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# THE THIRD COAST

Catherine J. Davis

27 Pages

The Third Coast is a photographic exploration of the vernacular landscape of the US Gulf Coast. Stretching some 1,600 miles from the mouth of the Rio Grande in Texas to the Florida Everglades, America's southernmost shore is vast and complex. The region is a patchwork of both the natural and built environments, a tangled combination of history and geography, culture and ecology that reflects an intimate and ever-evolving relationship between man, land and sea. The Gulf Coast resists tidy hierarchies or easy classification. Rather, the rhythms of the region comprise its own syntax, a way in which seemingly dissimilar locations speak to one another with awareness and familiarity. More than just describing the landscape, this body of work looks to explore the Third Coast's visual vocabulary, its sense of place, and the recurrent themes that create the area's distinct material and cultural identity.

KEYWORDS: Gulf Coast, Landscape, Photography

THE THIRD COAST

CATHERINE J. DAVIS

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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THE THIRD COAST

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C.J.D.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“When all the lands will be filled with people and machines, perhaps the last need and observance of man still will be, as it was at his beginning, to come down to experience the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

- Carl O. Sauer

Deep, dark, infinite, and immense, the ocean appeals to humanity like little else on Earth. Since our earliest days, this mercurial body of water has played a powerful role in shaping human life, alternatively separating and connecting us, sustaining us and swallowing us whole. Our fascination with sea runs deep. Perhaps it is in our DNA. In *Land and Life*, geographer Carl O. Sauer mused that the “continuous and inexhaustible” ocean might have presented early humans with “the best opportunity to eat, settle, increase, and learn.” Rather than civilization actively appropriating the water, he suggests that it may have been the shoreline, with its fluid, liminal features, that created the “congenial ecological niche in which animal ethnology could become human culture.”<sup>2</sup> Today the coast remains a site of an intricate and an ever-evolving relationship between humans, land, and sea.

Stretching some 1,600 miles from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the Florida Everglades, the US Gulf coast is vast and complex. Buffered by warm, shallow seas, the climate along the water’s edge is consistently humid and mild with abundant sunshine and ample precipitation. Land here is naturally flat, rising on average only a few dozen feet above the ocean’s surface. Small waves and weak currents sculpt the coast into smooth, broad beaches, while narrow island

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<sup>1</sup> Carl O. Sauer, *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (University of California Press, 1963), 311.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 309.



chains cling to the mainland like silhouettes made of sand. Native tribes combed these littoral zones for resources long before Columbus ‘discovered’ the New World. Now, lured by sun and surf, thousands of modern travelers regularly vacation along America’s southernmost shore. Over thirty-eight billion dollars flow into the Gulf Coast every year from people wanting to escape their day to day lives and experience the sea.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the beaches, long, semi-submerged stretches of tidal marsh and mangrove forest cover the coast. These fertile habitats provide critical breeding grounds and aquatic nurseries for countless commercial seafood and sport fishing species. The same topographical features that generate this ecological productivity, have also made the Gulf coast attractive to energy interests. Millions of years of nutrient dense water and decaying organic material have created vast offshore oil and gas deposits. Combined with capital investment and easy oceanic transportation, these crude resources have helped to transform the region into a principal hub of the nation’s petrochemical commerce. Industrial facilities along the shore, including refineries, steel mills, and chemical plants create “a landscape of industrial muscle on par with any in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Gulf is a place like no other. *The Third Coast*, is my love letter to this region, a photographic reexamination of the vernacular landscapes of my youth and a lingering exploration of spaces hereto undiscovered. This body of work seeks to understand the recurrent themes that together create the area's distinct material and cultural identity. It focuses on a specific visual vocabulary of the Gulf Coast: newly-built houses rising like monoliths above the tides, industrial pipelines subsumed by muddy water, palm trees as stylized icons, and fiberglass

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Jacobsen, *Shadows on the Gulf* (Bloomsbury, 2011) 148.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh S. Gorman, “The Houston Ship Channel and the Changing Landscape of Industrial Pollution,” in *Energy Metropolis*, ed. Martin V. Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt (University of Pittsburg Press, 2007) 52.

sharks marking toothless tourist displays. Thematically, these photographs investigate moments where a complex combination of elements -- historical and geographical, cultural and ecological -- collide. Tonally, they reflect a place caught in an endless process of development and dissolution. Beyond just describing the topography, this project looks to appreciate the Gulf Coast as a unique and particular place worthy of attention and respect.

