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As I revisit a location that is layered with my own personal history, I find myself perceiving this space very differently than I did as a child. In examining this place as an adult, I find that it is no longer the pristine beach that I recognize from my memories. It has changed over time, and has become a wasteland, littered with the debris of decades worth of discarded items.

I am interested in photographing the transformation of this beach that illustrates the destructive metaphor of decay and reclamation found on this beach, that mirrors the cycle of our changing culture. It is my goal to bring my viewers back to a slower pace, and allow them to readjust and re-center their imaginations while looking at my work.

NEW PERCEPTIONS OF A TRANSFORMED SHORELINE

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To my parents,  
for supporting my decision to  
quit my “real job” and pursue this degree.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## NEW PERCEPTIONS OF A TRANSFORMED SHORELINE

All I can hear is the wind whirling and the sound of the waves just behind me. The cold March air is chilling and invigorating at the same time. I have come home, to eastern North Carolina, to photograph this new body of work. The images I am pursuing are about rediscovering the familiar and examining this place that I had once taken for granted. On a remote beach that overlooks the Atlantic Ocean I find what I am looking for. I don't live here, nor was I born here. But I grew up in a nearby town. And I return to this isolated, almost forgotten place and I feel grounded, revived and renewed. There is something about the unpretentious nature of this strip of land that appeals to me. It does not attempt to conceal or cover up its flaws. Instead, it is part of a community that is proud of its history and embraces the blemishes of its own character.

In my thesis work, I am hoping to find meaning in the seemingly useless objects that once held a specific purpose in this world, but whose meaning has been altered over time and are left littering the shoreline. I see coming home as a treasured experience in and of itself, the kind of self-reflection that can only occur in safe locations where we can permit ourselves to slow down and listen to the world around us before responding. These prints are a product of my own slowing down and looking at what the natural world around me has to offer. In revisiting this location that I knew as a young girl, I am

facing my own history with this place, and re-negotiating my own ideas of how I remember the physical attributes of a location.

The site of my investigation is a small, rugged beach at the very end of Harker's Island. It is bordered by a parking lot, a dead end road, and the ocean. Cape Lookout and Shackelford Banks are on the nearby horizon. As gorgeous as the view may seem, very few people actually get out of their cars and take a walk on the beach here. Decades ago, in an attempt to hold back the eroding shoreline, locals pushed abandoned cars into the water's edge. Some seventy-odd years later, those ruins of the cars still remain. Although now rusted and covered with barnacles, the engines and hubcaps linger, with wires resurfacing from the sand.

The crucial element to understanding the site and the objects represented in my work relies on the act of looking. I invite the viewer to ask the questions: "What do we allow ourselves to see? Do you see only what you've been programmed to see? Are you only seeing what you are looking for?" I would argue that we are missing out on so many treasures when we limit our perceptions to the expected. It is my goal to bring my viewers back to a slower pace, and allow them to readjust and re-center their imaginations while looking at my work. You needn't be a child to see with child-like eyes, to see the magic contained within simple forms. The place in these photographs is a part of me, and through this body of work and this process I am exploring my own identity and distinguishing a unique way of seeing the world.

Someone who has never visited this location might ask: “Did this debris wash ashore during a storm? Are these relics of an ancient shipwreck? Metal washed ashore from a cargo freighter?” It seems impossible that these elements would be placed here so irreverently. In such an environmentally conscious culture, this kind of odd discarding would now be unthinkable. How could this waste possibly serve some sort of purpose? Where did it come from, and how long has it been here?

There is a battle of sorts going on in this location. Who has the upper hand? Is it the hand of modern man or Mother Nature? Can there be a coexistence between the two in a society that is largely based on the consumption of raw materials? There is this graceful back and forth between nature and man. We throw away meaningless things, we discard the things we once loved, and nature has a way of giving them a new life. We throw away an item we no longer need, but it does not disappear. It goes *somewhere*. It becomes *something* (other than the way we knew it). It does not cease to exist.

There are countless photographs of idyllic beaches with pristine sand and pale blue sky and colorful sunsets. But this kind of perfection is seldom an accurate reflection of reality, especially in America, where practically every inch of the shoreline is overwhelmed by human presence. I am not interested in photographing perfection. I am interested in photographing reality. The reality of our modern environment is that life is hardly ever impeccably pruned and well balanced. The location I have chosen to focus my attention on is neither flawless nor idyllic. It is strewn with rusted metal, shards of glass and concrete blocks. It is a treacherous place that few people are interested in visiting. It takes careful navigation and patience to reach this place, on the edge of the



Atlantic Coast, amidst all the rubble and decay. However, there is an underlying beauty that illustrates the cycles of destruction, reclamation and new life.

