In Bruno Latour's *Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene* the idea of a contractual agreement between land and humans seems logical.<sup>13</sup> That some duty for one another is assumed through a symbiotic relationship seems in line with Homo sapiens arrival on earth through evolution. I felt some assurances that if we evolved to fulfill a specific niche in the ecosystem of the earth then we had to be providing some benefit or ecosystem homeostasis would have snuffed us out. After all, mutations that are not beneficial are killed off.

Yet at some point we overreached and our impact on the earth became more than it was possible to correct.<sup>14</sup> As responsible caregivers, we can never repair this impact and return to the Holocene "time flows from the future to the present".<sup>15</sup> Instead we must seek new ways to engage with the agency of the land and make sure its voice is heard. In many ways this is a call and response, not seeking to exert our expression upon the earth but to pair well with it. I feel this agency and voice of the land is something best experienced and heard in wild places, places where the land is allowed to exist for itself.

Wilderness areas strike me as being essential to this goal of promoting the agency of the land. Wild places should be preserved as just that, wild. This may mean less restrictions in some places where the term wild is challenged by its own designations, as when the physics theory of the "Observer Effect" is applied to "wild" areas we see that by declaring something "wild" we are constraining it to fit within a certain perception. Additionally by enforcing restrictions around

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<sup>13</sup> Bruno Latour. "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene." (*New Literary History*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014.) 1–18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

these places as “Wilderness Areas” we are constraining their capacity for being truly wild. Nonetheless and with these serious caveats, it is still my belief that Wilderness Areas offer our best chance at meeting the place and land for what they truly are.

I engaged the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area in this collaboration. The work shows a responsible conversation between myself and the place, a conversation that is strained by chaotic beauty.

### **Historical background**

Photography is a medium that aestheticizes and exploits the land. There seems to be an eternal quest to take faster, clearer, more perfect, higher resolution landscape photographs. Yet frequently this results in images of land that feel sterile. Images like those of Rick Sammon (Figure 3), or many other contemporary nature photographers, whose beautiful images are only surface level depictions of landscapes. They lack any reference to the chaotic reality of the place. A photographer’s decision to employ techniques like cropping, panning, and tilting cameras around until the scene appears “perfect” seem innocuous, but often have the unintentional result



Figure 3: *Iceland Adventure #4*, Rick Sammon, 2017

of denying a place its voice. Images quickly become about the photographer's vision and not the place depicted.

This type of disregard for the broader scope of a place can exploit land solely for its visual aesthetics. Reverential images like those of Ansel Adams depict enormous landscapes full of mood and drama but they fail to depict the deeper minutiae. Adams' photographs show "perfect" scenes with compositions and camera controls were just right, everything is accounted for, everything is controlled for. This exertion of control demonstrates Adams' prowess as a talented photographer but also can be interpreted as a form of domination over place. His process may have begun as a conversation with the place, searching the land for a vista that depicted what he felt to be its ultimate beauty, but the images became prescriptive of his ideals not conversations. As a conservationist and member of the Sierra Club, Adams' intentions were to protect natural lands from development and as a modernist his images often portray landscapes



Figure 4: *Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park*, Ansel Adams, 1934

devoid of human influence. Images like his *Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park, 1934* (Figure 4) depict a serene Edenistic landscape, yet at the time Yosemite National Park was already welcoming over 300,000 visitors annually.<sup>16</sup> While these

<sup>16</sup> "Stats Report Viewer." (*National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, [irma.nps.gov/Stats/ssrsreports/park specific reports/annual park recreation visitation \(1904 - last calendar year\)?Park=yose.](http://irma.nps.gov/Stats/ssrsreports/park%20specific%20reports/annual%20park%20recreation%20visitation%20(1904%20-%20last%20calendar%20year)?Park=yose)) 2018

images show us the conventional beauty of these places they ignore many of the more complex issues that coexist with that beauty. When viewed with a contemporary postmodernist lens, Adams fails to acknowledge any activity in the land beyond beauty, his images show none of the energy or problems that these places face. While at the time Adams' photographs were consistent with the mindset of the public, at this point in our history we need to understand that these places are in danger, that they face struggles, that they are dynamic, that they are being affected by climate change, and that they have a voice of their own.

