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IRVINE

Origin[Redux]

Photography as a Mechanism of Dream Transference

A THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by

Joaquín Palting

Thesis Committee:

Professor Simon Leung, Chair
Professor Jennifer Bornstein
Professor Miles Coolidge
Professor Gabriele Schwab

2020

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Dr. Diana Edwards and Dr. Pancracio Palting, aka Mom & Pop.

“The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind.”

~Sigmund Freud

“For it is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: “other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”

~Walter Benjamin

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Origin[Redux]

Photography as a Mechanism of Dream Transference

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Simon Leung, Chair

What is it that I am doing when I take a photograph? What are the implications when I exhibit the work? Expanding upon theories advanced by Sigmund Freud in his writing on dreams and the unconscious, as well as what Walter Benjamin referred to as the "optical unconscious", this thesis explores the idea that when I take a photograph, I am making a visual record of a dream. Furthermore, that when I exhibit the photograph, the dream that I recorded is then transferred to the viewers via the unconscious.

As a case study, we will examine a series of photographs titled, *Origin[Redux]*, which I created for my MFA thesis exhibition. The argument will be made that the photographs may, in part, include shared dreams that have moved between myself, my mother, Brett Weston and his father Edward Weston.

PREFACE

Of the many ideas put forth by Sigmund Freud it is arguably his work on dreams and the unconscious that resonated most with his contemporaries and the public at large. This work was initially published in 1900 in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and 1915 in his essay titled, *The Unconscious*. Ideas from these writings continue to captivate many and remain widely cited in present discourse.

Psychoanalysis is the study of the mind but its scientific validity was often brought into question because, as a system of theories, it is unfalsifiable. The lack of empirical evidence is what led to numerous critiques of Freud's work. He often pushed back on those critiques, once stating:

“Our right to assume the existence of something mental that is unconscious and to employ that assumption for the purposes of scientific work is disputed in many quarters. To this we can reply that our assumption of the unconscious is *necessary* and *legitimate*, and that we possess numerous proofs of its existence.”¹

Additionally, Walter Benjamin's theory of the “optical unconscious” relies on the presupposition that there indeed exists an unconscious as defined by Freud and others. As the reader moves through this thesis it is important to keep in mind that, just as with Freud and Benjamin, this work relies on frameworks of aesthetics rather than empiricism. Furthermore, that although the arguments put forth follow a path of formal logic, there exists gaps where the reader must be open to the speculative conclusions that are asserted.

¹ Gay, Peter, 1989, p.573

INTRODUCTION

You have seen my dreams. If you are a photographer there is a good chance that I, too, have seen yours. A transference of our respective dreams has taken place during the act of viewing each other's work. This movement happened outside of our conscious awareness in the space that we call the unconscious. On the walls of my childhood home hung photographs taken by my mother, and also Brett Weston. Even when I wasn't looking directly at them, their essence permeated my very being. Could it mean then that my photographic work, in part, is unconsciously informed by not just the both of them but also Brett's father Edward Weston?

In the summer of 2019, I began work on a new series of photographs, titled *Origin[Redux]*. The project consists of large scale black and white photographs taken within the city of Los Angeles, California. The production of this series, as with most of the work that I do, was done in a traditional manner. I use a large format (4X5) camera and black & white negative film. The relatively slow pace of working with these tools allows much time for contemplation. Often I am outdoors, in natural environments, carrying heavy equipment. I walk from one spot to the next, compose a shot, and then move on. I also drive extensively between locations when walking becomes impractical. I consider the repetitive process of walking, setting up, exposing the film, and driving, a moving meditation. When I get into a particularly good rhythm, these activities elicit a state of transcendence. This state is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's description of the high from consuming hashish, "...a continual alternation of dreaming and waking states, a constant and finally exhausting oscillation between totally different worlds of consciousness."²

² Benjamin, Walter, 2006, p.117

As I moved through the city of Los Angeles, creating the photographs for *Origin[Redux]*, I became hyper aware of some of the earliest memories from my childhood. It was during those formative years that I was introduced to this exact method of working through spending countless hours “assisting” my mother (see Fig.1). She is also an artist and an academic, and her methods of photographic production mirror my own. As with many things in my life I was only partially aware of the influence that those latent memories had on my unconscious, my art practice, and my life as a whole.

