

FRAGMENTS OF LIGHT: FIGURE STUDIES

by

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Do you see what I see? Probably not, but that doesn't mean I can't show you. As I sit on my bed writing this, a streak of light is cast on the wall across the room. It intrigues me and stirs my soul. I'm very drawn to light, both natural and artificial, and how it describes forms. This interest in light and forms compels me to stop and capture it somehow. In the case of my senior project, it is a study of human figures, resulting in *fragments of Light: Figure Studies*.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, an Italian painter has been a huge influence on my art work. The use of light in Caravaggio's paintings is simply beautiful and has an ephemeral atmosphere to it. I find myself going back to his paintings to seek out more of an understanding of the way he uses light. Caravaggio's technique, Tenebrism, (Italian tenebroso, "murky," dramatic illumination) is a style of painting where chiaroscuro or violent contrasts of light and dark becomes a dominating feature. "With Caravaggio light isolate, it creates neither space nor atmosphere. Darkness in his pictures is something negative; darkness is where light is not, and it is for this reason that light strikes upon his figures and objects as upon solid, impenetrable forms, and does not dissolve them, as happens in the work of Titian, Tintoretto and Rembrandt," Rudolf Wittkower (Wittkower 27).

Tom Hunter, an English contemporary photographer, is an example of a working artist who shares some of my influences, such as the old masters. Hunter's *Woman Reading a Possession Order*, imitates Vermeer's *Girl reading a Letter at an Open Window*. It gave me hope, in that I can make works of art that has been influence from different mediums other than my own.

I have also come across two really interesting websites, [www.fashionphotographyblog.com](http://www.fashionphotographyblog.com) (Understanding Light November 28, 2008) and [www.digitalphotographyschool.com](http://www.digitalphotographyschool.com) (What the Mona Lisa can teach you about taking great portraits by Darren Rowse) that discuss how learning from the masters is a useful tool in photography.

I shoot with a Vivitar 35mm camera and 400 ISO black and white film. I sometimes push my film to shoot in low lighting settings. In the darkroom I print split contrast. Printing this way allows me to have more control with the shadows, blackest blacks, and the highlights, lightest lights, without losing detail in the photograph. I print on warm tone fiber base paper for its contrast qualities.

My initial idea for my senior project was to compose a series of photographs with intaglio prints. I had planned to scan my black and white negatives from the photo shoots that I've done, digitally print them out onto BFK printmaking paper, and then etch a section of the photograph onto a plate and print on top of the photograph. I knew what I wanted to photograph based off my etchings that I had done a year ago. I was working on self portraits, focusing on the anatomy of my body instead of the full figure. I felt it was time to put aside working on self portraits and work with other figures and see where it would lead me. I started to take notice of people around me, particularly my friends and their anatomy. I asked them if they would be models for my photo shoots. I'm very particular in how I compose a photograph. My photo shoots involve a studio setting, where I stage the figures. I only shoot one figure at a time, and this allows me to work with them on an informal and personal level. The lighting I use is

Caravagesques. I shoot in black and white to achieve the dramatic, yet spiritual atmosphere in my photographs. However, shooting in black and white presented its own challenges. I had to figure out what colors to use, from the clothing that the figures wear to the backdrop fabrics, in order to compose the values of tones I wanted in the photograph. I asked two of my male friends, Jared Ronin and Sean Willkens to model for me. I found the anatomy of their hands and arms to be fascinating. I had them wear a black tee-shirt and blue jeans during the photo shoot. My intension of having the subjects fully clothed was because of how I liked the fabrics falling against the forms. It wasn't necessary to have Jared and Sean to be nude as this wasn't about sexuality but intimacy. After the shoots were done, I developed my film, scanned the negatives into the computer, and worked in Photoshop. The size of my photographs didn't need to be printed big; the work didn't call for it. I printed 11x14s onto BFK. The photographs were softer and not as contrasted, which led to questions on my initial idea of what I thought the photographs would look like and what I had. Once I had my photographs printed, I chose a section of the photograph to etch. Kathe Kollwiz, a German printmaker and Alberto Giacometti, a Swiss sculptor, painter, draftsman, and printmaker are influences of my printmaking work. Kollwiz's mark making of her subject matter and Giacometti's drawings are similar to my own mark on the copper plate. My etchings have an expressive, gestural mark, and a weight to the figure. I did a test plate for my one of my photographs, and the process of etching onto the photograph raised some questions. I have not etched on dry paper before so I had to figure out the pressure of the press, so the plate would print on the photograph.

