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Confined By Darkness

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art and Visual Culture

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Abstract

In addition to my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier is arranged with an extended artist statement, documentation of a photographic series, a case study on artist Brian Ulrich, and a curriculum vitae. These portions of the thesis exhibit the themes and pursuit that inform my studio practice in photography. The comprehensive artist statement describes the attachments and personal background that informs my overall approach. The second chapter consists of a series of images titled, *Confined by Darkness*, which is an archive of significant spaces documented at night that evoke nostalgia or are prominent in my everyday life. The case study on Brian Ulrich focuses on his photographic night series, *Dead Malls*, which looks at the aesthetics of abandoned spaces while also raising questions about the fate of our urban environments.

Key Words

Darkness, Night, Photography, Landscape, Psychogeography, Place Attachment, Night Photography, Brian Ulrich

Summary for Lay Audience

In addition to my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier is arranged with an extended artist statement, documentation of a photographic series, a case study on artist Brian Ulrich, and a curriculum vitae. These portions of the thesis exhibit the themes and pursuit that inform my studio practice in photography. The comprehensive artist statement describes the attachments and personal background that informs my overall approach. The second chapter consists of a series of images titled, *Confined by Darkness*, which is an archive of significant spaces documented at night that evoke nostalgia or are prominent in my everyday life. The case study on Brian Ulrich focuses on his photographic night series, *Dead Malls*, which looks at the aesthetics of abandoned spaces while also raising questions about the fate of our urban environments.

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Preface

In addition to my thesis exhibition, this dossier consists of three main chapters; an extended artist statement, documentation of my studio practice, and a case study reviewing Brian Ulrich's series, *Dark Stores, Ghost Boxes, and Dead Malls*.

The first chapter of this dossier, the extended artist statement, is composed of five parts that break down the theoretical and physical approaches I take to achieve my photographs at night. Throughout the artist statement, I explore the emotional and cognitive bond I have to my curiosity about these environments, through the lens of place attachment. Place Attachment theory emphasizes the emotional and psychological effects on individuals of the built environment, and this theory is integral to my process for creating my night images.

Chapter two includes photographic documentation of work I have produced during my two years in the MFA program. This work was presented in my thesis exhibition, *Confined by Darkness*, at McIntosh Gallery from August 3rd to September 8th, 2023.

The third chapter is a case study on Brian Ulrich and his series *Dark Stores, Ghost Boxes, and Dead Malls*. This part of the dossier explores three aspects of Ulrich's work. Following a brief introduction to the series, I explore the technicalities of urban photography, looking at settings, composition, and exploration of man-made structures. I also consider how psychogeography captures the politics of these buildings being left abandoned even as they still serve as appealing images for many viewers. Finally, I discuss Ulrich's photographic process by way of an analysis of aesthetics and pictorialism, looking at how Ulrich's imagery might contribute to different ways of thinking or, even, rethinking diverse aesthetics.

Chapter 1:

Extended Artist Statement

Introduction

At the beginning of my graduate studies, I aimed to work with images of industrial spaces, pushing boundaries of access, while printing my photos in cyanotype and other alternative processes. Alternative photography processes are non-traditional techniques for developing and printing photographs. These processes consist of a light-sensitive emulsion, the negatives exposure to light, the image's development, the final image's fixing, and optional toning.¹ This type of photography differs significantly from the new digital age of photography and its technological techniques of post-production. Instead, these alternative photographic processes play with different methods to successfully generate an image.² The critical aspect of these alternative techniques is the artistry involved in the processes: the physical interaction from the artist helps achieve the desired results, development, and setting times.³ Cyanotype is one such process—a light-sensitive liquid that creates images on paper when exposed to ultraviolet rays from the sun. Using alternative processes with my homemade ultraviolet table and hand-mixed chemicals, I produced one-of-a-kind images with unpredictable and varied results.

In 2021, I developed my practice of creating cyanotypes of an industrial lime plant. Industrial lime is blasted and crushed there and sent off to many different industries for farming livestock, paper, and cement. The lime factory was a significant part of my childhood since it dominated the economy of the small town – Beachville – where I grew up. I have long been curious about what happens inside the plant, but the public does not usually have access to this

¹ Malin Fabbri and Gary Fabbri, *Blueprint to Cyanotypes: Exploring a Historical Alternative Photographic Process*. Self-published, CreateSpace, 2014.

² Fabbri and Fabbri.

³ Fabbri and Fabbri.

type of space. Pushing the boundaries of access, I inquired about gaining entrance to the factory and finally had the opportunity to tour the active and inactive aspects of the plant and quarries. I had a meeting to address what I was expecting for accessing this space and created a plan for touring the facilities. During my numerous visits over the span of two months I was able to photograph the explosions in the quarries, document many spaces within the plants, and learn about the history and ways the factory has affected the community both positively and negatively.

I chose to work with cyanotype because of the history of its use in creating industrial blueprints, long before printers took on this function. Cyanotype's distinct blue characteristics have been used as a proofing method for photographers and architects to copy architectural plans.⁴ The history of this non-toxic alternative process being used to create architectural plans influenced me to use this medium in an industrial setting, while also looking at the environmental aspects regarding the lands use of industrial lime production. Such a large factory dominates small-town politics and shapes many assumptions about what the factory plans to do when they expand into the surrounding land. These small-town politics distinctly impact life in the community and the issues impact our personal relationships, our understanding of historical events, and our sense of the economic conditions within the community. It is a dynamic process that can challenge governance and decision-making in a close-knit community.

As I created my first large-scale cyanotypes of the lime plant, I realized that the images did not capture a view of the space that was representative of the liveliness during the day and at night. After this realization, I started creating digital-based panoramas to better capture an overall sense of the spaces I was encountering. I wanted to show the uninterrupted, around-the-

⁴ Fabbri and Fabbri.

clock production and labour atmosphere of this space and the company that manages it—all of which has been a significant part of my life.

When the summer came, I returned to my job in the food manufacturing industry, working on the midnight shift, three days a week, from 5:00 PM to 5:00 AM. Because of this factory job, I have spent much of my free time alone, feeding my aesthetic curiosities by starting to explore the spaces that surround me at night instead of during the day. Additionally, the short work week allowed me and spend more time in—and to photograph—undisturbed spaces during the night hours. Due to this, I have found a lot of solitude and mystery in how I now view my surroundings. The spaces I visit and document all connect to my personal life, in ways that are as big as industrial-scale economics or as small as quotidian. My associations and attachments to these places influence the emotions I experience in these spaces. Creating night images felt natural to my practice and developed a new layer of conceptual, emotional, and visual approaches to my work.

Night Photography

*Photographing at night requires one to look at the world from a different perspective. Night photography should not be considered merely an extension of daytime photography because night light transforms the known world into something unfamiliar and strange.*⁵

⁵ Lance Keimig, *Night Photography: Finding Your Way in the Dark* (Waltham, MA: Focal Press, 2010), 52.