Figure 1



(Captioned, “Joaquín - April 22nd 1972 - Out taking pictures with Mama - Edmonton”)

I was born in 1969 in Washington D.C. At the age of 3 we moved to western Canada so my father could do his post-doctoral work at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. The geography of that land consists of endless wheat fields that slowly evolve into rolling hills, before crashing headlong into the dramatic upwelling that is the Rocky Mountains.

From the moment that I could stand on my own two feet, I was obsessed with being in the outdoors. I would spend every moment I could immersed in nature, and intrigued by wilderness and all things untamed. This was a time before modern electronic distractions like video games and the internet, a time when kids were left largely to their own imaginations for entertainment. We moved to different parts of the city of Edmonton and in each place I always sought out the walkable places that were on the periphery of development. There, in tree-filled ravines, or on the muddy banks of the mighty North Saskatchewan River, I would find my freedom.

These places of respite were where I first understood nature to be a place that elicits fantasy. I remember researching a map of Edmonton once and seeing that just beyond the city limits, in the middle of the river, was an island. I can't tell you how many times I stared at the powerful movement of that water and daydreamed about building a raft, and floating my way downriver to the island. I'm not sure how I would have gotten back, but as a kid you don't consider those practicalities. In fact, maybe that was part of the intrigue—the danger, the unknown, the finality that such an expedition could result in.

In his introductory lectures on psychoanalysis, Freud identified the correlation between nature and fantasy stating,

“Thus in the activity of phantasy human beings continue to enjoy the freedom from external compulsion which they have long since renounced in reality. They have contrived to alternate between remaining an animal of pleasure and being once more a creature of reason. Indeed, they cannot subsist on the scanty satisfaction which they can extort from reality.... The creation of the mental realm of phantasy finds a perfect parallel in the establishment of “reservations” or “nature reserves” in places where the requirements of agriculture, communications and industry threaten to bring about changes in the original face of the earth which will quickly make it unrecognizable. A nature reserve preserves its original state which everywhere else has been sacrificed to necessity. Everything, including what is useless and even what is noxious, can grow and proliferate there as it pleases. The mental realm of phantasy is just such a reservation withdrawn from the reality principle.”³

The degree to which I “assisted” my mother varied greatly depending on my age. As a toddler it entailed primarily sitting still in one place as she worked. In those early years I was introduced to the most important aspect of photography, light. I recall how the sunlight would feel moving across my face and body, and I loved to observe the interplay between natural light and shadow. How their combined movement helped define, and give volume to, the elements in my field of view.

Ever one to explore my surroundings, I would often feel compelled to interact with different pieces of my mother’s photography equipment. There was the dust blower with the soft brush bristles. I was obsessed with the silky texture of those bristles. In the moments when she wasn’t paying attention I would pick up the dust blower and slowly run it across different parts of my hands and face. There was also the braided metal cable release. A two-foot serpentine flexible cable with a plunger on one end that, when depressed, would cause a metal wire to protrude from the opposite end. The smoothness of its operation seemed otherworldly to me, and I loved to hear the sound of the wire move through its plastic and metal casing.

As I became older my responsibilities grew. Some days I would carry her tripod. On other occasions she taught me to use a light meter. There was never any overbearing intent or

³ Damisch, Hubert. 2001. p.132.

motivation for her sharing these experiences and information with me. In fact as a child, and from a conscious perspective, art and photography didn't leave much of an impression on me. They were simply activities that my mother did, and I only engaged in passively by virtue of being the child of a single mother.

When I was nine years old my mother bought a van. That vehicle allowed her, my younger sister and I, to go on longer photographic excursions. We explored and chased light all over western Canada. There were weekend trips to Elk Island National Park, longer summer road trips to remote places like Prince Rupert, or the interior of British Columbia. Each time out reinforced the steps of production...walking, setting up, exposing the film, and driving.