Timothy O'Sullivan's work fuels debate on issue of the aesthetization of land. His photographs often exploited the land for its aesthetic merits but also show artifacts of the wild places in subtle ways. Rick Dingus's rephotographing efforts in *The Photographic Artifacts of Timothy O'Sullivan* highlight some of these aesthetization issues, the clearest example is offered in his rephotographing of O'Sullivan's *Tertiary Conglomerates, Weber Valley (Witches Rocks #5) 1869* (Figure 5). This image depicts a number of towers of conglomerate rock rising stoically above the horizon. Dingus's photograph of the same scene, shot with a leveled camera and a wider angle lens, reveals O'Sullivan's disregard for the true horizon in an effort to create an



Figure 5: *Witches Rocks #5*, Timothy O'Sullivan, 1869 - left / *Witches Rocks #5*, Rick Dingus, 1978 - right

image that fit his photographic vision more accurately. There are numerous examples of this objectification of land through O’Sullivan’s work but parallel to those is evidence of respect for the power and voice of these places.<sup>17</sup>

O’Sullivan was an expert in wet-plate photography, but even he failed to control out all aspects of the environments he worked in. *Snow peaks, Bull Run mining district, Nevada, 1875* (Figure 6) stands out as one of these “imperfect” plates. Though O’Sullivan likely engaged in his process as usual there is still evidence of a dynamic environment throughout. This sort of “failure” in the process likely barely passed as acceptable by his standards, yet ironically I find images like this to be the most successful. These abnormalities or process begin to speak to the wildness of the time that they were produced, and the visible struggle within them serves as a type of unintentional foreshadowing of the issues these places have come to face. Because of this foreshadowing I believe O’Sullivan’s more “dirty” images remain topical, serving as evidence of the voice of these places. The visible struggle grounds these photos to these specific/particular places in a more intimate way than a “perfect” landscape, and it allows the place to maintain its agency even after a century has passed.



Figure 6: *Snow peaks*, Timothy O’Sullivan, Bull Run mining district, Nevada, 1875

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<sup>17</sup> Rick Dingus “The Photographic Artifacts of Timothy OSullivan” (University of New Mexico Press, 1982.)

The ability to maintain an image's potency and topicality after a century also allows them to overcome some of the issues of aesthetization. Even after the plate has been removed from the place it depicts, printed, framed, and aged it still retains its relationship to the place and the conditions of its making, unlike the images of Ansel Adams or Eliot Porter whose work could easily be decontextualized and only appreciated for its aesthetics. Deborah Bright proposes the hypothetical scene, in her writing *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men*, of James Watt U.S. Secretary of Interior in the early 1980's, having an Eliot Porter photograph behind his desk. Rather than being recognized for the irony of an anti-environmentalist showing environmentally based work, Watt would likely be congratulated on his eye for high-quality art. This hypothetical situation speaks to the issue of only engaging with a place's aesthetics in isolation by ignoring its larger voice and losing the potency of its intentions.

O'Sullivan used wet-plate collodion because it was the most accurate process of his era, and not as a way to record a deeper image of place, however my method intentionally engages place through this same process. The exposures I facilitate are ripe with "failures". I allowed myself and the plates to be vulnerable during the process in an attempt to engage with the places on more than just an aesthetic level. The resulting images retain their own context of place and speak of struggle, beauty, and chaos.

## **Process**

Wet-plate:

Photography is interesting to me because it is a direct conversation with the world. This doesn't mean I fall into the fallacy of believing photographs to be true. Rather the contrary, I am interested in the camera's propagation of false truths.