Turning to night photography has helped me generate a sense of self within my work; creating images at night is more natural for my lifestyle. Using night photography, I can capture the unique atmosphere and mood of places in the dark, exploring the relationship between myself and the environments I frequently spend time in and that have significance to me. The time and space depicted are influential to the way that I perceive the photography I shoot. Understanding the spaces around me allows me to create photographs that evoke emotions of mystery, intrigue, isolation, and nostalgia and create a powerful perspective. A still photograph of a given space is never static; instead, depicting space has the potential to create a visual story for the viewer, capturing a moment in time through composition and focus range and guiding the viewer's attention through the scene's atmosphere. In this way, the surrounding space in the image is just as important as the main subject; it helps to establish the environment and to convey a deeper understanding of the space.

The spaces photographed within my night series *Confined By Darkness* are well-known areas in and around Windsor, Beachville, and London, three places that carry personal significance. I was born in Windsor, where much of my family still resides and where I completed my undergraduate degree. I was raised in Beachville and my connections to the area and community go deep, and I currently reside in London. Showcasing the unique, nighttime features of these distinct-yet-similar places has been an intriguing challenge for me. This work has caused me to focus on the way human-centred lighting — street lamps, security lights, headlights — illuminates space differently than ambient and direct daylight. *Confined by Darkness* has also highlighted for me the way liveliness emerges from the night, which gives new shape to the atmosphere surrounding urban and industrial spaces after dark. Time of day is another characteristic of these spaces that is important to this work. The mood is controlled by

time, its distinctive qualities rendered by the midnight atmosphere. Shooting at night has allowed me to focus on different types of light sources and to gesture to the mystery of what lies beyond the shadow's edges, that deeper darkness through which we cannot see. Many of my works are named for certain times of the night, as time is one of the key elements at play here.

In his book, *Urban Exploration Photography*, Todd Sipes raises many questions about what subject matter is being shot, why the photographer is shooting it, and how one might understand of the technical and theoretical aspects of the spaces depicted.⁶ My work draws upon, and emulates Sipes' considerations, by asking these questions in the process of creating spaces the viewer can feel immersed in and absorbed by. Taking images at night has forced me to focus on camera techniques and equipment specifically suited to creating my compositions. Shooting with the camera in manual mode has always been my preferred method, as it allows me to have full control over camera settings, such as aperture, ISO, and shutter speed. This control is crucial in low light situations, where the camera's automatic settings lead to underexposed or noisy images. Since aperture controls the size of the lens opening, and thereby affecting the amount of light that enters the camera, I use a high aperture when I shoot at night, which means less light will enter the camera. To balance this, I use a longer shutter speed, creating a longer exposure time and allowing more light to emit into the camera. However, my ISO never surpasses 400. For my images, it is important to keep the ISO low, as noise is very easily seen in night images and a low ISO helps to create a crisp image.

⁶ Todd Sipes, *Urban Exploration Photography: A Guide to Creating and Editing Images of Abandoned Places* (San Francisco: Peachpit Press, 2015).

Place Attachment

Psychological processes where place attachment occurs involve affect, cognition, and behaviour. Place dimension is divided into not only a physical but also a social level, the former including various geographic scales. Moreover, the psychological functions of place attachment (conscious or unconscious motivations to form enduring bonds with places) are listed and include offering survival and security, supporting goal attainment and self-regulation, providing self-continuity, sense of belongingness, sense of identity, and self-esteem.⁷

The body of work, *Confined By Darkness*, centers around spaces of industrialization, urbanization, and abandonment. My investigation into these themes started with the following questions: *Why do I want to explore these spaces?* and *Why am I drawn to specific urban or deteriorating spaces, particularly at night?* Reflecting on these questions, I found that I have created a *place attachment* to particular spaces that have become part of my self-identity. Place attachment and a sense of belonging are crucial to the emotional and cognitive bond that produces my curiosity about these environments. Place attachment is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing cognitive and affective components, and it is influenced by personal experiences, memories, and identity.⁸ The scale of the environments subject to place attachment can range from the small-scale, such as homes and local environments, to the large-scale, such as towns and cities and nations.⁹ Place attachment is significant to my work in that it theorizes my

⁷ Kalevi M. Korpela, "Place Attachment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental and Conservation Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 148–163.

⁸ Korpela, 148–163.

⁹ Korpela, 148 – 163.

sense of belonging, well-being, and the connection I experience with each given specific space I am photographing.

Place attachment reveals itself in my photography through imagery that captures a place's physical characteristics, such as landscape, architecture, and landmarks, to evoke a sense of familiarity and nostalgia. One way I go about evoking these feelings is by creating the human presence of place attachment. I do this by capturing images with illumination from lights or buildings, indicating some human presence. This creates a nostalgic feeling without capturing actual individuals within the shot. By framing a space's physical characteristics, I can create an emotional response influenced by a viewer's personal experiences and emotions, whether negative or positive. Place attachment can be shown in night photography through capturing the unique qualities of a place at night and by highlighting how people and places change after dark. Night photography evokes mystery, intrigue, and loneliness, feelings that are all affected by choices of composition and lighting. The generic nature of my photographs allows the viewer to have enough recognition to create their own sense of familiarity and belonging within the scene. This type of place attachment, it should be noted, does not just include tangible places but also symbolic or imagined places.¹⁰ That is, the symbolic attachment is often linked to a personal significance that a place holds for a person or a community, whereas an imagined attachment is connected to the mental or emotional representations of a place. Both of these attachments have influenced my photographs to explore and connect with places physically and emotionally.

Overall, night photography can be a powerful tool for capturing and communicating place attachment through the emotional bonds that I and my viewers have developed with specific physical locations that continue to shape our senses of identity and belonging.

¹⁰ Korpela, 148 – 163.

Psychogeography

Nighttime has been associated with solitude, danger, mystery, and the unknown throughout human history. The night transforms our notion of the world from one of routine certainty to one of mysterious unknowing. The night holds secrets—secrets that may engage our curiosity, shelter us, or frighten us. There are those who seek comfort in the night and those who recoil from it.¹¹

Looking through a lens at vacant spaces is the foundation of my studio practice. This guides my ongoing investigation into the underlying anxieties connected to this dark side of modernity. To me, the dark side of modernity looks at the consequences and problems that are associated with modernization and unequal social structures. This type of modernity has personally led me to a sense of disconnection and alienation. Looking at these spaces at night has rendered the landscapes in a way that they are perceived in a new light which I can personally connect to. The darkness has shaped my experience differently, creating personal relationships and connections with the space and my photographs.

The term psychogeography, coined in 1955 by Guy Debord, defines a new concept available to an urban wanderer.¹² Psychogeography serves as a vital instrument for prompting an examination of how a specific urban environment influences the emotions, cognitive reactions, and conduct of individuals. Guy Debord, a French political theorist introduces this term in his essay “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” by stating “Psychogeography could set

¹¹ Keimig, *Finding Your Way in the Dark*, 4.

