Windows to Reverie: A Photography Exhibition

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Background:

*Windows to Reverie* is my photography exhibition that first showed in Wehrle Art Gallery at Ohio Dominican University from January 12th to the 20th, 2013. The gallery displayed ten 3 foot by 3 foot framed digital photographs of enlarged cloud imagery. In addition to the ten photographs, my artist statement on the wall read:

"The whole world can be brought to life by the command of a hypnotic gaze."

-Gaston Bachelard's *Air and Dreams*

Take a moment to sit and relax. How often do you get the chance to really look up and think? To appreciate every little detail of the world around you? To see how something you think is the same can be so drastically different? Here is your chance.

Reverie is a dreamlike state where you are free to wonder and to question all that is happening in the world around you. Clouds provide the perfect canvas for this form of contemplation. For years I have been photographing clouds, attempting to preserve the beauty and the understanding that I have obtained through letting my mind wander as I watch them drift by. This collection of photographs gives viewers the opportunity to see beyond the clouds and embrace the significance of the fleeting moments in their own lives.

Starting at a very young age I became fascinated by photography. My dad had a Polaroid camera that I would often ask to borrow to take photos. The things I chose to document were often objects instead of people. I began to taking photos of things in nature that I found interesting, like a pile of dirt or a tree line. When walking around finding things to photograph I
would often become distracted by the sky above me. Soon I found that the clouds were more interesting to me than everything else I could see.

**Cataloguing the Moments & Researching:**

I knew that my honors thesis would somehow embrace the use of photography, but I was unsure of what subject matter I wanted to display. I started my research by cataloguing all of the photos I had already taken. I noticed that I had a significant number of cloud photographs, yet I had never understood why they were so significant to me, so I started to investigate.

Part of my research involved looking into other artworks dealing with clouds. One work was Yoko Ono's *Sky TV* that involved bringing sky imagery into the gallery in a way that conveyed motion and a sense of time through video footage. *Silver Clouds* by Andy Warhol and Billy Klüver also interested me because of its interactive nature. In this piece, gallery visitors were able to walk around a room filled with silver helium balloons that changed their location based on air current movement when participants walked around in the gallery. Therefore, this instillation allowed viewers a unique experience with this piece. Finally, one of my other major inspirations was a new artist who I happened to stumble upon while researching these other artists—Thom Surman. Surman's abstract paintings depict natural elements in simplified ways. His pieces bring an emphasis on elements within nature that should be prominent yet remain obscure to others who do not know the original imagery. All of these artists and artworks gave me general ideas of the elements I wanted to include in my presentation. The next step was to try and narrow down what I wanted to emphasize when dealing with the subject of clouds.

When trying to understand any subject, one usually goes to books or articles surrounding the subject first. My research continued with scientific books that explained various weather conditions and the formations of clouds. I learned about the technical terminology and the types
of clouds within my photos, yet this did not yield any greater understanding as to why I decided that cloud photography was so important to me. I eventually read Pretor-Pinney and Sanderson's *The Cloudspotter's Guide: The Science, History, and Culture of Clouds* and Gaston Bachelard's *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. These books were different than the textbooks I initially started my research with, in that they helped to shed light on the personal significance of clouds.

*The Cloudspotter's Guide* discussed both the technical terminology and history of the documentation of clouds, in addition to citing references to other stories or artworks where particular clouds appear. This extra data built up some possible reasoning as to why my interest in clouds had been so substantial. I began to grasp that there are many artists who chose to capture the beauty of clouds in their works, even if the clouds were not the intended focus of the piece. This work emphasized the significance of clouds, stating that "a lazy summer afternoon beneath the candyfloss curls of the Cumulus is far finer than the monotony of a cloudless sky" (Pretor-Pinney 23). This made me realize how I particularly enjoy seeing the beauty in every detail that others may miss. I began to identify how my photos have always been about seeing past what others see and finding those things to hold on to that are always present, yet may not always be appreciated. This book pointed out that "children... have a fascination with clouds" and posed the question as to whether being "wheeled around in prams staring up at the sky as infants [could cause them to] develop a deep connection with the clouds" (24). This resonated with my experiences and I began to try to understand my reasoning for my attachment to clouds. In addition, I recognized that my process of taking photos is usually to take as many pictures as I can and then find the best ones later. The more I began to think about these aspects of my
photography, the more I began to understand my mental state when taking these photos of clouds.

