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Zero Street

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ZERO STREET

by

Keith Graham

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 Karen Kunc

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2016

Zero Street

Keith Graham, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Karen Kunc

"It becomes oppressive when important events, important changes, can't break through to the surface of life and are continually unable to fulfill themselves. The still invisible and uncrystallized fact that is to be realized in the future is already growing, swelling, beginning to push through into a preexisting reality, which, however, doesn't want to yield. It gets tighter and tighter, and therefore more and more suffocating. The lack of air increases our feeling of helplessness. We watch the gathering of the clouds and wait for a voice to speak from them, reading us the inexorable verdict of fate."

-Ryszard Kapúscíński¹

Zero Street is a highly subjective visual portrait of Lincoln's central artery, with the title borrowed from a poem by Allen Ginsberg.² Taking my immediate surroundings as a starting point, my thesis examines the physical reality yet suggests states of awareness beyond it. The subject encompasses the ways things become timeworn through use or neglect and the people who inhabit and reflect such worn spaces.

¹ Another Day of Life, p. 101. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. In this personal narrative of the Angolan civil war, the Polish journalist Kapúscíński describes the sensation of living in a city under siege in language that suggests wider implications. It is as though all of life is a chrysalis, a stubborn husk both nurturing and resisting the new world which will succeed it.

² Allen Ginsberg, Wichita Vortex Sutra, 1966. Dictated onto tape recorder while traveling between Wichita and Lincoln, the poem is a patchwork of contrasts delivered in a Whitmanesque voice: highways and towns seen from the blur of a moving car, weather reports, the innocent ripeness of young midwesterners, newspaper headlines from the war in Vietnam.

In the popular imagination Nebraska stands in for someplace far away and empty. Of course it is far from empty, physically, culturally or historically. At the same time the idea of emptiness as a subject is relevant to me. The sky has an overwhelming presence here: objects placed against it become monumental and we are dwarfed by the scale of the sky and the plains. By imposing the rigidly structured grids of utility and commerce on our landscape it could be that we have filled our spaces with meaninglessness. Emptiness enters my work in various ways, in a direct yet vacant gaze, in views of uncared-for spaces, or in the dull browns and tans of winter.

I think of myself a naturalist of sorts, looking for meaning in small things. My working method is to observe, gather and present. My sketchbooks and bookworks are filled with everyday details, collected impressions and unexpected elements. With a broad filter I am willing to accept most anything as potential subject matter. I look at the built environment and the passing of innumerable faces as an assembly of artifacts, and attempt to respond honestly with artifacts of my own making.

Printmaking is important to me because of its particular graphic qualities. The decisions I make along the path from idea to matrix to print elevate the final image, while the distancing nature of printed marks ensures that my hand is present but once removed, lending the work a sense of translation. I consider the interaction of color, density, opacity and line weight in seeking to form a unified whole. I find the final print becomes a distillation of many elements, in which I attempt to balance texture and simplicity, sequence and meaning, efficiency and time. For me the ongoing challenge of the medium is to achieve spontaneity within a system.