In this statement, I will discuss the conceptual framework that undergirds my image making. Since all “[p]laces are cued visually,”<sup>5</sup> I will begin by looking at the role of visual perception in depicting the Gulf Coast. In particular, I am interested in the perspective of both the native and the tourist in ‘seeing’ this space as well as own experiences assessing the landscape. I will then unpack our notion of place, “a concept fundamental to the study of landscape,”<sup>6</sup> as well as how our sense of place is influenced by a complex accumulation of elements, both the natural and man-made. Because I am particularly interested in the specific visual vocabulary generated by the coastal environment, I will examine the relationship between language and the vernacular landscape, how the rhythms of the region allows dissimilar locations speak to one another with awareness and familiarity. Lastly, I will reflect on my use of photography to represent the Gulf. Looking at light quality, color, and visual scale, I will discuss how my compositional choices are used to capture the textural qualities of the region and express my interest in it.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 4.

## CHAPTER II: THE NATIVE AND THE TOURIST

“I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes.”<sup>7</sup>

- Wallace Stegner

In my investigation of the Gulf Coast, the notion of *how* one ‘sees’ is particularly important. As previously discussed, the landscape is both natural and cultural. Thus, the way in which we view our surroundings greatly influences our understanding of its traits, character, and meaning. Who does the looking is often just as significant as what is being looked upon. This is particularly true when considering a photograph. An image, once taken, transforms a three-dimensional, durational moment into a flat, static, representation of itself. The optical perspective of the camera strictly delimits the audience’s field of vision. The photographer’s perspective defines not only what elements are included within the four, finite walls of the picture frame but also how those components are visually arranged. Rather than simply depicting what exists, an image illustrates what an individual *chooses* to observe. Thus, a picture is “not just a record but an evaluation of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Understanding this concept is significant in that it undercuts the impression of a photograph as an impartial document. Rather, a picture is an object grounded in the perceptual values and predilections of its maker. Like all artistic endeavors, one’s photographic perspective is strongly influenced by one’s background. Where and how we form our primary sense of identity, and thus our point of view, is often closely associated with the material and cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Howarth, “Reading the Wetlands,” 75.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Sixth Printing, 1978) 88.

circumstances in which we came of age. “Natural environment and world view are closely related; world view, unless it is derived from an alien culture, is necessarily constructed out of the salient elements of a people’s social and physical setting. . . Like means of livelihood, world view reflects the rhythms and constraints of the natural environment.”<sup>9</sup> Much like sight, these contexts are the principal lens through which we grasp our lived experience. They form the basis of our outlook and provide a benchmark against which all future encounters are measured.

Despite being grounded in a formative identity, our everyday sense of perspective is fundamentally situational. An individual’s evaluation largely depends on who they are and where they are located. For example, locals and tourists may occupy the same physical location and yet understand and perceive that space in completely different ways. “Visitor and native focus on very different aspects of the environment,” writes Tuan. “Generally speaking, we may say that only the visitor (and particularly the tourist) has a viewpoint; his perception is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures.”<sup>10</sup> This statement does not diminish the local point of view, but rather highlights the acute awareness of the outsider to novelty and difference. Tourists come as strangers to the land. They, rather than natives, consider the landscape with a newfound perspective. Their engagement with place is transient and superficial, yet it is this shallowness that allows the visitor to conceptualize a location in terms of imagery rather than utility.

“The native, by contrast,” Tuan states, “has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike the casual visitor, locals do not survey their surroundings seeking what is unique, pleasurable, or interesting. Instead, locals must contend with the boring, unpleasant, and tedious actualities of living *in* the environment. This

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<sup>9</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia* (Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974) 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

mirrors the semantic difference between landscape and place, in that landscape is something to be looked at whereas place is something to be lived within. It is the intimate and prolonged contact with their surroundings that creates the sensitivity and nuance inherent to the perspective of an insider. It is also what marks their perception of place as proprietary. Indeed, “[w]hat is authentic about us – our very identity – is inextricably bound up with the places we claim as our own.”<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the impact and allure of place is not limited only to those few locations that we call home. Sometimes our interest in a locality can just as well stem from feelings of connection and attraction to a space rather than the length of time that we spend within its borders. “Many years in one place,” observes Tuan, “may leave few memory traces that we can or would wish to recall; an intense experience of short duration, on the other hand, can alter our lives.”<sup>13</sup> I am not native to the Gulf Coast; nor am I a stranger. I was raised in North Texas but traveled to the coast quite frequently as a child. These trips were short, yet they imprinted themselves deeply upon me. To this day, I can vividly recall the tepid, mud-colored water of the beaches. I remember the unyielding heat that blistered my fair skin, the scent of salt and commercial detergent, citrus and fish heads.