When I turned 18, art and photography were not ways in which I expressed myself. I had always been very athletic, and solo pursuits in the outdoors like rock climbing, skiing, and backpacking are what held my interest. Being near places where I could engage in those activities guided my decision making, including where I completed my undergraduate degree. There were stints in Banff, Olympia, Bellingham, Alaska, Portland, Taos, Steamboat Springs, Denver and Europe. The list would have continued save for awaking one morning at age 27 with an epiphany. An unknown catalyst released repressed thoughts from my unconscious. It caused me to sit up in bed and proclaim, **“I need to be a photographer!”**

Not wanting to be a “starving” artist, I packed my bags, and the Mamiya twin lens camera my mother had given me, and moved to Los Angeles. This was 1997 and at the time all photography was still shot on film. It took me a few months to put together a portfolio of portrait work, and after that I was able to start getting editorial assignments photographing celebrity

portraits for magazine features. This quickly evolved and before I knew it I was working bi-coastal as a full-fledged editorial and advertising photographer.

The experience of such work was interesting and satisfying to an extent. However, after awhile I craved to be thinking about photography from a more theoretical perspective. Additionally, I wanted to be making work that inspired me creatively, not just executing other people's vision to sell more consumer products. Eventually I began making more work for myself and rediscovering what my mother had shown me as a child. This included fostering and maintaining an art practice in order to conceptualize and produce projects that are more creatively and intellectually satisfying.

The importance of going to graduate school at the University of California, Irvine, can not be understated. During the past three years, I was able to build the foundation in art theory and critical theory, which was exactly what my art practice was lacking. It is here that I discovered the written works of Benjamin, Freud, Lacan, Adorno, and others. It is here where I was able to tear down all that I had known about art and photography. Questions would arise and answers would always seem to follow.

During the production of *Origin[Redux]*, I was trying to address a deceptively simple, yet fundamental, question surrounding my art practice. "What am I doing?" It was through the process of my moving meditation, and in the depths of the altered state it produces, that an answer to this question began to reveal itself.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MECHANISM OF DREAM TRANSFERENCE

Over the course of the summer of 2019, I was reading extensively about Freud's theories on dreams and the unconscious, and Benjamin's idea regarding the optical unconscious.

In considering the tangential relationship between these two ideas I came to the conclusion that through the act of photographing I am doing two things. First, I am creating a visual record of the dream that is unfolding in my unconscious, in real time, at the moment that I press the shutter button. This visual record is what Freud would have referred to as the "manifest content" of the dream. Second, when I exhibit that work I am transferring that recorded dream from my unconscious to the unconscious of anyone who views it.

With the impact of the photographic image on the early 20th century, both Freud and Benjamin often made reference to photography when discussing their ideas. Freud, who collected photographs, thought of them as objects of memory. He broached this idea in *Moses and Monotheism* by proposing that, "...the relation of unconscious memories to conscious perception is like that of the negative to the photographic print: 'It has long been common knowledge that the experience of the first five years of childhood exert a decisive influence on our life...the process may be compared to a photograph which can be developed and made into a picture after a short or long interval.'"⁴

Benjamin, on the other hand, originally thought of photography in regards to the mechanics and functionality of the camera itself. The ability of the lens and film to make a record of minute elements which elude our conscious perception, but that we are none the less unconsciously exposed to.

⁴ Sliwinski, Sharon & Shawn Michelle Smith. 2017. p.13

I came to the idea of photography as a mechanism of dream transference through a series of logical deductions. First, unlike the conscious mind the unconscious mind is always active and engaged. Further, Freud stated that the primary activity of the unconscious is dreaming. One could then assume, by way of conflating these two ideas, that **we are always dreaming**. When we are asleep we experience the phenomenon that we normally associate with dreaming. Additionally, while we are in an awake state we also experience that same phenomenon, it is just that we are not consciously aware of it.

There is a precedent to believing that there is the closest of relationships between our dreaming life and our awake life, and that at certain ages little difference exists between them. In his book, *The Unconscious Mind - The Meaning of Freudian Psychology*, Wollman states that:

“In accordance with the homeostatic principle, Freud believed that the infant's mind avoids overstimulation. Falling asleep leads, as it were, to a disconnecting of the outer world. The infant wakes up under pressure of disturbing stimuli such as hunger, bowel or bladder discomforts, rain, loud noises, and so on. As soon as the infant can get rid of the stimuli, he shuts out the outer world and falls asleep again.