To complement the technical and literal works describing clouds, I looked into the book *Air and Dreams*. To contrast the sterility of the cloud textbooks, this work had a stronger focus on what clouds represent or how they are interpreted from a more philosophical perspective. This text led me to many insights into my own view on clouds. For example, Bachelard claims that "the dreamer always has a cloud to transform. The cloud helps us to dream of transformation" (Bachelard 185). This idea that looking at the clouds can lead to finding solutions directly related to what my experience with clouds. I found that when I was looking up to the clouds, I was looking for answers. Though the clouds did not literally spell out an answer, sometimes it provided a blank slate that served to clear my mind. The concept of looking at a cloud, which scientifically is just a collection of water particles and not a solid form, mimics the idea of having a problem that is not a physical, concrete issue, but rather something that can be clarified or resolved. At this point I began to realize how much the situation I am in when I take photographs is actually essential to the meaning behind them.

**Experimentation & Education about Experience:**

When looking at the scientific aspects of clouds yielded a limited understanding of my obsession, I decided to turn to direct experiments to better comprehend my thought process. I looked into the circumstances I experienced prior to taking a series of cloud photographs, in addition to how I felt during and after a photography session. When I began to document everything I did during this time I started to notice a pattern. Often I would be sitting outside somewhere, working on homework, reading, just thinking about things going on in my life, when suddenly I would be overcome with the need to take photos of the sky. I would start to look off
to see what time it was, or if it was getting dark, and notice something remarkable about the sky. The part of the sky that always drew me in the most was a dramatic shift in shadows or play of light on cloud formations. It would captivate me to the point where I felt the need to chase down the best scenes. Typically I would grab my camera and run down the street to try and get a better angle of a particular cloud. I noticed that I would take hundreds of photos, of what would seem to others to be the same scene time and time again. However, I was always able to identify the subtle differences. I could see where the light was just slightly more vibrant, highlighting a single line in the corner that would draw your eye into the image. My process dictated that I wouldn't review the hundreds of photos I had taken until much longer after the event. In that moment of documenting the sky I was enjoying the process of taking photos, of seeing the sky poke through the clouds, of seeing the light transforming something that is typically seen as dreary and depressing, or ignored all together, into something magical and inspirational.

Just like my analysis of my photographs, I began to question the reasoning behind my photographic process. I began to question why I did not choose to take many photos when there were small clouds or a solid sheet of grey clouds. I tried to decipher why I was so interested in the play of light. I began to question the times in my life when I took the photos. Often when I was struggling with something in my life, I would spend time sitting outside and looking up at the clouds. I would spend that time contemplating and questioning how I felt or what I should do next. I particularly enjoyed listening to the rain because it was calming, so frequently I would be outside on the porch during a storm, pondering my problems. What ultimately took my mind off of my issues was when I would realize the sun peaking through the clouds. Soon the sky would be illuminated with bright rays poking through the scene before me. This is when I would feel compelled to document it. The more I began to question myself, the more I began to see the
parallels to my life. I would first observe the clouds when they were dark and ominous, but I felt motivated to move on and capture something positive and beautiful when I was able to see the good in something. When I could see the sun peaking through the clouds, I knew it was time to take action, that there was some hope. This was what inspired me to take my mind off my problems and find something new to get me through my days. In a way these photographs were therapy to help me find motivation to keep going, even when things were difficult.

**Understanding Personal Significance:**

I proceeded to question why if simply seeing the light shining through the clouds was enough to inspire me, why did I need to take so many photographs? When I started to think about this I began to realize that a lot of my photos were a way of preserving the moment. I have lived in places where the weather is not often spectacular and there are seasons of snow and rain that last for days. Having these photos of the light shining through the clouds serve as a reminder during those times that beauty does exist. More specifically, however, having multiple images helps to preserve and relive the experiences of seeing the clouds clearing or forming the beautiful scene. With this further investigation, I accepted that these photos are less about the aesthetic beauty of the image, but rather more about the experience I gained from taking these photos and seeing these transitions from negativity to positivity. This is when I realized that Bachelard's statement "the whole world can be brought to life by the command of a hypnotic gaze" (186), is true when observing clouds. You are able to find meaning in staring off at something that really isn't there, "eager to seize the invisible world in [your] hands... that is entirely free of the constraint imposed by earth" (187).

In addition, during my photo taking I was always consumed by trying to capture these images that I would literally walk or run to places to attempt to document the full spectrum of
this event. Bachelard had a reason for that too, stating "things themselves are more alien to the subject when they are motionless. When they begin to move, they move in us by arousing our latent desires and needs" (189). When taking these photographs, I often start in a state of uncertainty or frustration. The cloud documentation allows me to run away, temporarily leaving my problems behind to find something that gives me hope. At the end of this process I often feel more at peace. I am satisfied only when the clouds or the sun hitting the clouds are gone.