The Gulf rarely felt exotic or striking the way postcards of other oceans did and for a long time it simply faded into background of my awareness, formative yet largely ignored. Although the width and breadth of my experience with the shore continued sporadically while I lived in the South, I never thought to turn my camera on the Third Coast. This may have been because as a habitual visitor, I was still simply too close to the subject matter. In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag quotes Berenice Abbott as saying, “[i]f I had never left America, I

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<sup>12</sup> Bodenhamer, Corrigan, Harris, *Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 185.

would never have wanted to photograph New York. But when I saw it with fresh eyes, I knew it was my country, something I had to get down in photographs.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly to Abbott, it wasn’t until I returned from the Midwest that I felt an urge to investigate the Gulf. In revisiting the coast, I realized that ‘it was my country’ and I felt compelled to re-examine it through the camera’s lens.

In this context, my view is neither that of a native nor that of a tourist. Like Tuan’s sightseers, my perception is very much based on ‘composing pictures’ with my eyes. Yet this same outlook, however, allows me to see beyond the coast’s traditional ‘seaside’ imagery. The combined vantage point allows me to be both critical and sentimental when viewing the landscape, focusing on the more localized, nowhere spaces that nevertheless contain meaning and value. These are liminal spaces that occur at the edges of spectacle, where the highly constructed experience of the Gulf begins to break down. In *Topophilia*, Tuan claims, that “even small cities sell postcards, revealing a faith in the worthiness of their main street, parks, and monuments. Postcards depict aspects of the town that are believed to do it credit.”<sup>15</sup> By producing images of overpasses, unmarked cemeteries, and indoor pools, I am asserting their ‘worthiness.’ Yet unlike main street postcards, the spaces that I depict undercut easy notions of the coast and reject it as a site of simple visual consumption.

Case in point, my image entitled *State Pier* (Figure 20) is by definition a non-place. Alternately subsumed and exposed by the sea, the underbelly of this jetty is not a primary site of human occupation but rather a setting created by default. The main attraction, a hundred-foot wharf built to accommodate fishermen, hangs overhead. The area below exists only because the

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<sup>14</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Tuan, *Topophilia*, 204.

rhythmic fluctuation of the tides required the pier to be hoisted above the high-water line. The stout, concrete pillars sunk deeply into soft, foot-marked sand create an inadvertent reminder of the different ways in which humans impact the landscape. Their bulk frames an ocean view whose bright skies and aquamarine hue portends the “interest and pleasure”<sup>16</sup> of the vacationer’s gaze. Yet, the space itself is marginal, appreciated only in passing by those intimate enough with the setting to value the midday shade over the lofty, elevated view.

Gohlke notes that “[a]pproached attentively, any place may persuade us to linger in an attempt to locate the source of its attraction.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the power of place rests largely in our ability to stop and ‘see’ the physical characteristics of the scene before us. Yet how we experience that place, and thus understand its significance, is grounded as much in act of perception as in the thing perceived. This is complicated by both my mediation as an artist and the vehicle (the camera) through which I represent coastal landscape. The result is not *the* representation of the Gulf Coast, so much as it *a* representation of the Gulf Coast, *my* representation of the Gulf Coast, in particular. This does not make the image any less ‘true’ but rather provides the necessary distance in order to engage with its contents in a more critical way.

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<sup>16</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Gohlke, “Thoughts on Landscape”, 197.

### CHAPTER III: THE COAST AS PLACE

“The world comes bedecked in places. It is a place-world to begin with.”<sup>18</sup>

- Edward Casey

To begin untangling the visual language of the Gulf Coast, we must first acknowledge the role of place in its construction. ‘Place’ is an ostensibly simple yet conceptually loaded term. The word itself is versatile. As a verb, it identifies, orders, or situates. As a noun, it suggests position, condition, or role. For the purposes of this project, I am thinking about place in a geographical sense. Within this context, place is conceptualized as a division of space, a fixed location that can be delineated and quantified. Yet, as William Howarth explains “[p]lace differs from the geometrical idea of *space*” in that “space is an abstraction with limited semantic reach.”<sup>19</sup> At its core, space is an inescapably vacuous notion, occupying the hollow gaps between erstwhile designated concepts. Place, on the other hand, “animates a broader range of human experience... Place sustains the fundamental concepts of time and space, the earth and maps, forms of writing, the sacred and profane, gardens and buildings, social order and disorder, political status, region and nation.”<sup>20</sup>

To invoke place is to draw upon a multitude of interrelated subtexts, linking individuals to their environment and to each other. Our perception of place hinges on these networks of

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<sup>18</sup> David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, Trevor M Harris, Introduction. *Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives* (Indiana University Press, 2015) 14.