In the waking state, the infant hallucinates rather than perceives, dreams rather than sees. But the external stimuli do not permit the perpetuation of the equilibrium of relief and sleep. Tension-provoking stimuli force themselves upon the infant and make him perceive them. The infant has no alternative but to cope with them and to master them. This is probably the origin of the realistic perception of the outer world. This is also the way that the conscious gradually emerges out of the unconscious. Tension and frustration lead to the development of the conscious perception of reality.”⁵

In Wollman's words we can see how that, from infancy, there is a blurring of the distinction between the dream life (unconscious), and the awake life (conscious). That our initial modes of perception vacillate between the two, before finally coming to settle on reality as we emerge from infancy.

Psychoanalyst and author, Gordon Globus, argues slightly differently, insisting that although our perception changes, our dream life and our awake life never detach, stating that,

⁵ Wollman, Benjamin B. 1968. p.7.

“...the dream world and the life that we lead in it is not a second-hand production composited together by some fantastical tinkerer, by the syntactical operations of a dream *bricoleur*, but is a continuous, spontaneous, formative production in which the dreaming-life is constituted *de novo*...and the reflective lives we live in those worlds, are essentially indiscernible.”⁶

If it is the case that a continuous stream of dream work is taking place during our awake states, one could then surmise that these dreams could very well be, in part, guiding our decision-making. Hence, before I set out to photograph for the day, are my dreams informing the location that I drive to? Are they influencing the elements that pique my interest as I pass them? Are they helping to decide how I arrange those elements within the bounds of the two-dimensional composition that I am creating? I believe that they must be. And further, that as I am photographing, my embodied self is acting as a conduit to record the activities of my dreaming unconscious.

I believe that there are additional influences at play as well. Walter Benjamin first introduced his idea of the “optical unconscious” in an essay titled *The Little History of Photography*. It is an idea that evolved greatly over numerous years, and became intertwined with his more widely known theory on aura. Benjamin’s initial musings on the optical unconscious described the idea in terms of being the ability of a camera’s “devices of slow motion and enlargement” to reveal the secret of what happens “during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step.” He goes on to state that,

⁶ Globus, Gordon. 1987. p.91.

“It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue, with which technology and medicine are normally concerned—all this is, in its origins, more native to the camera than the atmospheric landscape or the soulful portrait. Yet at the same time, photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable.”⁷

The implications of Benjamin’s statement are profound in regards to how I “see” photographically, and more importantly what I “see.” When I view the world I am interpreting the visual information before me in two distinct ways, consciously and unconsciously. For example, let’s examine the construction of my photograph from *Origin[Redux]* below listed as Figure 2.

As I walked through the interior of the cave my conscious mind was intrigued by the light cascading in from the entrance. The raking sunlight brought the texture of the cave wall to life. However, is that the only reason that I arranged, and chose, to frame this composition? Maybe the decision was guided by my unconscious mind, and its dream. Did my unconscious interpret the light in other terms? Is the implied movement in this photograph a stand-in for the idea of flight or ascension? Or perhaps the ever present death drive triggered a dream, and this image perfectly illustrates the proverbial notion of moving towards the light. There is of course no definitive way to know, but my assumption is that a combined decision-making of the conscious/unconscious was at play.

Now, if we consider the viewing of this completed photograph, within that same framework, we can see how the unconscious transference of narrative can occur. When a viewer

⁷ Benjamin, Walter. 1931. p.510-511

looks at this image they are taking in the visual information in the same manner that I did when I composed it. They have both a conscious and an unconscious reading of it. Consciously one sees a rock wall. However, unconsciously they are also seeing the way that the light illuminates the surface in a way that is open to symbolic interpretation.

Figure 2



CASE STUDY

The photographs of *Origin[Redux]* provide an opportunity to examine my theory in greater detail. I would like to propose the idea that my photographic work, and in particular the work from *Origin[Redux]*, has been influenced by a rich inheritance of shared dreams that has moved between Edward Weston, his son Brett, my mother, and finally me.