¹² Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography.” in *Situationist International Online*, trans. Ken Kabb. Accessed October 21, 2023. <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html>.

for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.”¹³ The late 1950s and early 1960s were marked an era of unprecedented social transformation and rapid urban expansion across the globe.¹⁴ With the formation of the Situationist International, their objective was to disrupt and ultimately dismantle the spectacle of capitalist society through the creation of subversive constructed situations.¹⁵ In its initial years, members of the Situationist International embarked on a series of artistic ventures exploring psychogeography and its potential for driving societal change. Among these, one of the most renowned works emerged from the collaboration between Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, known as "The Naked City".¹⁶ Jorn and Debord crafted a fresh map of Paris based on their drifts, or what they termed a "mobile architecture of living".¹⁷ This subversive map comprised 19 fragments, meticulously cut from a travel map of Paris and then reassembled with vivid red directional indicators linking the segments.¹⁸

In Siobhan Lyons’ book, *Psychogeography: A Way to Delve into the Soul of a City*, she defines psychogeography as “the pairing of psychology with geography, focusing on the psychological experiences found in the city, looking at forgotten, discarded marginalized elements.”¹⁹ Psychogeography, then, is a concept that emphasizes the emotional and psychological effects of the built environment on individuals. Emma Arnold suggests that pairing psychogeography with photography creates an advantage when exploring occupied

¹³ Debord, *Situationist International Online*.

¹⁴ Nuno Coelho, “Psychogeography: A New Paradigm?” in *Academia*, July 8, 2017. https://www.academia.edu/12090740/Psychogeography_A_New_Paradigm, 49.

¹⁵ Coelho, 49.

¹⁶ Coelho, 50.

¹⁷ Coelho, 50.

¹⁸ Coelho, 50.

¹⁹ Siobhan Lyons, “Psychogeography: A Way to Delve into the Soul of a City,” in *The Conversation*, June 18, 2017.

spaces and creating new ways of looking.²⁰ In a similar way, I use night photography as a tool to capture the effects of how a place changes after dark.²¹ This encourages critical thinking about my relationships between the built environments around me and the human behaviours that enliven them.

My explorations of these urban environments at night, which evoke certain emotions or behaviours because of their geographical location, is influenced by elements of urban design, architecture, psychology, and sociology. These elements are essential when considering psychogeography in relation to my photography since they influence how I create an enigmatic sense of atmosphere and exploration through lighting, colour, and composition. With my work, I am using the psychogeographic mode to get a sense of these spaces in a new way. While thinking about the geographical location, I want to bring out the layered, and often invisible, psychological and emotional effects these spaces can evoke. I am particularly focused on aesthetics that suggest a sense of mystery, ambiguity, anxiety, wonder, and awe.

My current practice began with places from my everyday life or where I grew up, places that were familiar and raised a lot of personal sense of mystery, intrigue, isolation, and nostalgia of the nighttime perspective. By re-encountering these places after dark, I let my surrounding environment guide my exploration. Although my night images also utilize the method of *dérive*, exploring the city by wandering without a specific destination, the images that end up resonating with me are often the ones that have a significant emotional or psychological connection.

²⁰ Emma Arnold, "Aesthetic Practices of Psychogeography and Photography," in *Geography Compass* 13, no. 2 (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 4.

²¹ Paula Reavey, "Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research," in *A Handbook of Visual Methods in Psychology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 324.

*In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a dérive point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.*²²

This situationist method, established by Guy Debord in France in the 1960s, is a specific technique used through varied spaces. The dérive calls for an awareness of the psychogeographical effects of a space, including fixed points that discourage entry or exit onto specific land.²³ There are two approaches to the dérive method when studying spaces: the goal is either to study the terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself. Of course, these two approaches necessarily overlap with one other, which makes it hard to isolate which approach is being more significantly used.²⁴

I implement the dérive method in my practice to experience spaces in a new way, using it to discover unfamiliar aspects of urban environments while also creating a new mental map. My dérive includes my car, camera, and myself, creating the mental map of spaces that helps me respond to my surroundings. I focus intently on how my experiences, memories, and emotions shape my shifting understanding of these spaces. The concept of a mental map is important because it captures how I—and others—experience and interact with the physical spaces around

²² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 1.

²³ Debord, 1.

²⁴ Debord, 3.

us. Technical details, such as composition, lighting, and perspective, help to convey and direct the emotions and feelings associated with a specific place and the imagery being viewed.

Through my subject matter, I intend to evoke a discourse of abandonment that will resonate with viewers' everyday experiences and create, within themselves, a simultaneous sense of conscious and unconscious looking. Even when we may not know *why* we are looking or *how* we feel about what we are seeing, we are able to engage in these psychogeographical practices with respect to communication through imagery.²⁵ I want my photographs to portray my wonder about my surrounding industrial environments, urban spaces, and the natural-world wonder that underpins the human economy that are significant to me. I want to capture these spaces in a way that cannot be recreated ever again, as such spaces are always either developing or deteriorating.

Process and Influences

*This book speaks to those who consider photography first and foremost as a craft, rather than an elevated artistic gesture on the one hand or mere technical process on the other. For them photography is a journey of exploration, from initial inspiration through capture of the subject matter, and finally to the subtle decisions to be made in choosing and manipulating printing techniques.*²⁶

After spending much time with the recommendations from the book *A Handbook of Techniques* I have determined my entire process, from the start to the final piece, is necessary to

²⁵ Reavey, *Visual Methods in Psychology*.

²⁶ Marco Antonini, Sergio Minniti, Francisco Gómez, Gabriele Lungarella, and Luca Bendandi. *Experimental Photography: A Handbook of Techniques* (London, UK: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 10.

create my night images. Spending time in these spaces alone, with my vehicle and my DSLR camera, leads to many decisions about how the work is displayed, what I show to the viewer, and what I intend to keep to myself. I am first drawn to a space when it elicits a significant memory or emotion, something that has made me want to enter these spaces and push-boundaries of access to seemingly inaccessible spaces. That is, I aim to simultaneously push against my boundaries of access while also limiting what is revealed about the space to viewers creates a focus on only the specific surface aspects of the scene. Never showing the viewer what is beyond certain lit areas allows me to hide and even keep secret parts of these spaces, creating curiosity about what is inside or obscured by darkness, the hidden and the inferred. This generates mystery, activating the viewer's sense of what might be beyond.

In this approach, I am influenced by the work of several other photographers, among them, Adam Moore who similarly plays with these types of conditions at night. In one of his series, *Darklands*, he obscures what is revealed to the viewer to the point of creating near-sightless images.²⁷ In Bill Schwabs's series, *Detroit: Where We Used to Live*, he sought to capture the remaining spirit of the city even as it appeared to be rapidly dying.²⁸ When I compose photographs, I keep the eye of my camera on the exterior of the buildings and spaces through which I'm moving to create a sense of the outsider's view, what someone may see while driving or walking past. Perhaps in response to a similar spirit. I have been curious about going inside these types of spaces I document ever since I was a teenager and first got my driver's licence at sixteen years old. I would explore these industrial and abandoned spaces with my friends for fun, not to disturb or destroy anything, but to indulge in my fascination for spaces we are disallowed

²⁷ Adam Moore, *Darklands: Black and White Landscapes*, 2005. Accessed August 9, 2023. <http://www.adammoore.com/bw/darklands/index.html>.