<sup>19</sup> William Howarth, “Reading the Wetlands,” in *Texture of Places*, ed. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, Karen E. Till (University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 57.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



implied meaning. The very designation transforms the imprecise vacancy of ‘somewhere’ into a specified ‘there’ upon which we map various layers of personal and social significance. This makes place a singularly anthropocentric concept. The genesis of the notion is rooted not in externalized localities but rather in human recognition and demarcation. To create place, someone(s) must first select a site, a particular part of the greater, undifferentiated whole, and brand it as separate and unique.<sup>21</sup> Thus, place cannot exist apart from the act of classification; rather, it is *in* the identifying and labeling of space that place is created. As professor of photographic culture, Liz Wells writes, “[t]he act of naming is an act of taming.... Naming turns space into place. Once named we no longer view somewhere as unknowable – although as yet relatively little may be known.”<sup>22</sup>

In *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, geographer John A. Jakle quotes architectural writer John Donat, saying “[p]laces occur at all levels of identity, my place, your place, street, community, town, city, region, country, and continent... They all overlap and interpenetrate one another and are wide open to a variety of interpretations.”<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, some localities (such as the coast) seem to exert a greater pull on our collective imagination than others. These places are experienced intuitively by both residents and visitors, engendering strong feelings of character and identity. This sense of place emerges from a combination of both the physical landscape and the cultural worlds into those spaces are socialized. For example, the cultural and environmental traits of the American South are collectively recognized largely because we have a foundation of geographical knowledge that flags this area as a certain type of cultural and

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<sup>21</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977) 6.

<sup>22</sup> Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011) 3.

<sup>23</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 7.

environmental place. As geographer John A. Jakle notes, “[e]ach individual ‘sees’ a landscape and its place implications differently,” yet because place is a symbolic notion rooted in social reality, “people tend to share similar place predispositions to varying degrees.”<sup>24</sup>

This idea suggests that the landscape is neither natural nor neutral. Instead, it is a symbiotic patchwork where ecology and humanity speak to and inform one another, altering our perception of both. “Most societies distinguish between nature and culture and consider that distinction important...” asserts human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. “Although the distinction is clear at a conceptual level, nature and culture so interpenetrate that it is often hard to say of an object or behavior whether it is more the one than the other.”<sup>25</sup> Along the shore, this interdependence is on open display. The warm waters and mild climate of the Gulf have traditionally supported rich ecosystems that have in turn facilitated the colonization and development of human civilization along the shore. Many of the entrenched environmental features that have yielded the iconic Gulf Coast landscape have also driven the expansion of modern housing, transportation and industry that now compete with the natural world for space and resources.

The labyrinthine swamps and marshlands dotting the US Gulf Coast typify such a location. In my photograph, *Wetland* (Figure 15), the verdant expanse of the bayou consumes our field of view. The atmosphere of the photograph appears thick and hazy. Sluggish, tinted water dominates the lower third of the composition. Thick, gnarled vegetation and waterlogged terrain pushes in on all sides. The space feels isolated and dreamy, with a subtle element of disquiet trickling just beneath the surface of the picture plane. Because we view all images through the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature and Culture* (Island Press, 1993) 8.

lens of human perceptions, we cannot help but insert our culture and psychology into its reading. Thus, our impression of this image/place is a direct response to our relationship to the wetlands themselves. In William Howarth's essay *Reading the Wetlands*, literary scholar Peter A. Fritzell notes that these spaces "do not cater to established, classical concepts of vista, horizon and landscape." Rather, "...wetlands are claustrophobic. They force you inward, both upon yourself and upon the nonhuman world."<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, our experience of place can also stem from a complex combination of environmental and sociological factors working together within the landscape. Rather than derive a sense of identity from nature alone, some locations develop their character from the interplay between the natural and constructed systems. Indeed, Jakle maintains that "[t]he search for character involves interpreting the objects of place as symbols of human intent."<sup>27</sup> In my photograph, *The Mississippi* (Figure 17), flat, grey skies and dull, leaden water supply a monotone palette. Scraggly, leafless trees cling to gravel banks, their natural tangle contrasting with the straight, smooth contours of an industrial pipe slicing resolutely through the foreground. In the background, a tug boat sits moored, while commercial shipping barges slowly navigate the wide, listless river along the horizon line. The whole image engenders feelings of bleak abandonment. The colors of nature bleed together with that of commerce, until both are neutralized.