Once it was printed and I had a test print, things did not turn out as I had predicted. I was struggling with the idea of how to have a conversation with both mediums and why I was etching on top of my photographs. It was only until I found out that I didn't have to use both mediums for my senior project to graduate, that the status quota changed. My photographs were strong by themselves.

The next challenge was the paper that I was printing on and how to make my photographs work with that medium. BFK printmaking paper has a certain texture that allows the paper fibers to absorb the ink suited for an etching instead of a digital ink jet, which led to the softness of the tones. This then led to the overall conversation being changed with my photographs. I didn't want to settle for what I had. I wanted the blackest blacks and lightest lights in my photographs. I didn't want to print on digital photograph paper or print traditional black and white photography. I wanted the paper I printed on to be relative to printmaking as I didn't want to lose the printmaking aspect to my senior project, even though I wasn't etching on top of my photographs. I did some research on what types of paper that I could print on without losing the contrast that I had initially wanted for my photographs. I was told that Hahnemuhle paper was a very good paper to print on, though expensive, and that I should look into getting some. The description of the Hahnemuhle German Etching 310 Digital Fine Art paper brought some interest to me. I felt the paper would suit my photographs in the way that I had imagined and keeping in the printmaking aspect. Once I printed on the paper, everything changed. I was relieved.

It was only recently that I became aware of my subconscious reasons for the way I was shooting. In reference of the use of lighting and the subject matter in my photographs, my life is similar to Caravaggio's paintings. I've been in the dark places, wanting to end it all. I didn't see any hope of getting out of where I was. All I could see was this dark, emptiness of nothingness; no light. In Caravaggio's paintings, figures emerge from the darkness into the light. For me it was through God, my Grandma Chicken, and friends, that I was able to see hope and that light again in my life. It was a process that I had to endure, allowing me to become the person that I am now. As an artist I want to show people, through my work, that there is hope and light in this world even though at times, the darkness may seem to be more evident than the light. I composed Jared and Sean, so that their anatomy of their hands and arms emerged from the darkness into the light.

There is also an intimacy to this emergence. I am intrigued by this intimacy because in my own life, I tend to shy away from the touch of another human being. This is not in a sexual way but by affection of love, something that I personally believe, surpasses any other emotions. Before coming to Purchase, I had written off connecting with males because of the hurt and pain that I had endured in my past. I was treated like property in these past relationships, to be used at their convenience and then tossed aside. My emotions had been toyed around with as there was no real connection. I was yearning for affection, which stemmed from not receiving it from my mother. As a result of these experiences, I was left empty, feeling ashamed and full of self hatred, with no hope and a severe

lack of trust. Since coming to Purchase, however, I soon found myself connecting with Jared, and all my ideas of what it means to be in a relationship with a male have since changed. What I saw in Jared made me curious and compelled me to come out of my comfort zone, even though I was scared and vulnerable. This took time though and it didn't happen overnight. Jared reached out in love by taking the time to get to know me as a person, not leaving when things got rough, and gave me hugs even though I pushed him away. By Jared reaching out to me, I in turn started to reach out to Sean. That ties into the concept of intimacy by the forms emerging from the darkness into the light, as found in my photographs. I also wanted to tie this concept of intimacy with the printing paper I used. The "touch" of the paper is very important to the psychology of my subject matter.

My senior project is a journey with many chapters in it. I have endured challenges and emotional processes to get to where I am now. I have also learned what it is to have complete patience and fully rely on God. Take a moment and look around you. Find the light, the light which I have expressed in fragments through my photographs.

## References

Wittkower, Rudolf. *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600-1750*. Penguin, 3<sup>rd</sup> end.  
1973. Print.