I have always loved the aesthetic of wet-plate collodion but avoided using it for many years as I didn't want to pick a process solely because of its aesthetic qualities. But that changed when I recognized that the process itself mirrored my ideas, specifically its slowness (both in process and in exposure), its physicality, and its permeability. I have always admired the faults or abnormalities of wet-plate work. Clean, well-poured plates that show a "perfect" depiction of their subject feel too sterile, or lacking vitality. Instead it's images like Sally Mann's *Cold Harbor #27* (Figure 7) with all of its foggy hazy oddities, or Timothy O'Sullivan's *Tufa Domes Pyramid Lake* (Figure 8) that appear almost smokey, like these places weren't sure if they had decided to exist yet or not. All the odd unexpected apparitions that appear in my plates as well as those of other wet-plate photographers are recordings of three-way conversations between a place, the plate, and the artist. With this process I don't really seek to understand this conversation but just offer a medium that can record it. Each mark, bubble, haze, crinkle, and line has a cause. It may have been my failure in the plate's preparation, a sudden pick up of wind,



Figure 7: *Cold Harbor #27*, Sally Mann, 2002

a fall in barometric pressure, the creeping cold, or any number of unexpected environmental phenomena taking place around me over the course of the preparation, exposure, and development of the plate.

The process of creating a wet-plate collodion negative





Figure 8: *Tufa Domes Pyramid Lake*, Timothy O'Sullivan, 1868

begins with a just a normal sheet of clean, clear glass, and collodion, a syrupy solution of pyroxylin and ether that was developed as a false skin for use as a surgical dressing. The plate of glass is held level and the collodion is slowly poured onto it at one of the corners. As the collodion is poured the plate is

tipped ever so slightly in a circular pattern allowing the collodion to flood the entire plate. Once the plate is coated the excess is poured back into the bottle for later use. The now-coated-plate is allowed to briefly dry, a process that can be measured by the tiny crinkles on the surface of the collodion, before it is submerged in a bath of silver nitrate in a red safe-light only environment. After 5-10 minutes of soaking in the silver nitrate solution the plate is light sensitive. Lastly, the plate is slid into a camera's negative carrier, ready to be exposed.

The exposure and development must happen while the plate is still wet, a window of time prescribed by the local humidity, so the camera should already be ready to go. Although contemporary digital cameras can have light sensitivity upwards of 3200 ISO, wet-plate is much less sensitive, with an effective ISO of ~1.5, making exposure times between 30 and 90 seconds. This time must be factored into the total window of time before the collodion on the plate dries. Once the plate has been exposed it must be developed immediately, so, it is brought back into a

red safe-light environment where developer is poured onto it. Next the plate is soaked in water to stop the development process, and with this rinse the red safe-light conditions are no longer necessary. Lastly the plate is then set in a bath of fixer before a final wash in clean water.

This wash concludes the immediate work that must be done to achieve the final product, a plate of glass with a graph of light affixed to its surface. In the controlled environment of a studio and darkroom the process is complicated but still manageable. With constant vigilance these types of environments lend themselves well to achieving consistent high-fidelity results, though ample room remains for “failure” through inattention.

The difficulty of the wet-plate process is compounded when extradited from the sterility of a darkroom into the field. My darkroom is shrunk down to two cubic foot plastic box with arm holes and a small red-light safe window. My lighting studio goes from white walls and strobes to the rugged landscape of the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area, rolling clouds, and dynamic weather. Already vulnerable to the smallest shifts in conditions, this process’s sensitivity to its surrounding environment challenged me at every step. The temperature alone, which often was well below freezing, prompted me to rework chemistry, extend development times, and be constantly heating water for the various washes. Everything became rushed; my body was the warmest thing for many miles and all of the chemicals had to be stored inside my jacket up against my core to ensure that they stayed as close as possible to their ideal temperature. A rugged landscape blanketed by snow challenged my camera placements and vantage points, some areas became completely inaccessible while others became dangerous to reach. The path

between camera and darkroom had to be planned out with test runs made to ensure I could make it there and back before my negatives froze.