In his book, *Place: An Introduction*, Tim Cresswell states that all places, rather than simply being geographical locations, can also be considered as forms of *assemblage*, a "gathering of things, memories, stories and practices... made up from the relation between the

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<sup>26</sup> Howarth, "Reading the Wetlands," 65.

<sup>27</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 76.

parts that are always changing.”<sup>28</sup> Within this framework, the Gulf Coast reflects not only the spatial associations created by place (geography) but also the gradual accrual of place markers over time (history). The interrelation of these two dynamics is at the heart of the coast’s visual landscape. Tuan offers two ways of approaching this relationship. One is to say that place is time made visible.<sup>29</sup> Another is that “[o]bjects anchor time.”<sup>30</sup> The ways in which these objects and actions are embedded into the environment form the core of the region’s collective narratives and sense of culture identity.

This notion of shared character is central to my investigation of the Third Coast. Traditionally, the Gulf Coast is not considered a unified space. While the name may suggest regional cohesion, the seaboard is historically viewed as a handful of discrete territories delineated by conventional geographical borders and organized under separate spheres of political influence. The division shifts our focus towards minute differences between spaces rather than emphasizing their intimate relationships. Texas, Louisiana and Florida each exert immense economic and cultural influence along large swaths of the seaboard. Yet the city of Galveston, TX may have much less in common with Austin than it does with St Petersburg, FL. By calling attention to the similarities within visual landscape, my photographs empathize the region’s interconnectedness. Thus, the act of image-making becomes an act of place-making.

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<sup>28</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015) 55.

<sup>29</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 179.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

## CHAPTER IV: LANGUAGE AND LANDSCAPE

“A great city may be seen as a construction of words as well as stones.”<sup>31</sup>

- Yi-Fu Tuan

Whether or not we actively recognize it, there is a specific visual vocabulary endemic to all places. Like a dialect, this language is vernacular, made up of physical and cultural oddments embedded in the environment. It is also formal, a way of looking at our surroundings as a structural system that can be studied and understood.<sup>32</sup> A location’s morphology, how we see and discuss it, originates in the landscape. Its sense of place lies in the loose conversations that occur space to space, object to object, within our field of view. Its meaning rests in allusion, in the complicated exchanges between the visual lexicon and deeper societal narratives. Exploring a place means not only visually encountering the land, but also coming to consciously understand the way in which that space speaks, its incongruences and patterns, the particular measure of its rhythms.

By and large, our experience of place is structured by sight. Tuan notes that “Sight is valued above all the other senses. True, that we can be persuaded that touch and hearing are more basic... Nevertheless, sight enjoys primacy. It immediately gives us a world ‘out there.’”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative Descriptive Approach,” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81(4), (University of Wisconsin, 1991) 686.

<sup>32</sup> W.J.T Mitchell, Introduction. *Landscape and Power* (University of Chicago Press, 2002) 1.

<sup>33</sup> Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*, 96.

The visceral impact of seeing and the implications of our gaze cannot be discounted. Light is the primary source through which we experience the world. Our spatial experience, the way we understand and navigate our surroundings, is profoundly driven by our perception of light. Jakle quotes the visual artist Gyorgy Kepes, noting ‘[w]ithout light there is no vision, and without vision there can be no visible space. Space in a visual sense is light-space.’<sup>34</sup>

Landscape is, by its nature, conceived of as an intensely visual idea. The term itself refers to the span of the earth’s surface that can be viewed from any one particular vantage point. The word marries subject (the physical terrain) and outlook (the optical perspective), creating a unique way of viewing the world. In her book, *Art Photography Now*, photographic critic Susan Bright writes:

“Photography emerged at a time of continuing and expanding exploration and travel, so in many respects the camera and landscape are intertwined. Coinciding with voyages, colonization, exploration and settlement, the camera enabled travelers to control the unknown visually so that sense could be made of it within terms of reference that were more easily understood.”<sup>35</sup>

Whether picturesque or sublime, landscape as a genre divides space into that which exists to be lived in from that which exists to be seen. It furthermore primes the observer to engage with their surroundings through the lens of a potential aesthetic experience.