²⁸ Bill Schwabs, *Detroit: Where We Used to Live - Photographs by Bill Schwab*, 2016. Accessed August 9, 2023. http://www.billschwab.com/detroit_2016/.

access to. To return to these spaces as an adult, camera in-hand and after dark, conjures many nostalgic memories that shape the photographs I take.

Since I started to work full-time on the night shift in 2022, my life has altered in many ways, mentally and socially. Spaces I had typically seen during my daytime routines were transformed at night and became a fascination for me after dusk. Experiencing spaces at night has conjured for me a different way of conscious and unconscious looking. When I first started exploring the nighttime landscapes of Windsor, Beachville, and London with my camera, I would bring people along with me, sharing the experience. At some point, that changed. My *dérive* became only me, my camera, and my car. Whereas I used to visit these spaces simply to fulfill my adolescent and artistic curiosities, I now practice solo, meditative photography where I create an archive of the spaces I see that physically and emotionally induce nostalgia and memories in me.

Lance Keimig, has greatly influenced my work on a technical level: from image capture right through to the final editing of my night photographs. Keimig is best known for his night photographs, which are often made at the juncture of the built and natural environments.²⁹ His book, *Night Photography: Finding Your Way in The Dark*, has been a motivating influence in my photographic exploration of dark spaces.

In terms of my process, after photographing a space, I look through the photos on my computer back home to determine which ones resonate most. From there, they are sectioned away from the rest, for editing. All of my images are organized into files by space, month, year, and camera used. Careful filing is essential for spaces I visit more than once since I take photographs to see the changes happening within these urban settings. When printing my images,

²⁹ Keimig, *Finding Your Way in the Dark*, 55.

I think about scale and print paper to use because these two elements are essential to how the images will be viewed. Combined with subtle lighting, a photograph that is printed on aluminum creates a colder image and reading, which can evoke feelings of the sublime as well as uneasiness. In contrast, my matte prints create a softer, romanticizing scene, illuminating these marginalized spaces in urban environments. Creating a scene of romanticism allows me to make the documented spaces—usually perceived as lonely, isolated, or unsafe at night—less unnerving and more aesthetic. All of my images refuse a bright and sharp aesthetic; instead, by limiting what is shown in work, I guide the viewer to spend more time discerning the shape and sense of the space captured. Making the viewer work to comprehend the visual plane serves to alter the viewer's perceptions and expectations. They might experience visual discomfort, yet, they may also create a psychologically intimate relationship with the space as they look closely to discern the nighttime subject. Creating an immersive sense of the space documented in my photography—so that viewing the artwork feels like being there—is important to me. At the same time, it is important that my images depict the space without giving away all of the features or the identity of the place. This guides my decisions to limit light throughout the scene, print certain images at different scales and on different materials, and why I only depict external views of urban and absent spaces. Creating this sense of mystery in my images evokes the personal nostalgia I feel when I am in these spaces, reminiscing and reliving some of the moments I have experienced.

The aesthetics are a crucial part of my series. My images are loaded with many political and social matters, although it is almost never what is questioned first. These loaded images are always viewed through the emotional and aesthetic aspects that make the viewer focus on what is being connotated, not the politics of the space. Focusing on the edge of visibility is one of the

primary aesthetics for how I compose my images. I want to simultaneously invite the viewer into the space and make them long for more. Creating this desire to see more takes the viewer's focus off of the loaded issues of economic ruin, politics, and capitalism and focuses on their ways of looking.

Chapter 2:

Alyssa Sweeney: Practice Documentation



23:48, Giclee Print, 16" x 24", 2022



01:32, Giclee Print, 16" x 24", 2023



01:48, Giclee Print, 16" x 24", 2023



01:54, Giclee Print, 16" x 24", 2023



03:34, Giclee Print, 20" x 30", 2021



03:23, Giclee Print, 20" x 30", 2021



00:07, Giclee Print, 20" x 30", 2022



22:49, Giclee Print, 20" x 30", 2022



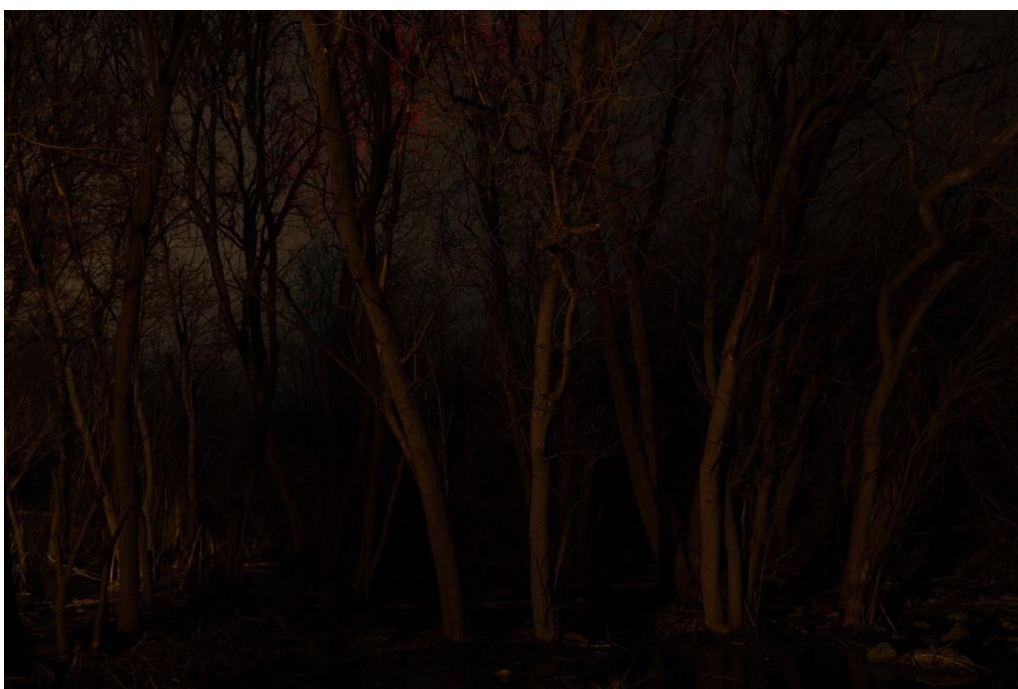
22:22, Aluminum Print, 20" x 30", 2023



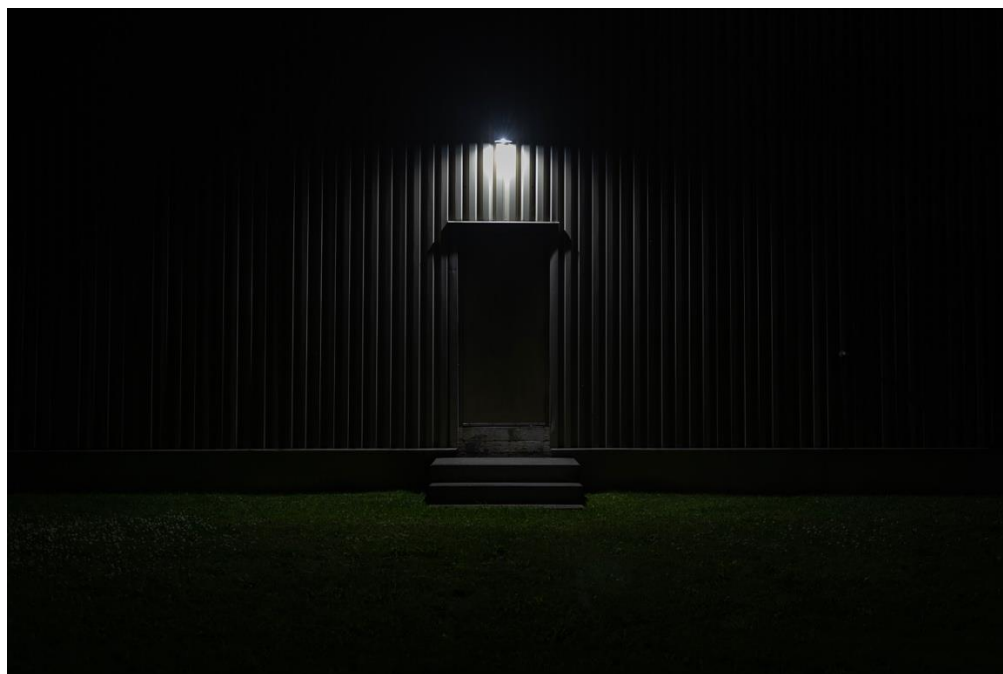
22:36, Aluminum Print, 20" x 30", 2023



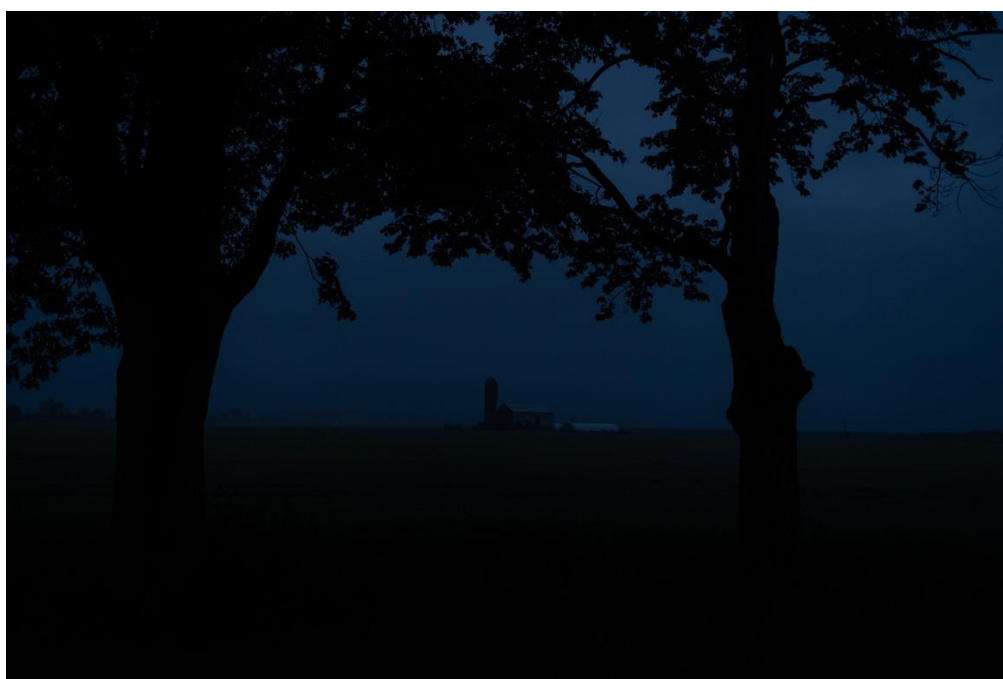
23:13, Aluminum Print, 30" x 40", 2023



23:21, Aluminum Print, 30" x 40", 2023



02:11, Aluminum Print, 30" x 40", 2023



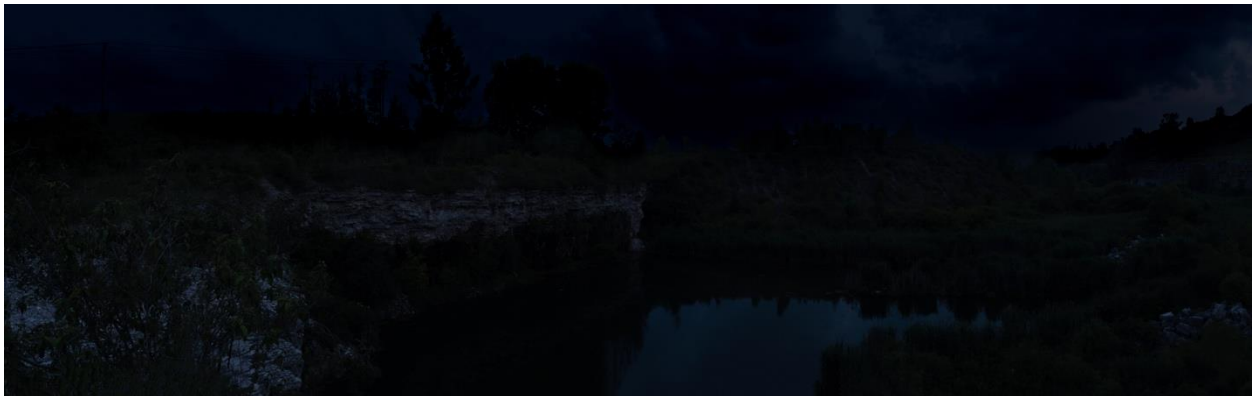
05:20, Aluminum Print, 20" x 30", 2023



01:49, Aluminum Print, 30" x 40", 2022



04:48, Mural Printed on Canvas 12ft x 38ft, 2022



22:39, Mural Printed on Canvas, 4.5ft x 15ft, 2023

Chapter 3:

Dark Stories: Brian Ulrich and Dead Malls

Introduction

This chapter will investigate pictorialism and aesthetics and will apply the concept of psychogeography in relation to Brian Ulrich's subjects. Large-scale photography will also be explored with a sub-reference to urban exploration photography. Ulrich is an American contemporary photographer who most recently, in 2021, exhibited photographic works at Cazenovia College Art Gallery in Cazenovia, New York.³⁰ One of his most notable shows, called 12 x 12, was at the Museum of Modern Art in 2005.³¹ He is also ranked in the top 10,000 artists globally and has shown work in 21 solo shows over the past 17 years.³² Ulrich received his BFA in photography from the University of Akron, where his work started to visually explore the built environment and reflect on the relationships between commercialism, politics, and economics.³³ Ulrich currently teaches in the photography and film department at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. He is still a practicing artist and continues touring his *Copia* show across the United States. This case study discusses how Ulrich's photography of dead malls uses night photography and other technical mechanisms to produce unique aesthetic effects.