There is no rest during the production of these plates, distance from my subjects to the darkroom was determined by how fast I could run the distance. The process is highly localized, every part of it is vulnerable to the scrutiny of the environment. The openness of the processes allows the place in which the exposure is facilitated to affect the exposed plate at every stage. Clouds move, snow falls, wind picks up, or I fall down a hill with an exposed yet undeveloped plate in my coat. All of these things manifest in the final plate and tell the story of a conversation between artist, place, and process. The language of this conversation is not verbal but instead it is visual, one thing affecting the other affecting the other in a continual thatching of experience. The final piece being a photograph with evidence of the place's agency exerted upon it as well.

Exposure locations were selected based on my own aesthetic considerations, somewhat rooted in the traditional dramatic scenes and vast views of Western landscape photography, but also expanded to encompass locations that engage with key features of the local ecosystem. The Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area is defined by the band of Madison formation limestone that makes up the stunning walls and pillars of stone throughout the range, the streams that have carved deep canyons into the stone, and the Mann Gulch and Meriwether fires that have reshaped the ecosystem. These defining elements are what I strove to portray in the exposures I facilitated.

The facilitation of these exposures wasn't in any way possessive, my goal was simply to set up a set of circumstances that allowed the place to speak and for its language to be recorded in the collodion. The sensitivity of the collodion made it reactive to place beyond just the light

reflecting off its landscape. The skin-like quality of the collodion retains some evidence like a skin records memories, a scar carved deep, a burns eternal raw mark, or goose bumps frozen forever. It is in some way the panic we experience in wild places, that unplaceable undefinable anxiety, a type of awareness that the land is alive, fixed into an image.

The resulting object is a piece of glass with an image of place affixed to it.

The difficulties of the place or the agency of it are evident in the “failures” that appear within the image. Apparitions such as those in Eric Overton’s *Valley of the Gods #1* (Figure 9) are less likely to occur in a sterile environment or when the technician is able to control conditions. Though the result of a highly controlled exposure are unblemished, the photograph becomes a statement about technical skills rather than a conversation between artist and place. By only engaging with a place through what is visible we pare that place down to only one



Figure 9: *Valley of the Gods #1(Bears Ears)*, Eric Overton, 2017

specific view, and by that action it shifts from being a subject which can be engaged to an object that can be viewed. This is a domination of landscape by stopping time, by freezing a moment and taking it away. There is no conversation, the land has been denied its voice.

I cultivated the challenges that collodion offered, forcing myself into discomfort, creating situations where the process could fail at any step. I can make flawless high-fidelity exposures in a lab, in my living room, or even from the bed of my pickup on the edge of a road. So I pushed further, to the mouth of a cave in the side of a mountain in a wilderness area. Physical struggle has always aided my understanding of a place because it strips my ego, it's hard to imagine that you are dominating a landscape when you're getting your ass kicked in the foothills. The effort of getting to these places insured their selection was deliberate, and the hard work to get there helped me to learn the land. Though the conversation appears on the plate it started hours before with the first step of the day. Or maybe even before that.

I am intrigued by the physicality of the negatives, they become photographic objects and the records of an experience. The plates can exist as both negative and positive images when viewed on a light table or backed to a matte black surface, respectively. There is something about that direct positive that gets to the directness of an experience. That the image can be viewed immediately as a positive, a direct recording of an experience yet reversed, as if the act of reflecting on an experience alters it. As soon as an experience is reflected upon it is changed and removed from its original context because now it is in the context of a memory and thus subject to the issue of illusion. The duality of collodion on glass brings awareness to the altering of an experience as soon as it is remembered.

Running:

Running is the great constant in my life thus far, and has likely shaped me as a person more than anything else in my life. As a child it was just about being fast and free, bare feet in

grass, or sand, it was spontaneous and celebrated just because it feels good to go fast.

Adolescence brought discipline and dedication to moving fast over specific lengths of ground, it was still fun but the enjoyment came from digging deep, trying hard, and being faster than others. At this point running was all ego, and it kind of had to be, even though I was never the best I still had to believe I was capable. After college there was still running, but for no goal. It was startling, and honestly it took a while to find fun in just running again. Roads were quickly abandoned for trails, then game trails, and finally with no constraints when possible. It became a way to meet places, fast and physical, all of it chaos, all of it beautiful. Long journeys of introspection brought on by learning a land through footfalls and breath.