The way in which we code this aestheticism forms the basis for how we ‘read’ the landscape. Jakle asserts that every location comprises its own visual syntax. “Not only do objects have meaning like words, but objects relate spatially not unlike a grammatical structure. Objects

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<sup>34</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now* (Aperture Foundation, 2005) 47.

in the environment can have a collective meaning given the visual relationships of place.”<sup>36</sup> No one feature can possibly constitute the entirety of a region. Yet taken as a whole, an interrelated series of imagery allows us to interpret the material environment and establish significance from the things we find there. Like the rhythm and cadence of speech, visual repetition of these moments enables dissimilar locations to speak to one another with awareness and familiarity. These connections accumulate through space and over time, building intersecting layers to form the texture of a place. “Again,” notes Jakle, “seeing in detail is, as well, a search for mutual dependence between part and whole. It is a search for a visual grammar whereby details are seen to sum to something greater than the parts.”<sup>37</sup>

Looking at the southern coast of the United States, we can see the visual vocabulary of the region coalesce into a handful of intermingled motifs: warmth, water, and the ebb and flow of forces (both human and geological) that continuously rework the face of the coastal landscape. These features underpin the Gulf Coast as a place. They comprise the foundational elements of the environment and by extension man’s socio-historical presence along the shore. Their presence dominates the visual and cultural landscape, inundating the region in ways both seen and unseen. Photographer Frank Gohlke makes the case that “[c]ulture creates a gulf between people and the world they inhabit.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast, I assert that culture is, instead, our way of navigating the world we inhabit. Constantly shifting and invariably imperfect, the social landscape nevertheless takes its cues from its environment, incorporating these elements them into the cultural milieu.

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<sup>36</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Frank Gohlke, “Thoughts on Landscape” in *Thoughts on Landscape: Collective Writings and Interviews* (Holart Books, 2009) 196.

The language of the Gulf Coast is grounded in its landscape, yet seeps into interior places as well. Indeed, the separation between inner and outer spaces along the coast often feels indistinct. Restaurants, hotels, museums, and even private homes, regularly draw upon elements of the natural environment reinforcing its connection to the region and its identity. Sometimes, this is done by purposely transporting the outdoors in. In my photograph, *Swamp Room* (Figure 5), almost two dozen taxidermied animals are arranged in front of a painted swamp backdrop. There is an inherent tension between the artificiality of the scene and the room's enthusiastic commitment to the local flora and fauna. In other instances, nature itself removes the barriers dividing interior and exterior settings. In the image *Housing* (Figure 10), the force of a hurricane has stripped away the windows and walls of a dwelling, leaving it open and exposed. Over time vines and palm fronds have begun to slowly penetrate the edges of the home, softening its angular lines and muddling our sense of space.



## CHAPTER V: PICTURING THE GULF

“Landscape photographs rarely ‘shout’, rather, they are quietly assertive.”<sup>39</sup>

- Liz Wells

The act of image-making can fundamentally change the nature of what is being seen. Sontag contends that “[p]hotographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the indexical properties of a photograph are so rooted in the world that we experience that the image itself seems imbued with the authority of the real. Yet picture themselves offer no special access to the truth. In fact, they are little more than derivative information, lifelike illustrations of light reflecting off surface. “The content of images may seem natural,” notes Wells. “But representational and interpretative processes are cultural in that they are anchored in aesthetic conventions. Photographs substitute for direct encounter; they act as surrogates, mediating that which was seen through the camera viewfinder.”<sup>41</sup>

The distance created by the image-making process turns the camera into a uniquely valuable tool of inquiry. “Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.”<sup>42</sup> Both in the making and in the viewing, images witness the world in ways we cannot. Pictures expand and amplify our sense of perception. They “alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a

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<sup>39</sup> Wells, *Land Matters*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Wells, *Land Matters*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.

right to observe.”<sup>43</sup> They prolong moments of observation, enticing us to linger and scrutinize. Photography, far from being a passive document, is a way of understanding and relating to our world. It offers us a separate arena in which to play with context and meaning and revel in the connections that occur both moment to moment within the lens and image to image on the gallery wall.