The Selection Process:

Once I finally understood all of these parts to my reasoning behind photographing clouds, I had to find a way to convey my newfound understanding to others. I had to pinpoint how I could get others to see that clouds can provide freedom and give you the chance to find hope and possibilities when things seemed bleak. Ultimately, I wanted viewers of my work to be able to relive the moments that I had tried to preserve. My first step was to select the pieces that were the most moving to me.

I started off by looking through all of the photos I had of clouds. Starting with a pool of over 5000, I narrowed my field down to 100 and then began to look more closely at the details within each cloud photograph. As I began to look at my pictures I tried to decide how they would be chosen— would I try to find a particular type of cloud? The location in which I took the photograph? A particular color that dominated the image? When looking through my collection I found that I really did not have one specific type of cloud I was drawn to. Therefore, I reasoned that choosing a variety of images would be the best solution to display the complexity of the sky and how, just as people and their problems are different, so are clouds.

In addition, I put thought into what parts of my image would be displayed. A majority of my pictures had some trees or homes in the foreground. The removal of reference objects
removed the notion of size causing the viewer to not realize what size area they are observing. Ultimately, I cropped the photos so that all you can see is the clouds filling the frame. This allows the audience to feel enveloped by the clouds, no matter the actual size of the area the clouds occupied. In addition, the enlarged imagery provided the viewers with a sense of uncertainty as to the photographs' location, thus making them applicable to everyone. It would be easy to think that these clouds could be those in your backyard or halfway across the planet in a place you have yet to visit. This gives every viewer the ability to build a personal tie with the images.

Once I had determined the elements that would be contained within the images, I had to select the specific photographs that exemplified the characteristics of my idea. This was the most difficult part of the process. Having so many images, I tried to decide if I utilize particular photos based off of the stories I knew accompanied them or based off of my prediction of the audience's perception of each piece.

The experience of taking the photos was a significant determining factor in the success of a photograph I had taken. My participation in this event is very personally touching. When I sit looking at the clouds I am almost always by myself, alone with my own thoughts. So when picking photos, I knew that these works had to be images that stood on their own. They had to be individuals. They had to show diversity so that those who would be viewing them would be able to find one that really spoke to them. Therefore, I ultimately chose works based off of my reaction to the final image and not solely my personal connection with them. Each work was approved because it fulfilled my original purpose for watching the clouds so closely— to find that new beginning, that inspiration to try something new, that hope that was not there prior to my time spent watching the clouds.
The Presentation of Works:

During the next stage of the process I had to consider how these works would be seen together. I decided that having multiple images was necessary to help others more fully understand the meaning behind these images. Personally, I did not fully understand why I took these photos until I saw them all laid out in front of me, so I wanted to create that same experience for my viewers. I thought that ten photos would be a sufficient number of works to show a wide range of images and envelope the viewers with cloud images while still remaining individualized to keep their own story. It was then that I decided that each one of these photos were unique works and not parts of a series. Just like each person has a unique perspective, each one of these photos would serve as a unique story.

I narrowed my choice of photographs down by creating a large grid of photos I had cropped. There were multiple rows of images and I had to decide which pieces worked best next to each other. Initially there was a system in place, trying to create a line within the works, but when it was realized that the works would be separated on the wall by a significant amount of space, it became apparent that the lines connecting each piece should not be a prominent reason for choosing one photo over another. Instead a piece should be accepted because it showed something truly remarkable or vivid that would spark some emotional reaction from the viewers. After lots of swapping of alternatives I finally chose the top ten sample works, separating them into two sets of five works for either wall in the gallery.

Next I had to decide all of the details about the appearance of these works. I knew that I wanted to have very simplistic frames to hold the images. The emphasis for this show was centered around the imagery. Therefore, I chose to have a small one inch plain black frame to
hold the images. This stylistic choice was delicate enough to contain the clouds, while not
distracting the viewer from the interior content.