My awareness has always been heightened when I run, things seem to flow into knowledge without thought attached, later recalled in clarity, each step, every breath. I think it was probably cultivated in pace training, learning how the body responds to the slightest breeze or spike of adrenaline. This translates into an excellent recall of what transpired over the course of a run, allowing me to revisit an experience after it has ended, continuing to develop the relationship with the place after I departed. I used to try and use these experiences to influence the subject matter of my photographs, but it never felt free, as if the conversation between myself and the land was lost with the third dimension.

Hamish Fulton's work challenged what I knew about art influenced by movement. Fulton's idea that maybe the data collected during movement or about movement could come to represent the experience was one I explored. Authors like William Kittredge, Edward Abbey, and Terry Tempest Williams inspired me within this vein to explore representation of experience in land through creative writing.

This started out as romanticized stories about runs but eventually developed into poems that purely represented experience. I have found the directness of language extremely useful in the recording of movement and also greatly enjoyed its pliability as I extrapolate on specific memories from movement. The pacing and repetition of the poems mimics that of the actual experience, denying the reader breath one line and offering rest the next.

The audio recordings started as simply supporting data for the poems, but soon I recognized their potential beyond just a supporting role. Playback reveals full sensory visions, each step each breath remembered in body. Something else happened when I started listening to them too, a type of landscape was revealed in the rhythm of steps, it's a physical thing that is not necessarily pictured but rather felt. The breaths aid this too, pulling the observer through the valleys and up the ridges. It's landscape, a conversation older than memory, immediate call and response, purely reactive. This reveals feelings for the listener more sensory than familiar, it's breathing along with it, being strung out by the heedless wind, or enjoying a moment of rest to water Nora.

These recordings tie the images and the writing together in a way I could never have expected. They offer the atmosphere, unpredictability, and agency of the land found in the images, but also the movement and direct interaction that is found in the writing. It's the least curated, and in some ways the most typical, it is easy to understand what it is and how it came to be. I think that this typicality makes it at times easy to ignore, something I interpret as a strength. If it was so relentless and distracting that it could not be ignored not only would it become a force of exclusion but it would also limit the viewer's ability to engage with the other works.

## **Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place**

The installation of my thesis exhibition consisted of three elements: photography, writing, and sound. In this chapter I will be addressing the installation as a whole in addition to how the three sections interact with the space individually. *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* was allocated the entrance hallway as well as the north gallery room of the Gallery of Visual Arts. I chose to use the gallery's multi-room floor plan as a means to create some separation between my writings and the photographs in attempt to keep one from becoming descriptive of the other, like some type of caption, in addition to fostering different viewer experiences in the spaces. The sound piece ties the rooms together acting as evidence and context for the rest of the installation.

A low rumbling that permeated beyond the confines of the gallery was the viewers first experience with the work of *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place*. The noise was a hook, evidence of an experience, and catalyst of an interaction with the installation. Within the gallery the sound was recognizable as a recording of movement through breath and foot fall. It is the most straight forward reference to my research location, the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area, as it was an unmediated record of my interactions. The repetition and chaos within it offered a foundation to foster connection throughout the installation. Though it was audible through the entire gallery its highest volume was at the back of the gallery, at the turning point between the two rooms, as a speaker was hidden there beneath the light-box. This concentration of audio intensity paired with the lightbox of negatives, the other installation aspect most directly influenced by the Gates of The Mountains Wilderness area, acted as a transitional point between the two spaces.



As the sound spilled over into the room with the photographs it was given a little more room to breathe as the space opened up. The two gallery spaces had distinctly different feels, created through the way the sound interacted with them. In the hallway the sound seemed a narration of the words, the poems on the walls tell of the same movements audible in the sounds. However in the larger gallery the sound became background noise to the images, as if someone was moving around the you, the viewer, as you interact with the photographs. The noise also served as a reminder of the harshness and stillness of the place.