I chose a camera as my vehicle to explore the Gulf because it enables me to visually investigate the various spatial and thematic relationships that constitute the coast. At the same time, this medium also produces a tangible object which allows me to turn around and re-present that structure and space to others in a visually way. Even though photographs ‘substitute for direct encounter,’ the illusion that they create is so beguiling that we are habitually tempted to engage with them as if they were reality. In his writing on place, Tuan suggests that “[t]he human being can command a world because he has feelings and intentions. The art object may seem to do so because of its form...”<sup>44</sup> embodies a sense of presence that insists upon collective recognition. The photographic form, its vividness and fidelity, commands our attention in a similar manner. Its visual potency circumvents the viewer’s inherent incredulity, encouraging us to suspend our disbelief and instead indulge in the unabashed pleasure of looking.

Constructing images that making use of this aura is a complex process involving more than just technical knowledge. In her book, *Land Matters*, Wells states:

“Artists collect, log and sift through a diversity of information about places in order to deepen the insights that will inform photographic method and processes.

They are not journalists going in and getting the shot; rather they are storytellers

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 162.

whose depth of research and analysis is reflected in the philosophic perceptions and visual rhetorical strategies which characterizes their picture-making.”<sup>45</sup>

In this vein, part of my photographic practice is a deep-seated interest in the role of humans in the landscape. I am primarily interested in the implications of our collective presence upon the spaces we inhabit. Residue from human activity suffuses my image making, even if the individual figures are rarely ever seen. Indeed, many of my photographs of the Gulf Coast appear deserted. Yet this is more about probing marginal spaces than avoiding pictures of people.

Regardless of its method of production, every photograph ever made is derived from the reaction of a photosensitive surface to the presence of light rays. The word ‘photography’ means literally ‘to draw with light’. Thus, nothing impacts our experience of an image like the quality of its illumination. The same scene captured only moments apart can vary vastly if, perchance, the sun suddenly slips behind a dense bank of clouds. One shot may read as bright and optimistic, while the other appears dark and dour. Consequently, the light is responsible for not only begetting photographic imagery but also for inducing a sense of ambience or mood within a given environment. Our very sense of place is tied up in the character of the light. Indeed, “[n]othing is so much a part of landscape as the constantly varying sky.”<sup>46</sup>

The type of lighting that I chose to focus on for this project underscores the natural luminosity of certain seasons and weather conditions along the shore. More importantly, these soft, hazy conditions function as a way to graphically represent the phenomenological experiences of moving through the coastal environment. Although a photograph can capture many aspects of a place, there are some facets that it is ill-equipped to describe. Pervasive heat and humidity are hallmarks of the Gulf Coast landscape. Yet, these elements resist visualization.

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<sup>45</sup> Wells, *Land Matters*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 109.

Hence to create a sense of atmosphere within the airless span of the picture frame, I targeted instances where the light contained a vaporous quality, suggestive of temperature or moisture. Collectively, the intent of these moments is to visually suggest the damp stickiness and intrinsic warmth that dominate the experience of the coast.

For instance, in my photograph, *CLOSED* (Figure 1), golden, early morning light skitters across the sand. Everywhere it touches appears sun-warmed and inviting. The sky is blotted by soft, white clouds that project an idyllic charm at odds with the divergent tire tracks slicing across the beach and the boarded-up cinderblock building lurking in the background. The lighting in this image suggests the warmth of sunrise. Visually, it reinforces a halcyon sense of place, even as other elements undercut that very perception. The discrepancy speaks to the conflict between aspiration and reality along the Gulf Coast. In contrast, my image, *Oranges* (Figure 2), features a grey, colorless sky diffused by fog. The dull lighting, along with the bedraggled grass, unruly trees and a dilapidated boat, paints a harsh picture of this humble seaside grove. Yet nestled within the coverage of lush, emerald leaves, brilliant pops of orange puncture the drab surroundings. The result is a push and pull dynamic between melancholy and cheerfulness, paucity and abundance, fostered by the misty qualities of light.

Color is another compositional tool that I chose to emphasize in my depiction of the southern shore. Color is visceral; it is “a dictator of mood.”<sup>47</sup> Within this series, I utilize specific tones as a type of visual shorthand, connecting spatially and thematically distant elements to one another through the invocation of color. This affiliation not only unifies the images but also points towards a greater geographical cohesion within the region as similar palettes appear again and again across the seaboard. Despite the fact that their subject matter may be completely

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<sup>47</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 105.

different, there is a curious sense of synchrony between photographs that share colors. For example, the images *Float* (Figure 7) and *Motor Inn* (Figure 14) each contain particular shade of muted teal. Although they are physically unconnected, this element of showy color links the two images together and situates them within the same visual world.