Thought also went into the shape and size of these images. Clouds are organic, undefined
by a particular shape. They have the possibility to be anything: big or small, bold or faint, flat or
rounded. Yet often times we think we are restricted by environment, that we have to behave a
certain way. By closing the cloud images into this equilateral square 3 foot by 3 foot format, it
shows the viewer that even within yourself you can be completely different than everyone else.
The square format drastically contrasts the ideas of clouds being free and almost captures the
image as if it was a Polaroid, temporary and still. The notion of stopping the clouds from being
free, but rather cropping them in tight, forces the viewers to look at the small details they do not
often pay close attention to. In addition, this enlarging of small portions to a larger size brings
the viewers eyes into something unique or special. Most notably however, the use of the square
shape of the photos mimics the ideas of windows, leading you in to see through the cloudy
image. The frames were only an inch off the wall, and the image was actually inset into the
frame. This created the illusion that the clouds were being seen through a window, with the extra
frame in front of the piece acting as the window frame.

In addition, I had to make decisions about what the images would look like. I wanted the
actual pieces to feel light and natural, so I did not want to choose a high gloss paper that would
have a very manufactured look. A lack of glare on the images from the matte paper would allow
the viewer to see the works as if they could be clouds just outside of the gallery walls. The use of
a glossy photo finish would have made the pieces less realistic and disconnected the viewer from
the idea of sitting and observing the clouds in nature.
All of these factors contributed to the idea that clouds are something simplistic and natural, changing in shape and color while still being contained in the sky. Each frame measured the exact same size, serving as a way to unify such drastically diverse pieces.

The most important calculation for this exhibition, was determining how the pieces would be laid out in the gallery. Wehrle Art Gallery was an ideal location to house my show for a few reasons. One was that this space provided ample bench seating to allow for long periods of viewing; this mimicked the process that I would go through during the capturing of these images, so it allowed the viewer to mirror my experiences. The gallery is a long rectangular space with a skylight ceiling to allow light to come in. The two long walls with high ceilings complement the openness of the space. All of these components created a very natural and airy feeling to parallel the environment of being outside observing these clouds. In addition, during the show, the doors to the gallery were opened to the outside to allow for a fresh breeze. This also enhanced the viewing experience by recreating the atmosphere when observing the clouds on a regular basis. The ten 3 foot by 3 foot works were large enough in this setting to fill the room with five works on either wall facing each other. After the final calculations, there was enough space between photos to allow the viewer to see each piece as an individual work and not as a part of a series. Ultimately the gallery layout created a scene filled with clouds that led attendees to experience these images in a way similar to how I originally had created them.

**Titling the Works:**

After I had planned out what the audience experience would be like when entering the gallery, I had to choose the titles of each work. This was a very challenging part of the process because naming the works was something I had never considered. I typically take photos in
multiples, therefore, when I addressing them I use the given memory card ID number and not an actual title.

My process for picking titles to my works was to lay all of the works down on the ground in front of me, try to relive the emotional situation that I was in when I took the photograph, and chose a word that accurately described my relationship with the image. From this analysis each title became some offshoot of what I was thinking in the moment. For example, some titles were directly related to the content of the photos, such as *Connecting*, which displays the lines of clouds that planes have made in the sky as they crossed paths. This title also ties into the idea of all of the locations I have traveled to and from, as well as all of the connections that I have made with people that I hope to preserve. After determining the title of this work, I noticed how a title can help guide a viewer to better appreciate the intended significance of a specific piece. This
gave me the ability to select the titles for the other works in the gallery. The other pieces were entitled *Triumph, Infinity, Resolution, Up, Obstacles, Hidden, Solitude, Reflective*, and *Possibilities*.

