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On Nine Mile

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ON NINE MILE

by

Allen Morris

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Dana Fritz

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ON NINE MILE

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University of Nebraska, 2015

Advisor: Dana Fritz

The photographs of *On Nine Mile* were made to explore my developing relationship with the place I now inhabit. They compare the reality of a place against preconception and actual experience versus idealized expectations. I made this work to help understand a landscape to which I was transplanted and to which I had no connection. This exhibition is comprised of photographs taken at a section of untilled prairie called Nine Mile that most closely resembled my visual preconception of the Great Plains.

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest surrounded by the mountains, forests, and shoreline that typify the landscape of the region. During the thirty years I lived there I developed a deeply personal relationship with these features of the landscape and they became synonymous with beauty, home, and comfort. The landscape I envisioned, and hoped to see when I moved from the Northwest to the Great Plains, was that of Laura Ingalls Wilder books, "...endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind...[and] nothing but the rippling grass and enormous sky." (Wilder, 13)

I ventured into the landscape of Eastern Nebraska as soon as I arrived. My naïve expectations were quickly proven incorrect when I encountered the reality of the plains landscape with corn and soybean farms dominating the land. While I expected the presence of farming operations from my research into the state, the sheer quantity and scale of these entities surprised me. I became ambivalent about this landscape

within a few months of relocating. I found myself in the mindset of those from outside the region – that this place was not much more than fly-over country. I couldn't see past the farms.

I relied on photography to establish a connection to my new location and to help me feel grounded. Taking to heart Susan Sontag's assertion that "Photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal... [and] help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure..." (Sontag, 6) I believed that photographing this space would have a reciprocal effect and that, beyond a sense of being grounded and taking ownership, I would also feel like I belonged to this place. Through the act of photography I searched for the beauty that Robert Adams describes as "... a synonym for the coherence and structure underlying life." (Adams, 24) I wanted to understand that structure and see the coherence that existed in the Great Plains landscape.

Nine Mile Prairie became a specimen for me to examine, explore and photograph. Photography allows for a unique and direct existential relationship between the photograph and its subject. While work created in other mediums can be produced in the presence of their subject, a photograph can only be made when the subject exists in front of the camera: in order to create my photographs I had to interact with the landscape directly.

Each time I returned to Nine Mile Prairie, I would notice subtle differences that gave insight into the systems underlying the landscape. I chose to photograph primarily in the fall and winter when the landscape was dormant and cold. However, glimpses of green could be found in the yellows and browns of the land as it rested. I

found subtle indications of life that became symbolic of the annual growth and death processes of the landscape. The photographs describe the latent potential of the plants inhabiting the space – a quiet sense of possibility that will soon be fulfilled.

Photographing during these times of the year also allowed me to organize and make sense of a landscape that from a distance has no distinguishable features, but that upon closer inspection is full of life and shows the signs of the natural and human processes underlying the land. In fall and winter, these processes become visible through the lack of foliage where they would otherwise be obscured. According to Robert Adams, form and beauty “[help] us meet our worst fear, the suspicion that life may be chaos and that therefore our suffering is without meaning.” (Adams, 25) He writes, “a photographer can describe a better world only by better seeing the world that is in front of him.” (Adams, 26) With the ability of photography to capture and organize individual details by separating them from their surroundings my work is able to examine particular elements of interest and place them in context with the greater whole of the landscape.

In creating this work I have become rooted in a landscape that I once considered shapeless and bleak. I found beauty and form in the small portions of prairie among the corn and soybean fields. By revealing this overlooked beauty I hope my work leads viewers to reflect on the relationship they have with their own landscapes and encourages a deeper exploration and understanding of the spaces they inhabit.

Works Cited

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