The jetties, the pilings, the decaying metal stakes in the water are the only visible linear elements in this landscape. These linear markers illustrate the intervention of the human hand. But nature is changing these structures too, in some rebellious attempt to make them her own again. Oyster shells cover the gearshift of an abandoned car frame resulting in a figurative form that appears to rise from the sea itself. The jetties are slowly moving and disintegrating with the tides and the hurricanes. The rocks that took bulldozers to move are being tossed aside and washed out to sea with each winter storm. The pilings have become benches for egrets and nesting posts for hawks, before they too fall into the sea and become part of an underground reef.

I do not think that my viewpoint, as an artist, is so very different from the Romantic poets and painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who sought to depict interactions with nature as an overwhelming, often humbling experience. But, instead of allowing the grandeur and awesomeness of the natural environment to be the content of the work, I look to the metaphor of the destructive imposition that humans have on our environment to form a more complex, seemingly misunderstood, contemporary landscape. In viewing these landscapes, I aim to begin a dialogue with my audience that addresses their own notions of beauty, as well as how their physical presence impacts a location.

There are several artists whose work addresses similar contemporary issues of the disposal of objects and the re-contextualization of their meaning. I place myself alongside artists who make work *in nature*, artists who are actively engaging with the elements, and who address contemporary notions of change and destruction. Sze Tsung Leong, Edward Burtynsky, David Maisel, and Chris Jordan are several contemporary artists who have been a huge inspiration to me over the past few months. Leong's current work is examining the loss of history a place experiences (specifically his homeland of China) as it is revitalized and old buildings and districts are demolished to make way for glitzy high-rise apartments. This is a concept I find interesting, as I look at the neglect and disregard for this location's own role in the history of this island. Burtynsky's *Shipbreaking* series, which addresses the discarding and reclamation of metal and steel, makes me think that the work I am producing has a specific place in contemporary culture, not as an artist wagging her finger at the carelessness of the world, but as a human being noticing a forbidding change in a shared environment. Chris Jordan comments to a reporter that his hope is "to draw the viewer in with the intricate details and colors, and maybe the image will hold their attention while the deeper meaning seeps in. Many photographers have used beauty in this way."<sup>1</sup> My intentions as an artist are similarly subversive.

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<sup>1</sup> Colberg, Jorg. "Intolerable Beauty: Depicting the American way of life." Orion. March/April 2007. 2 April 2007. <[www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/70](http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/70)>.

The complexity of motion and change in nature is becoming more and more influenced by the human hand and by the machines upon which we so heavily rely. This specific beach reflects the changing landscape of the nation and of the world. It is impossible to walk on this beach without cutting yourself on glass and decaying matter. It is, in a sense, a wasteland. The ugliness is kept out of sight and out of mind.

There is a sensitivity to time that happens while working “out there” that seems to contradict the traditional studio practices of my education. I have a need to feel connected to the awesomeness of nature, the environment, and the magic of everyday events. By working outdoors and enduring the elements, I am creating a place for myself in the world through the making of these images, the taking or recording of them. Working with a medium format and SLR camera, I became very aware of how I moved through this space. The camera is large and clumsy, and the landscape is treacherous and unstable. I had to literally slow down to make this body of work. Focusing on the linear elements of this landscape, I chose to limit the conversation to discovering what happens in the exact location where the land and sea collide. In terms of marking and mapping one’s location, the beach and the ever-changing shoreline make this very difficult. It is never the same and it is never traceable. The tide is constantly changing the visible shoreline. Every time it recedes, it takes a piece of the earth with it. As it returns, it deposits another relic from the depths of the ocean for us to discover. However, there is a sense of the elements being in the right place, even though the beach is strewn with orphaned mechanized parts that do not seem to belong here. The parts return to their origins as organic matter after having served some larger purpose in the human world, changing their function in the

world as the world itself changes and demands more of the earth's elements. It is a beautifully destructive cycle. They are creeping back into the sea so slowly that we are not aware of their migration.

My practice of shooting from a low vantage point transforms the objects, and requests the viewer to look at something from an uncomfortable position. In this sense the photographs are about creating another world for the viewer to exist in, even if only for a moment. In the same way that I was forced to slow down taking photographs of what I saw as I walked along the shoreline, I am asking the same level of participation from my viewer. And hopefully, I am allowing a connection that is not really possible anywhere but in the contemplation and interaction between photograph and person. I am asking my viewers to stop naming the things they recognize immediately. And to allow them to become something else, I am asking them to embrace the unfamiliar.

As I am finishing up my last roll of film an old fisherman of about seventy-five or so approaches me with his son at his side and his cane in his left hand. "I come here every week to pick up sea-glass and say a prayer for my friends who got lost 'out there' you know." He points to the infinite horizon with his hand-carved walking stick. I cannot even count the number of times I have visited this remote beach, and I've never laid eyes on this aging man before. We talk and he retells the story of how his childhood home used to be on the exact spot we are now standing, a muddy patch of earth that is now completely covered by the sea at high tide. The house disappeared during a storm one winter some forty years ago, but he continues to come back, despite his ailing health and

the ever-changing landscape. I suppose I will too. Because change is inevitable, and as time passes the layers of information will only become richer and more interconnected.

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