Culturally, the Gulf is prone to moments of lurid vibrancy. Flamboyant hues are frequently painted on stucco walls, crafted in neon, or applied to effigies. These distinctly human tones are products of the particular social landscape that nevertheless continues to reflect the tone of the natural environment. Certainly, the ecology of the Gulf contains moments of comparable chromatic richness even if it lacks the garishness of human-made colors. These luxuriant organic hues appear in the verdant green leaves of a sprawling live oak, in the cerulean depths of an ocean view, or the soft, gilded glow of a picnic at twilight. Both the synthetic and natural tones of the Gulf mirror its warm, sub-tropical climate. Yet, as Jakle notes, “[c]olor is not something easily intellectualized, because it plays more on the emotions than on the intellect.”<sup>48</sup> These recurring hues reference and connect to one another across span of the Gulf, yet they themselves do not signify anything apart from their own self referencing allusion to the region’s visual language.

Because the Gulf is a tourist location, the scale and placement of objects is frequently modified as a way to attract the attention to various localities. “The child in all of us is captivated by the bright, the gigantic, the amusing, and the strange,” notes Tuan. “We respond to such objects with wonder, and the anxiety that the strange and gigantic may first arouse can turn into amusement when we see them as harmless, a joke, an exuberance of spirit.”<sup>49</sup> One illustration of

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<sup>48</sup> Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape*, 105.

<sup>49</sup> Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*, 156.

this concept would be the oversized tourist displays that litter many coastal towns. In my photograph, *Tourist Attraction* (Figure 6), a two-story tall shark serves as the entrance to a local souvenir shop. The fiberglass fish fills the picture frame; its monstrous mouth takes center stage. Yet, because of its size and placement, the shark is eye-catching rather than intimidating, humorous rather than horrifying. Scale also operates as a way to assert authority, rather than rendering ostensibly fearsome things benign. Again, Tuan observes that “[a]nything large or exceptional in some other way has the power to command attention; and attention is the beginning of respect.”<sup>50</sup> In my photograph *SOLD* (Figure 11), a partially constructed house looms like a monolith against a delicate, multi-hued sky. Tattered grass foregrounds a smooth segment of freshly poured pavement. The background drops off into abrupt nothingness. The overall effect is one of both power and folly, for despite its brash physical presence, the building itself is fragile and hollow, vulnerable to the might of an unseen sea.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

“The world, in brief, is diverse and complex, and we can understand it only through an appreciation of the uniqueness of places and the events and cultures that they hold.”<sup>51</sup>

- Bodenhamer, Corrigan, Harris

Over the past year, I have had been an amazing opportunity to photograph the Third Coast. Not only have I been able return again and again to this fascinating place, but I have been granted the time and space to reexamine and rediscover a sense of myself in relation to the coast. Although it was not immediately apparent, my initial experiences of the Gulf left a lasting impact on me. It not only informed my perception of the shore but it also kindled a subconscious curiosity in places that were intrinsically complicated rather than merely pleasant. My habitual and early contact with the Gulf Coast from my childhood up to the present day also creates a point of view that is indicative of neither native nor a tourist. Instead I come to the shore in a state of flux, able to see the landscape in a way that is both analytical and loving.

The fundamental qualities of the gulf, both the natural and man-made, make it place like no other. As such, it continues to appeal to my sense of curiosity. As my understanding of the Gulf grows and so too does my appreciation of its inherent complexities. The longer I interact with this patchwork of the natural and built environments, the more I come to value the way the region resists tidy hierarchies or easy classification. Rather, it is the liminal spaces along the shore that grapple with the regions’ tangled amalgamation of history and geography, culture and ecology. It is these locations that I am drawn to, that contain the most meaning and value for me.

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<sup>51</sup> Bodenhamer, Corrigan, Harris, *Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives*, 16.

This body of work will continue to expand and evolve as I continue to revisit the Gulf Coast. Its sense of place and the visual language with which I am able to articulate its features will be developed and refined. By turning my lens on the coast, I will continue to investigate this coast both as a unique and evolving place and as a reflection of my own sense of self.



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