³⁰ Brian Ulrich: Artist, *ArtFacts*. Accessed September 12, 2022. <https://artfacts.net/artist/brian-ulrich/41378>.

³¹ Ulrich, *ArtFacts*.

³² Ulrich, *ArtFacts*.

³³ Elina Ruka, "Brian Ulrich." in *FK Magazine*, (Contemporary Culture Centre KultKom, 2012). Accessed August 9, 2023, <https://fkmagazine.lv/2012/07/04/brian-ulrich/>.

Night Photography: Dead Malls

*“Chicago Place mall I’d photographed in the very beginning of my Retail project. It was fascinating to me that in 2003 it was full of stores and thriving. I photographed people shopping in there, I took pictures of weird stuff, like these cheesy art shops. Now it’s seven stories of emptiness. I’ve been thinking about how the whole project makes all these references.”*³⁴

In 2001, Brian Ulrich started his first series of photographs, *Copia*, which looked at shoppers and their surrounding environments in shopping malls and discount outlets.³⁵ Once *Copia* evolved to incorporate new subjects, Ulrich began to divide his photographic series into chapters, originally with *Retail* and then *Thrift*, where he documented thrift and discount stores, and finally, with *Dark Stores*, which focused on out-of-business malls and shops.³⁶ Taken together, his series visually explores the uneasy balances between (non) human occupation and the banality of these mall environments while also exploring the changing dynamic shift of consumerism in the United States across a diverse range of societal classes.³⁷

Ulrich composed the photographs that would become *Dark Stores* between May 2008 and 2010, a spread of three years dramatically shaped by the Great Recession.³⁸ Although many individuals see these spaces as boring, Ulrich conjures emotions of emptiness through diverse imagery of vacant and dead spaces.

³⁴ Lynn Saville, “Brian Ulrich”, in *Bomb* (New Art Publications Inc, 2010). Accessed on October 21, 2023. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/brian-ulrich/>.

³⁵ Ruka, *FK Magazine*.

³⁶ Ruka.

³⁷ Ruka.

³⁸ Ruka.

*“You go to these places, and they’re ugly, and they’re not spectacular. The hard part of this project is figuring out where to point the camera. How am I going to get people to think about this idea? I have to make an interesting photograph. I have to pull them into a narrative that has an aesthetic basis.”*³⁹

This series demands that its viewers reflect on the after-effects of capitalist consumerism on communities, the built environments surrounding these spaces, and the American landscape writ-large. However, what I am interested in highlighting in *Dark Stores* is the use of night photography, its various technical aspects, aesthetics, and the emptiness being portrayed throughout this series.

Figures 1 to 10 are images that are part of Ulrich’s *Dark Stores* series, which he photographed while travelling the country. He uses many distinct image-making skills to document the transformations of these spaces. Using his 8 x 10 camera to make his scenes more dramatic than life, Ulrich holds respect for the places he is capturing. To Ulrich nothing new emerges without the confrontation these spaces offer as these subjects are never promised to be around forever; it doesn’t surprise Ulrich that once they go down, they are easily forgotten.⁴⁰ That’s why his photographs are always layered with a focused attention to the weather conditions and the dramatic lighting because these phenomena are crucial to his method of using extremely long exposures to get the perfect night shot. In a way, Ulrich is creating a visual archive of the mid-to-late 20th century American consumer landscape before such spaces are no longer around.

³⁹ Saville, *Bomb*.

⁴⁰ Los Angeles Center of Photography. *Inside Photography with Brian Ulrich; Moderated by Sarah Hadley* (YouTube 2021).

Night photography pushes the limits of a camera's ability to capture with light and is highly demanding of the photographer who is forced to consider the photographic technology used to create a successful image. Ulrich has perfected his method of capturing a night image: showing exposure range with the lights and darks while maintaining minimal noise within each image. These technical aspects are accomplished by using exceptionally long exposures and a low ISO, which creates the clean and crisp shot Ulrich is always pursuing. Ulrich's images demonstrate many such aspects of his photographic aptitude. Looking at the subject in his series, I find a clear emphasis on architecture, abandonment and emptiness throughout. The emptiness of his images, especially in Figures 4 and 5 below, is particularly interesting because they are the same type of retailer but taken a year apart from each other. These figures show the progression of consumer trends and the decline in the franchise's business. The tastes of the societal classes are always changing and growing in relationship to its interaction with cultural and social establishments that surround and advance communities. This relationship creates changes over time that can have long-term consequences on society.

Ulrich is photographing something that is intangible to himself: the linear shapes, broad forms, lights and rich reds and yellows that pop off the buildings. Ulrich is aestheticizing the memory of these spaces and documenting the way they have been discarded by American society. Focusing on what he calls the "drippingly dramatic" Ulrich's photographic scale reflects the immensity of these spaces and the relationship between those building sizes and the human life that once enlivened it.⁴¹ The atmospheric lighting, architectural forms, colours displayed on the buildings and, especially, the location, are all elements Ulrich asks us to consider. These elements have intrigued him to thus create a unique series of images that documents architectural

⁴¹ Los Angeles Center of Photography, *Photography with Brian Ulrich*.

spaces now highly modified and disregarded by urban expansion. By photographing these spaces, he brings awareness to his extensive viewers of our surroundings and creates this sense of space and relationship that we share with these perishing architectural structures.

Technicalities of Urban Exploration Photography

It's aggressive, difficult to execute and often misunderstood. It's a genre that most photographers don't attempt because most people pick up a camera and only want to take pictures of their kids, flowers, landscapes, food, etc.⁴²

The three technical elements of night photography—settings, lighting, and composition—play a crucial role in creating a strong artistic message. The camera's field of view can coordinate leading lines that, in turn, can create a compelling composition for an image. Strong use of leading lines can also create dynamic ways for the viewers to be drawn to certain points of an image—this way, they will focus on certain parts of the subject that the photographer chooses. However, lens distortion and vantage points should also be considered when thinking about the best ways to create space in your photo.⁴³ The vantage point of an image is crucial when looking for the best point-of-view of the subject, and adjusting the position against the subject can change the relationship and emotion within the space.

⁴² Sipes, *Urban Exploration Photography*, xi.

⁴³ Sipes, 21.

I find all this fascinating in the fact that one can stand in a place in the world and make a mechanical rendering of it, and that image is the result of a whole set of decisions made by the photographer and the conditions it was made in.⁴⁴

Ulrich's fascination with perfecting the composition can be a challenging technicality to determine. Ulrich uses centred shots for his work so the viewer can feel a sense of a fuller scale in an image—although it is not always the desired and compelling composition used by photographers.⁴⁵ Ulrich's centered shots, like those shown in Figure 4-6 and Figure 10, create a sense of dramatic scale, an expression of just how massive these spaces are. The buildings Ulrich photographed as centered shots were composed intentionally since those buildings are larger than the buildings in Figures 3 and 9, which are angled shots. Centered shots create a composition that has stability and order, it is able to convey a sense of importance and draw attention to it, whereas angle shots have depth and dimension which adds a sense of movement to the composition but can cause an unconventional mood compared to centred shots. The viewer's perspective of Ulrich's images is guided directly by his lighting and setup choices. Bracketing, for instance, can be used to create a seamless image to get that perfect exposure. Urban exploration is based around the exploration of manmade structures, looking at the abandoned or hidden aspects of the built environment. As such, photography is heavily used in urban exploration when artists seek to document buildings and spaces of historical, political, and social-economic interest. Ulrich's Dead Malls series certainly fits into this genre for its exploration of these manmade objects. He takes documentation of these spaces that have been abandoned by American society but does so in a way that conjures dramatic affect. Ulrich

⁴⁴ Ruka, *FK Magazine*.