Origin[Redux] consists of thirty black and white landscape photographs. Each of the images was taken within the city limits of Los Angeles, California. They depict urban areas that lay in a state of relative primitiveness. Gone are the freeways, the skyscrapers, the Hollywood sign, and graffiti. In fact, all traces of western civilization, and human existence, have been removed. Eliminated not through means of post-production but through perspective, the careful positioning of the camera and construction of the compositions. These choices allow for often overlooked natural elements to re-emerge. This includes lush primordial lagoons, steep rocky sea cliffs, the wild Pacific Ocean, and stands of tall trees.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint the production of this work allowed me to indulge in “fantasy.” In, *The Unconscious*, Anthony Easthope states that,

“...the common element between art and the unconscious is fantasy. For psychoanalysis, fantasy means 1) an imaginary scene or narrative; 2) in which the person fantasizing is present; 3) but a scene altered or disguised; 4) so as to fulfill a wish. Fantasy turns ideas into concrete images and narrative; dreams work by ‘*the transformation of a thought into an experience.*’ But art has always done this. Fantasies are expressed in dreams and art. The difference is that actual, lived fantasies—day dreams or night dreams—can be referred to the dreamer’s life for interpretation.”⁸

In drawing the conclusion that art and dreams are one and the same, Easthope underscores that indeed, just as with dreams, one can refer to the artist’s life for interpretation of their art.

⁸ Easthope, Anthony, 1999, p.110-111

My childhood did not just involve being around the production and discussion of art, I was also immersed in the resulting objects. This included exhibitions within institutional spaces such as museums and galleries, but more importantly on the walls and bookshelves of our home. It didn't matter if I was eating a bowl of cereal, or watching cartoons on t.v., each time I glanced up the prints of my mother's, and Brett Weston's were in view. Additionally, I could walk three steps in any direction and reach for one of the many artist monographs and photography books that filled our house. The photographic imagery (dreams) quite literally surrounded me.

One of the connections that Freud made between memory and dreams involved the idea of symbolic displacement. In Freudian dream theory two terms are relevant to this concept, "latent content" and "manifest content." Latent content stems from the drives and forms the underlying basis of a dream. These are primarily memories from a person's early life, or things that have happened to a person earlier in that day. Freud referred to the memories in one's day to day life as "daily residue." Manifest content, on the other hand, includes the visual aspects of dreams that we remember when we wake up. Freud proposed that important elements from the latent content such as people, places, and specific objects appear in the manifest content of a dream in a displaced form. Meaning that the essence of an important person, place or thing from the latent content often gets displaced and appears symbolically as a different person, place or thing in the manifest content. One of the keys then to Freud's dream interpretation is to glean an understanding of the important elements in the manifest content, and try to determine who or what they represent in the latent content.

Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



These three plates (figures 3-5) were taken by Edward Weston, Brett Weston, and my mother, D.S. Edwards, respectively. Figures 4 and 5 in particular hung on the walls of our home. If we consider these photographs as the manifest content of dreams then we can conclude that the elements contained herein can lead us to important aspects of their latent content. I would like to speak theoretically about a single commonality between these three works and my series *Origin[Redux]*.

Noticeable in all three photographs, and my series, is that they do not readily depict humans or evidence of human activity. I believe that this choice goes beyond simple aesthetics, and relates to an “othering” of the self. By creating a separation between the artist and object, and by virtue of the POV (point of view) perspective, viewer and object, it allows for a moment

of solace in which one can focus on the subject/object relationship. If one is removed from that relationship, is it possible to envision and renegotiate new ways for the relationship to exist? Furthermore, what does the object represent in these photographs? a geographic location? an abstract idea? These questions, and others, are laid bare for the viewer to come to their own conclusions.

One must remember that a photograph is not a picture of a thing but rather a photographic representation of that thing. Therefore, we are viewing the artist's representation of the external, and in this case it is the environment as experienced through the condition of being human. In plates 3-5 one is confronted by a subjective depiction of reality. The photographs function by allowing the viewer, in a single moment, to fantasize about the external as it is, as it was, and as it can be. This is how I believe Edward Weston's dream ultimately manifested itself in my most recent series. Not through a transmission of specific elements but rather by passing on a shared framework through which existential questions about the subject/object relationship can be addressed.

As a child I stood on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. The water beckoned me to build a raft and journey into the unknown. What I, as a subject, was ultimately seeking was a reaffirmation of the self relative to the external world. In the same respect this is also how the photographs of my mother, Brett Weston, Edward Weston, and my series, *Origin[Redux]*, operate. A shared dream, and an open invitation, for the viewer to do the same.

Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



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