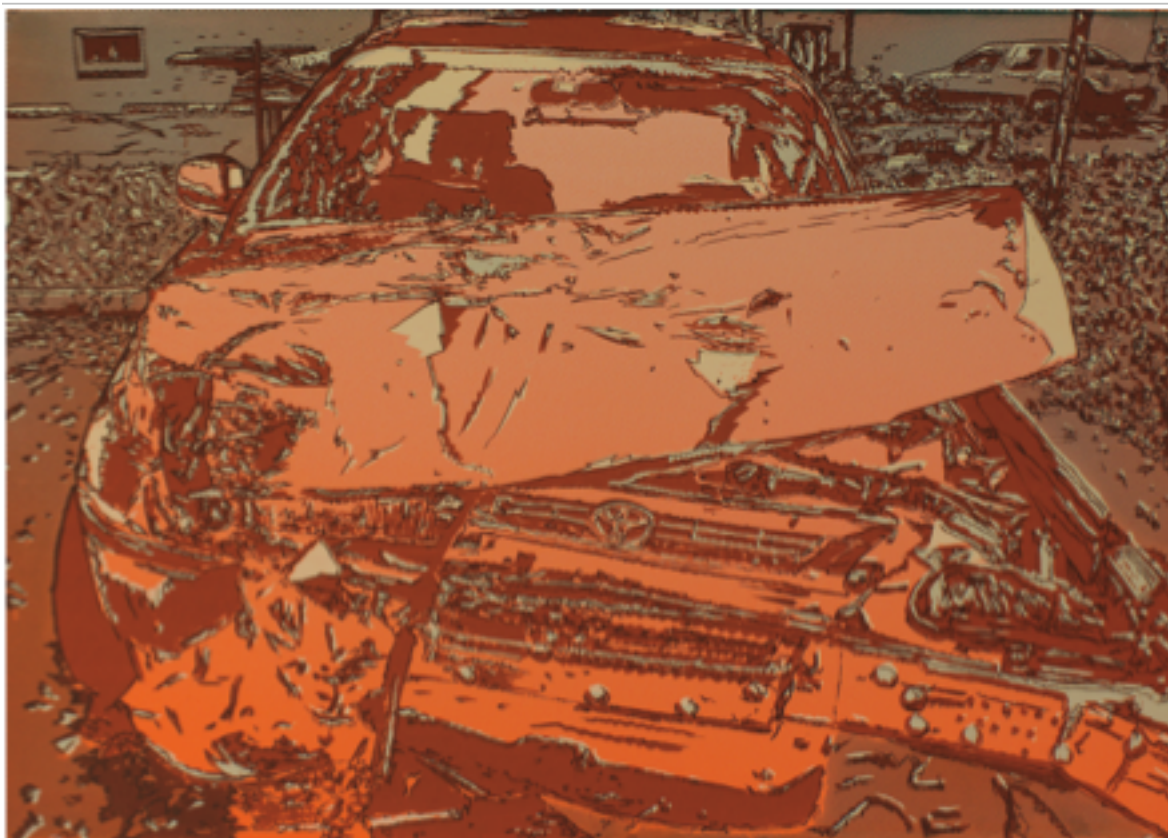
Layering has been particularly important in this work as it allows me to introduce subtleties of pattern and color. A halftone pattern can highlight or obscure, when overlaid it can appear to buzz or glow, and it can stand alone to form its own specific atmosphere, mediated by the look of commercial production. To me layering suggests embedded history, a tension between the surface and what lies beneath.

Within the overwhelming presence of the commonplace in this Zero place, the images resonate for me on many levels. Parallel lines of thought: I know of the observation of small things; I know of the discovery that one image can stand in for a larger concept; I sense that perhaps I'm not talking about Lincoln at all but instead presenting other issues entirely. Another thought is more personal, relating to my identification with place and sense of belonging. Having grown up next to one of the largest industrial districts on the west coast, I have always found beauty in dilapidation, "those dead neighborhoods shut away and buried in a corner of a busy and lively town."³

My intention in Zero Street is to orchestrate a conversation across images. My work interrogates the circumstances of life in a city that has much in common with other American cities. I question how people, objects, and phenomena can become invisible to us. We shape the world and it in turn shapes how we move through it; rarely, we experience the contingent and constructed quality of our surroundings and see beyond the nothingness of zero.

³ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 16. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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Zero Street

Keith Graham
MFA Thesis Exhibition

"My wonderful junkyard! The mystery and dreams you find in a junkyard..."
-All About Eve

April 18-22, 2016
Closing Reception Friday April 22 5-7 pm
Gallery Hours 12:30-4:30 pm
Eisentrager-Howard Gallery
Richards Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

keithdouglasgraham.tumblr.com

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***The Nebraskans* detail**



***The Nebraskans* detail**



Book display and *Family Portrait*



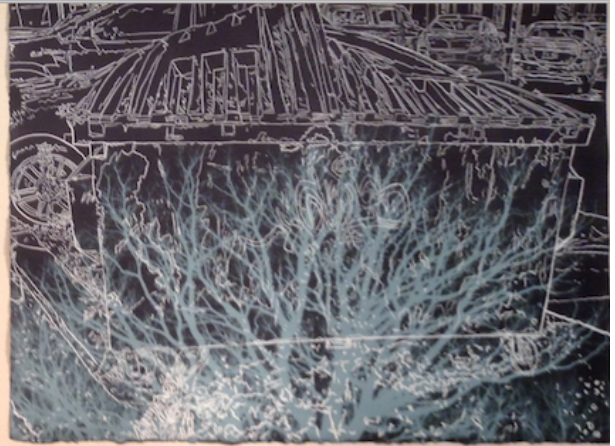
The Sea-Bed and Lust for the Hideous books