⁴⁵ Sipes, *Urban Exploration Photography*, 19-21.

believes the life of an image does not end with just capturing a moment in time; he reminds us that the editing, printing, and broadcasting of an image should also be considered to attain the communicative message the artists wants to express. Photographs play a considerable function in our culture, psychologically and socially.⁴⁶

Psychogeography

Have you ever thought about how you look at the spaces surrounding you while walking through them? How do these spaces make us feel and how can they change our perspectives on your given city or town? Immersion within the city while also creating a visual documentation of the space is considered an essential practice to reflect upon the aesthetic politics of the city.⁴⁷ Ulrich's *Dead Malls* series is the perfect representation of an artist's reflection on the aesthetics of the city and suburban spaces. In this series, Ulrich is focused on capturing the end-game politics of these commercial buildings, which have been left abandoned. But still, Ulrich creates an arresting image of these forgotten spaces of suburbia for the viewer to engage with and consider. Capturing these diverse facets of the city can facilitate a sensory engagement in the photographed space, creating varying emotions. Ulrich's images create the sense of being lost, or empty; viewing these vacant spaces entirely devoid of human life creates a sense of being profoundly alone. This attention to the feelings that can arise when practicing psychogeography also aligns with autoethnographic research, a branch of photography that focuses on the study of oneself in space and time.

⁴⁶ Ruka, *FK Magazine*.

⁴⁷ Coelho, *Academia*, 51.

Psychogeographers advocate the conscious act of getting lost within the city, a process that is done through the act of the *dérive*.⁴⁸ To Guy Debord, *dérive* is “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.”⁴⁹ Ulrich’s series plays with these notions of the *dérive* for us. His work is certainly not focused on the journey or stroll; instead, he is finding these spaces and spending considerable time obtaining nighttime photographs to bring more awareness to the potential of these spaces and to communicate with the viewer about our present economic and social era.

Photography is a powerful medium to document and reveal how different spaces are used and unused within the city. With a lens trained on the material, surfaces, and spaces the city offers, photographs can show how this urban materiality is utilized, contested, and subverted. Capturing these spaces contributes to a deeper social understanding of aesthetic dialects and moves beyond mere documentation and representation. Photographic documentation can preserve these soon-to-be demolished spaces so that more individuals can spend time reflecting on and learning from this passing social and economic era and thereby create their own appreciation of the aesthetic dialects found within. Examining the intangible dimensions of space and locale, Ulrich's series crafts depictions of tangible environments. These environments may be perceived as beyond physical reach or direct observation, yet the textures and nuances captured in his imagery evoke a palpable sense of connection to the space.

Ulrich’s own explanation of his process indicates his connections to the psychogeographic art scene. Just as psychogeographers take walks, gaining impressions

⁴⁸ Lyons, *Delve into the Soul of a City*.

⁴⁹ Guy Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*” in *Situationist International Online*, trans. Ken Knabb. Accessed July 23, 2023. <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

throughout the city and taking note of their interior, emotional state, Ulrich would drive past empty grocery stores in his hometown, viewing the asphalt along the street and the night sky above. Ulrich thought it all looked like a Rothko painting.⁵⁰ Rothko was an American abstract painter who is most known for his colour field paintings that formed varied sizes of rectangles. Rothko's use of black and bright colours in some of his paintings could be linked to the asphalt and beautiful sky above with all the oranges and reds. This was the inspiration for the *Dark Store* series in *Copia*. Ulrich then travelled the country to scout for more dead and expiring malls, retail strips, and big box stores.⁵¹

Aesthetics and Pictorialism

Aesthetics can have multiple effects on a viewer and result in multiple meanings, which has created a complicated history for the term. Aesthetics can also be defined in many ways. It can be referred to as a sensory experience or can be looked at from a philosophical point of view, as well as interpreted through an understanding of an artist's practice. In terms of how psychogeography intersects with aesthetics, the way of doing fieldwork is bound to both the sensory and creative practices of the artist, which, in turn, creates flexibility in how it can be interpreted by the viewer.⁵² There is not always a single, identifiable response from viewers of Ulrich's photography, and the varied responses are notable. Emotional responses and interpretations of his work is valued although it can be different from person to person. By capturing and conveying these aesthetic concepts through photography, imagery has the potential

⁵⁰ Amanda Kolson Hurley, "Everything Must Go: Brian Ulrich's Photographs of Dark Stores and Dead Malls," in *Architect*, March 11, 2010, 3-13.

⁵¹ Hurley, 3-13.

⁵² Hurley, 3-13.

to prompt alternative modes of thought, and in some cases, the imagery even prompts a reevaluation of diverse aesthetics.⁵³

*When looking at the root of photography, I believe that photography allows individuals to scrutinize and show an analytical nature that garnishes much reception through the desire to understand.*⁵⁴

Ulrich describes his series Dark Stores as “an aesthetic response to a familiar situation done grandly and with a photographic language that is both literal and conceptual.”⁵⁵ One prominent aesthetic in Ulrich’s work is repeat framing of ‘Labelscars,’ which are the remnants of a logo attached to the building. He specifically tries to capture his photos before these logos are painted over and the buildings erased of their brand identity.⁵⁶ This aesthetic element is an important attribute to his work as he is trying to portray the remnants of what the consumer world has left behind. Seeing these spaces ripped of their identity can trigger a warning about North American consumption habits and signals how our retail economy can be abandoned and stripped of its life.

No other category offers the spectacle of modern ruin at such horrifying scale: the scars of familiar logos on storefronts, the desiccated planters, the sheer volume of emptiness and waste. No other building displays the capriciousness of human desire with such

⁵³ Arnold, *Geography Compass*, 5.

⁵⁴ Brian Ulrich, “Dark Stores, Ghost Boxes and Dead Malls,” in *Fraction*, no. 1 2010. Accessed August 9, 2023. <http://www.fractionmagazine.com/brian-ulrich>.

⁵⁵ Ulrich.

⁵⁶ Ulrich.

*brutal rigor — a once-beloved edifice that, in the span of a few years, has become so worthless no one even cares enough to tear it down.*⁵⁷

Ulrich captures the psychological sense of decay and harshness through his photographs of overlooked urban and suburban areas. His work draws attention to the political dimensions of these spaces through an aesthetic lens, viewing the malls as environments shaped by natural processes, human activity, and the passage of time. He delves into the societal and economic consequences of closed franchises and deteriorating structures, examining the environmental and economic toll of shifting consumer behavior and the uncertainties stemming from the Great Recession. Ulrich's documentary images, with their compelling and even sublime aesthetics, serve as powerful visual narratives of these challenges.

