

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Theses, Dissertations, and Student Creative Activity,
School of Art, Art History and Design

Art, Art History and Design, School of

4-2018

Someday I'll Find the Sun

John-David Richardson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, johndavidrichardson1@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artstudents>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

Richardson, John-David, "Someday I'll Find the Sun" (2018). *Theses, Dissertations, and Student Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design*. 129.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artstudents/129>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art, Art History and Design, School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Student Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

SOMEDAY I'LL FIND THE SUN

by

John-David Richardson

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 Walker Pickering

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2018

SOMEDAY I'LL FIND THE SUN

John-David Richardson, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Walker Pickering

I am a product of poverty. The atmosphere of my childhood prepared me for a world where economic and social worth is defined by class. I was raised by my mother and her countless male partners amidst a backdrop of violence and neglect. These men would come and go, each one exhibiting more violent and destructive behavior than the one before. My family fought to make ends meet, but their efforts constantly fell short due to addiction, domestic violence, and a lack of education. This unrelenting cycle shaped my worldview at an early age, and I came to understand family as a collision of love and hate.

My childhood memories exist only as isolated fragments of time, like a puzzle I'm continually piecing together. I use photography as a tool to remember, understand, and interpret the complex and traumatic environment that shaped me. Through my artistic process, I am looking to reconstruct my class identity by immersing myself in a once familiar place. Academia provides the intellectual distance to analyze the systemic issues that contribute to poverty. As someone who identifies with those of the underclass, I feel an obligation to address these issues through my work.

I am drawn to art that encourages the viewer to understand the human condition. For many years, the turmoil in my home created emotional detachment between my mother and me. Because of this separation, I seek intimate connections with people that mirror members of my family—developing lasting relationships with the people I photograph. Creating portraiture that balances between beauty and grit, I humanize an

overlooked and often stigmatized group of people. Their bodies reveal signs of abuse and neglect, scars that reflect the narrow choices presented to them by a system of social and economic oppression. Growing up under these conditions creates a seemingly inescapable trajectory. It is difficult not to follow the path presented to you as a child.

In *Eyes as Clear as Water*, ^{Fig. 1} a young mother submerged in shallow water suggests the Madonna and Child. Her visage emits a strength that contrasts the reality that she may be too young to take on the responsibilities of parenting. The figure's gaze and body language in *Man of Steel*, ^{Fig. 2} reflects the persona worn by some as a defense mechanism. While making this photograph, the intensity of his gaze reminded me of the men my mother would bring home. I saw these men as impenetrable, fearless, and unstoppable. These characteristics stem from living a life where every bit of humanity and dignity is stripped from you, and the attitude you adopt serves as a suit of armor.

Interior scenes of intimate spaces, both public and private, show signs of life without the presence of the figure. *Kitchen Table*, ^{Fig. 3} uses the dramatic lighting, symbols of mortality, and references to time to draw a connection to baroque still life painting. A large catfish is laid across a glass kitchen table, and an ashtray full of cigarette butts sits in the background. Catfish are commonly thought of as bottom-dwelling fish, much like people in the underclass are seen as the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. *A Moment to Breathe* ^{Fig. 4} alludes to the trace of a person. The flat beer and pile of scratch-off lottery tickets invoke a sense of isolation and desperation that is often felt by the people I photograph. Metaphorically, this piece becomes about the search for a breath and finding that moment of escape in a familiar place.

Supporting photographs, printed at a smaller scale, provide context to the portraits and interior scenes. These images function poetically, relying on symbolism and metaphor to reinforce ideas of neglect, violence, tension, and the expectations of family. *Fence*, ^{Fig. 5} depicts a young man turned away from the camera while shadows of a chain link fence are cast across his back. The graphic shadows and his guarded body language reinforce the feeling of being confined by the cycle of poverty. In *Love to Fly*, ^{Fig. 6} the decal of an eagle on the side of an RV consumed by overgrowth symbolizes the false reality of upward mobility in America.

The United States is built on a history of social and political conditions principally organized to control subsets of the population. As a result, these people continue to suffer from a lack of resources. Social stratification designed by those in power allowed the upper and middle classes to identify those living in poverty as “the other.” The backbone of the American Dream relies on our forefathers’ assurances to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Despite these promises, for families that suffer from multigenerational poverty, this goal is often little more than a pipe dream.

In *Someday I’ll Find the Sun*, I ruminate on my family’s troubled history by building relationships with those of a similar background, finding people that are simultaneously callous and tender. Through forging these relationships, I’m coming to terms with my bloodline. Using photography, I hope to generate a conversation about the class divide that consumes our country, and the people most affected by a system constructed to benefit those in power.

SOMEDAY I'LL FIND THE SUN

John-David Richardson, M.F.A.

Figure List



Figure 1, John-David Richardson, *Eyes as Clear as Water*, 2016, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 2, John-David Richardson, *Man of Steel*, 2017, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 3, John-David Richardson, *Kitchen Table*, 2017, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 4, John-David Richardson, *A Moment to Breathe*, 2018, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 5, John-David Richardson, *Fence*, 2017, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 6, John-David Richardson, *Love to Fly*, 2017, Archival Pigment Print

SOMEDAY I'LL FIND THE SUN

John-David Richardson, M.F.A.

Thesis Exhibition Documentation