Viewers entered into the hallway of the GVA to find the location of my writings (Figure 10). My poems encrusted the walls of the hallway in near entirety, moving horizontally, encircling the area. Written in my own handwriting without much care given to legibility or spelling the script felt like that of a journal, hasty and personal. The black marker I furthered this urgency, as every mark seems deliberate and needed. Though the lines of script were ruled out and orderly the density of the wall made it difficult to stay with any one of the poems for too long. This allowed my story to exist but also gave the viewer the agency to move around the

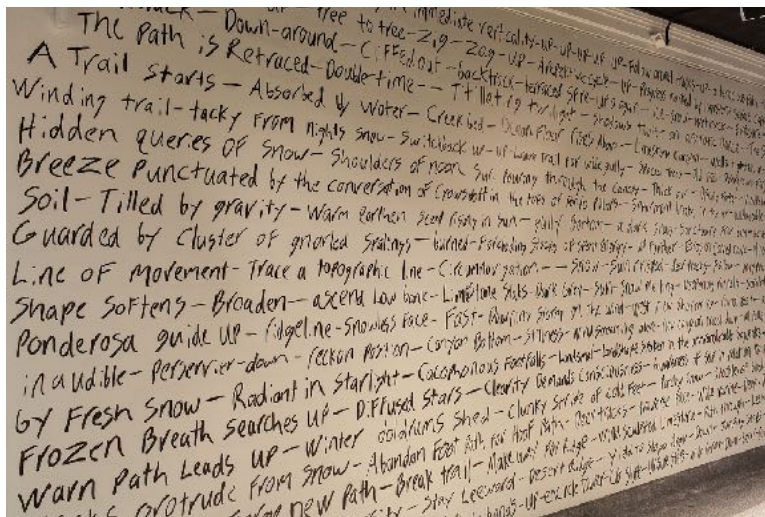


Figure 10: *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place*, Hallway view

space, latching onto words or phrases that they relate to. The presence of such a large amount of writing lead to its consumption as an art object rather than something to be read in its entirety.

While it was possible to abandon the hallway at its

inception, in favor of the side door that lead into the north gallery, the horizontality of the lines pulled viewers into the space. The progression of the lines referenced topography, time, and movement. It also shrunk the space, making it feel like a canyon. I felt a nervous fascination in it. Viewers I observed in the space began their experiences by taking a long view and assessing the writing as a whole, as if appraising it, attempting to decipher how to engage it. Typically they would then follow a line of text or two, with no obvious preference given to any specific part. Upon getting what could be described as the “gist” of it they would investigate how the words were applied to the wall itself. Satisfied, or not, with their findings they often would then read a bit more, now giving up a pretense of following a line but rather obviously jumping around between sections, building a narrative of their own, picking out “mistakes”, or just enjoying land language before moving on to the origin of the sound, the lightbox.

After the hallway of writing the viewers moved to the lightbox podium (Figure 11). Upon the light table were placed the original wet-plate glass negatives, the raw photographic data, the direct results of my experiences. This also stood as a transition between reflection on personal



Figure 11: *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place*, Podium

experience in a landscape (the writing) and direct engagement with a place (the photographs). These two sides were represented here on the podium by their supporting evidence. The negatives were also the viewers first introduction to the

photographs, on the lightbox they were objects of oddness, their texture and physicality perhaps telling of the experiences that produced them.

In the north gallery room I hung five of the photographs produced during my time spent in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area. The images were spaced widely allowing each to be engaged with individually. At 53 inches wide by 42 inches high their size demanded attention and also allowed the viewer to engage with their minutia as well as the image as a whole. The addition of a bench in the room allowed it to become a place of contemplation fostering the viewers consideration of the images as well as their own experiences with place. The sound there was less harsh and becomes more atmospheric than descriptive, helping to shape the image's experience. The images have an uncanny nature to them, they are unsettling, viewers were left to search for the edge between chaos of land and "failure" of process.

*Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place #5* (Figure 12) reflects the edge between natural chaos and process artifacts. During the course of the plates exposure the camera was pointed at a

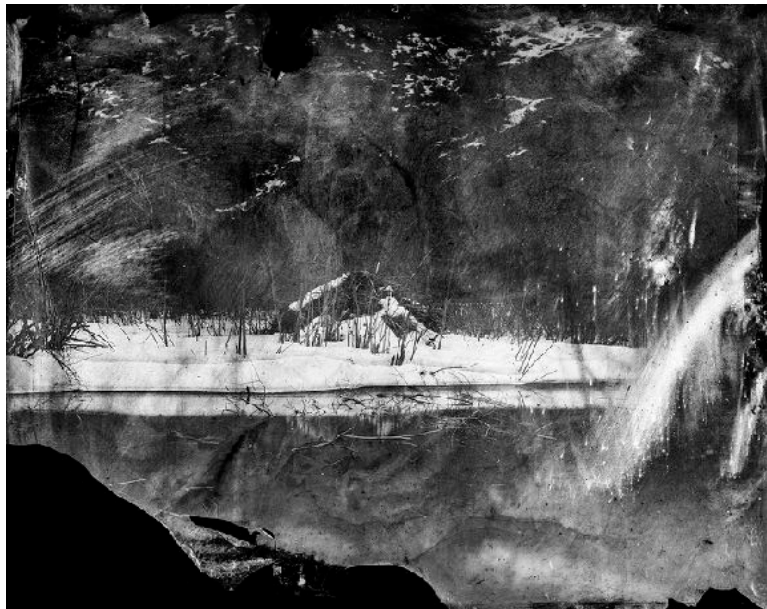


Figure 12: *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place #5*

small, snow covered beaver lodge (the middle ground), along a creek (the foreground), at the bottom of a limestone cliff (the background). The composition was simple and straight forward. I chose the scene because it reflected many of the canyon bottoms I had encountered on my movements through the

Gates of the Mountains Wilderness area, a water carved canyon walled by limestone and teeming with life. In addition to this scene, whose subject matter is recognizable, there exists an upheaval in the apparitions left behind by process and place. I remember this moment: brutal wind, temperatures well below freezing, and falling down a snowy hill with the unexposed plate inside my jacket. These experiences are undoubtedly part of what created the diversity of textures found in this print, though it is impossible to say what caused what. Some of the affects of the place and the experience are easy to identify - like the ghostly white shapes on the right side of the image that appear almost as falling snow, or the misshapen edge, while others challenge the viewer to search deep into the image. Where do the harsh diagonal brush stroke-like lines end and the willows begin? What is snow on the background cliff and what is a remnant of the process? What is a failure of my hand and what is a product of the environment? These are all questions I don't want to know answers to, for me the conversation is the most important part.

Over each of these exposures my conversation with place was recorded onto the plates that created these images. They are the results of two agents acting in collaboration. The viewer is left to translate these images for themselves, to understand the conversation in the context of their own relationship with land. The conversations are ongoing and continually refreshed by new experience. Learning the visual language of these helps to shape how we interact with land and our relationship to it.

## **Summary**

If we are in fact in the Anthropocene, and human activity is the dominant influence on climate and environment, then there is no going back to a world unaffected by us. We can

however engage with the land for what it is today, we can have conversations with it. For me these conversations will be based in physical engagement with the land, and from time to time I will seek to facilitate an exposure where my conversation with land and place might be recorded. This body of work will serve as my framework for forming relationships with place, though it will never be duplicated verbatim. Every place is different and must be engaged with in a unique capacity. The relationships are reciprocal, they are conversations not dictations, both parties have agency. I'll never know the language of the land, I'll never fully understand it or what's best for it, but through deliberate interactions I can gain some knowledge and come to understand myself in its context.

This body of work has challenged me intellectually, physically, and emotionally. I endured many cold days wandering around in snow and many freezing nights huddled in the bed of my pickup. Yet this has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I've only begun to come to know the Gates of the Mountain Wilderness area but I feel a kinship to it nonetheless. Perhaps above all, *Agency Panic: A Reckoning of Place* has helped me to come to understand how my art can speak to the complexities of land and help promote understanding of place.

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