Family Portrait



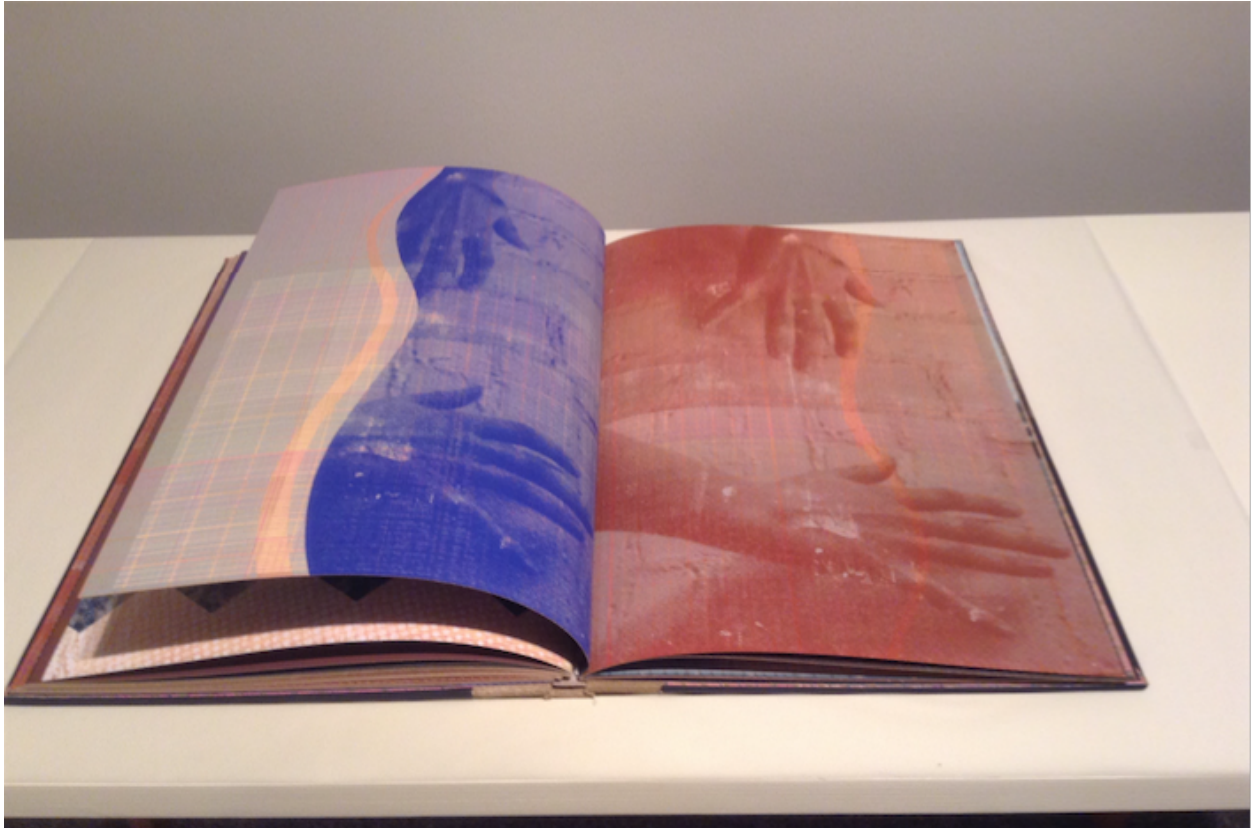
Zero Street full view



Zero Street detail



Zero Street detail



Axis Mundi book