*Triumph* is a work about the play of light on clouds as a result of some source of turmoil. Often times my inspiration to take photos of the clouds comes from the transformation period when the clouds go from stormy, dark, and dismal to hopeful and clear. It is especially during these moments that I realize how I look for the hope and clarity from darkness and want to see the good "triumph" over evil.
Infinity was chosen as centerpiece for the left wall because of its look of continuity and endlessness. This piece is more about transforming your own life. We are often given an obstacle and we may struggle to overcome it, but nothing is insurmountable. Every problem is simply an opportunity to be creative and to find new solutions. Therefore, in the creation and titling of this piece, the original image has been rotated 180 degrees to create an image that, instead of having the clouds receding into the skyline, creates a pillowy ground for the viewers mind to walk on. This hints at the idea that there is always support available if you simply look at all of your options and find new ways to see things.
Resolution is a play off of two ideas. The primary idea, however, was that this photograph was taken following a very heavy rainstorm, thus the resolution comes from the clearing of the sky and bringing order and beauty back to the atmosphere. In addition, this concept takes on a second meaning because when trying to enlarge this image, I struggled the most with making sure this image was not pixilated, thus the "resolution" was an issue.
Up is a piece that is also titled for a variety of sarcastic reasons. Initially, the title Up was chosen because when I was working to install the hooks in the back of the piece to mount on the wall, the work was upside down; therefore, the idea of "this side up" was humorous. The more serious meaning behind this piece, however, is that there is a small glowing cloud in the foreground of this work. It seems so innocent and happy, as if it were a slip of paper lightly being swept up by the wind.
Obstacles is one of my most memorable cloud watching experiences. What I appreciated most about that moment in time was that the sky was divided between the light and the dark. It seemed as though the clouds were at war with the sun and they were trying to overtake the sky. I managed to capture the moment when the fun was first beginning to prevail. This notion of overcoming the darkness resonates through a lot of the works of this show and really embraces the idea of a transformation of thoughts in the moment. This work mimics the idea of Andy Warhol's piece Empire, because it also sets the mood for thinking and does not need the viewer's full attention, but rather requires them to spend time being in its presence to get the feel of the work.
My work *Hidden* is probably the most simplistic and obvious cloud image. The reasoning behind the title was that, though something may appear to be one way, you never know what could actually be hidden beneath the surface. The cloud in this image is white and soft amongst a clear bright blue sky. It would appear as if nothing could be wrong, however, this may not be the truth. Outside of this frame there could have been miles of clouds and this was just the last of the storm. The viewer also is unable to tell where the cloud is, making it difficult to judge if it is even relevant to the common viewer.
Solitude is one of the best pieces to summarize what this gallery show entailed. Solitude is by no means the most memorable piece within this show. It is a strong work on its own, however, it is also very simplistic. The use of blended colors within the sky causes it to be seen as beautiful, but also cleansing. It is not too prominent that it diverts your attention from your thoughts, but rather it serves as backdrop to allow you to solidify what is on your mind. Ultimately, this is what the show served to do: to provide that medium that would allow the viewer to experience the process of thinking about oneself and understanding a little more through cloud watching. This idea of getting lost in thought is the notion of reverie.
Reflective was the most recently photographed piece. It was taken during the decision making process of which photographs to incorporate into the show. At the time I was very caught up in thinking about where the things in my life were going and my way over to the student center I was drawn in by the odd way the clouds had formed in the sky. So I took my camera and walked around the parking lot trying to get the best angle of this rippled-water looking sky. This idea that the sky looked like a pond that someone had just skipped a rock across brought the idea of the "reflective" nature of the piece to mind.
Possibilities is the piece that started the whole concept for this show. When this
photograph was taken I was amazed by what I saw in front of me. I was in the car with my dad
and we had not driven in this particular location before, so we were a bit lost. We saw this scene
in front of us and for the longest time believed it to be a coastline with water. When the clouds
slowly began to break apart we gradually came to the realization that we had seen a mirage. We
had both allowed our imaginations to encroach on reality, we had allowed our minds to
transform our surroundings, we had embraced the possibilities. When I took this photo I thought
of how interesting it would be to fool people with photos of clouds— to confuse them— to cause
them to think about what they were seeing. This is where the idea for this show was born.

Overall, the title of each piece was the one additional detail needed to help more easily
convey that these works are not just simple photographs of clouds, but rather they are works of
meaning that pertain to more than just me as the artist. The outcome for the show was to provide an opportunity to share a space for contemplation and facilitate deep and personal reflection. I wanted viewers to get a chance to experience the way one naturally tries to relate to a work, and then give them something to look at in a way that would make them forget they were looking at photographs and instead see the substance within the photograph. To build a relationship with contemplating outside of the show.

The Show Opening & Results:

The gallery opening was the most entertaining for me as the creator of the work. When talking with viewers I found it very intriguing to ask which work was their favorites and have them explain to me why they felt that way. The whole process became similar to a psychiatrist with ink blot tests. I was asking viewers to sit and look at the art while thinking about the things happening in their own lives. The quality of each photograph was equal. The works were equal in size. They were equal in that the only content within the frame was a cloud. Therefore, viewers found certain photos more appealing than others because of personal associations with the imagery, because of their thought processes. In the end, it wasn't so much about the stories I was told that were significant, but rather that each person had some association with each piece that was really impactful.

Documenting the transformations of clouds has been a passion of mine for over 10 years now. It has helped me find inspiration and persevere in difficult times. Reverie is the ability to allow your mind to tap into that inspiration and free yourself from the stress in your life. Clouds serve as that window to let in the insight. Ultimately, I hope that my future works target that same ability to connect with viewers and truly understand a little more about myself and others.
Works Cited