Photography proves particularly effective in scrutinizing the intersections of commercialism, economics, and politics due to its status as a modern technological medium. However, it's crucial to recognize that these tense relationships involve additional components. Ulrich's Dead Malls series not only illuminates the socio-economic repercussions of abandoned franchises but also serves as a poignant reminder of the impermanence of consumer landscapes. It prompts reflection on the fleeting nature of human endeavors and the ever-evolving urban spaces. Through his meticulously crafted night images, Ulrich compels us to contemplate the emotional and economic impacts these abandoned retail spaces have on the daily lives of communities across America.

⁵⁷ Kate Folk, "Letter of Recommendation: Dead Malls," in *The New York Times*, July 28, 2018.

Figures:



Figure 1: Brian Ulrich, “Kentucky Fried Chicken”, from the series “dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls”, 2009.



Figure 2: Brian Ulrich, “Pep Boys”, from the series “dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls”, 2009.



Figure 3: Brian Ulrich, "Winn Dixie", from the series "dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls", 2009.

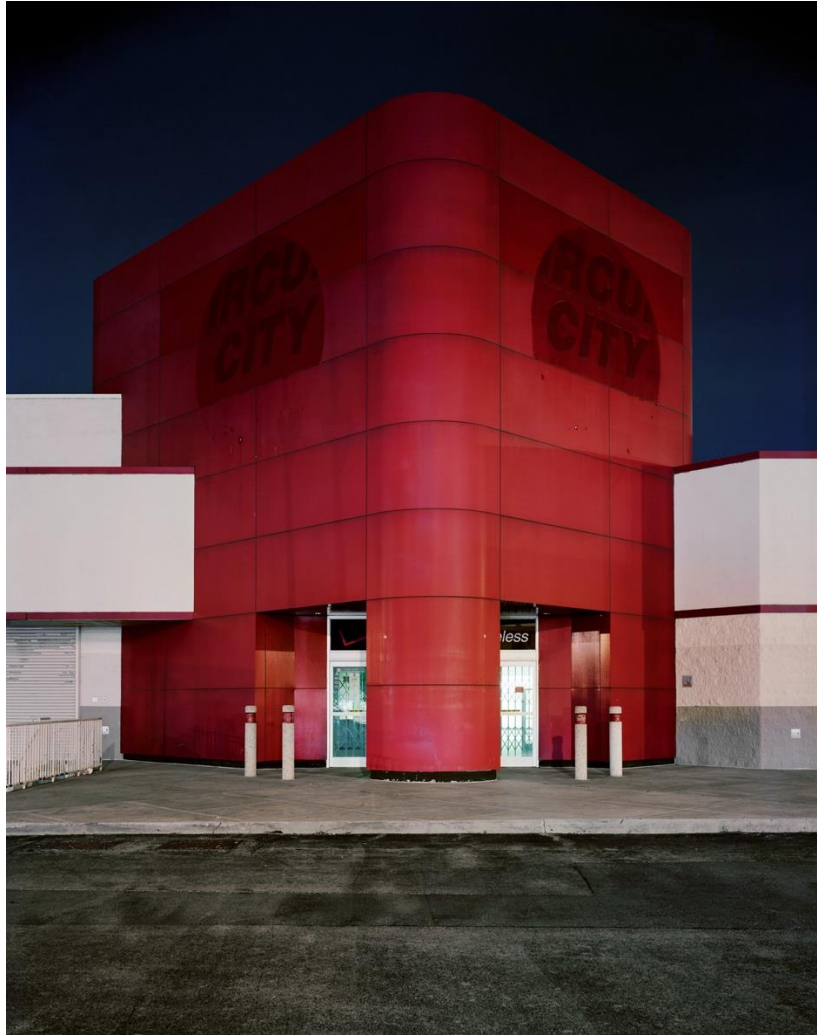


Figure 4: Brian Ulrich, "Circuit City", from the series "dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls", 2008.



Figure 5: Brian Ulrich, "Circuit City", from the series "dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls", 2010.



Figure 6: Brian Ulrich, "Future Compusa", from the series "dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls", 2010.



Figure 7: Brian Ulrich, "Rialto Theatre", from the series "dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls", 2009.



Figure 8: Brian Ulrich, "Kids R Us", from the series "dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls", 2008.



Figure 9: Brian Ulrich, “Target”, from the series “dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls”, 2008.



Figure 10: Brian Ulrich, “Best Thrift”, from the series “dark stores, ghostboxes & dead malls”, 2010.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

- 2023 **MFA Visual Art**, Western University, London, Ontario
- Western Certificate in University Teaching and Learning
- 2021 **BFA**, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario

Awards & Grants

- 2023 **Western Graduate Research Scholarship**, Western University
- 2022 **Western Graduate Research Scholarship**, Western University
- 2021 **Western Graduate Research Scholarship**, Western University
- Chair's Entrance Scholarship**, Western University
- LEAD Medallion Scholars Program**, Western University
- Mary DeMarco Scholarship**, University of Windsor
- UW Alumni Associate Member Scholarship**, University of Windsor
- 2018 **Nodder Hayes Visual Arts Scholarship**, Ron Nodder Scholarship Fund
- 2016 **Betty McArthur Art Scholarship**, Betty McArthur Art Scholarship Fund

Exhibition Work

Solo

- 2023 **Confined By Darkness**, McIntosh Gallery, London, Ontario
- 2019 **Order & Chaos Installation**, Armouries Exterior Window, Windsor, Ontario

Group

- 2023 **This is YOUR Crisis. FIX. IT.**, Various Artists, Ivey Business School, London, Ontario
- 2022 **Thresholds and Inventories**, Various Artists, Western University ArtLab, London, Ontario

- 2021 **From Memory**, (Dan DeBoer, Hannah Ride-Out & Alyssa Sweeney) Little Bird Place,
Sofia, Bulgaria, Europe
- International Street Photography**, Various Artists, Street Photography Exhibition,
Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom
- 2020 **Into the Night**, Various Artists, Glasgow Gallery of Photography, Glasgow, Scotland,
United Kingdom
- The Photo Show**, Various Artists, University of Windsor SoCA Gallery, Windsor,
Ontario
- 2019 **Industrial Order & Chaos**, (Chantal Brouillard & Alyssa Sweeney), University of
Windsor MFA Gallery, Windsor, Ontario
- The Photo Show**, Various Artists, University of Windsor SoCA Gallery, Windsor,
Ontario

Residencies

- 2021 **IMAGO International Artist Residency**, One Month, Village of Leshten, Bulgaria,
Europe

Related Experience

- 2020 **Installation and Documentation – The Photo Show**, University of Windsor, Ontario
- 2018 **For as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the river flows (Collaborative
Work) – Barry Ace**, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario