

COMMON GROUND FINDING MY WAY BACK

STEVI MCNEILL
MA PHOTOGRAPHY
CRITICAL REVIEW OF PRACTICE
NOVEMBER 2020



Green River, UT 2020, Stevi McNeill

Introduction

I moved back to America somewhat unexpectedly in 2007. I came back to Colorado expecting to be here for a few months and take that time to reconnect with family, explore the vast land and all it had to offer, then return to the U.K. That was twelve years ago. Since then, I have travelled most of the west coast and the Rocky mountains. The vast wilderness beckons to be explored and experienced. With *Common Ground*, I intend to portray a reflective investigation of these explorations and experiences.



Figure 1: The North Fork Valley, Stevi McNeill 2020

The themes of land, land management, community and access inform my project. In the Critical Review of Practice, I will describe how my Final Project has evolved and developed concerning these central themes.

Awoiska Van Der Molen has encouraged and inspired my work. She states "I am not interested in landscape... it's a wanting to be in that state of being in nature; it's a longing of a place I want to be in" (Van Der Molen 2017)

Much like Van Der Molen, I'm drawn to the potential of the land, what being in nature does, and the effect it has on our state of being. Along with this observation, I find myself reflecting on the history and use of the land, public and private. What does that look like, and does that influence the way we curate our lives in these places.



Figure 2: Topographies I, Jess Gough

With those reflections in mind, I found myself coming to recognise that before I can genuinely connect with unfamiliar places and communities, I need to acknowledge my connections, and what they mean to me. This has led me to *Topographies I* by Jess Gough.

"My recent work concerns our experience of nature and the representation of its presence. I use my camera almost as a navigational tool, a means of studying the textures and kinaesthetic qualities when wandering through new landscapes." (Jess Gough)

I see myself using my camera in a very similar way as Gough. I see it as a tool to breakdown and navigate new and familiar landscapes, as well as a way to understand my place within these spaces and communities. Something that I have done for some time, but only recently, I have begun to know how to properly utilise my camera to expand my explorations and distill them into a cohesive body of work that reflects that.



Figure 3: Ogden Utah, 2020 Stevi McNeill

I find myself out exploring trails and land near and far, often documenting these adventures as a way for me to remember these experiences as well as understand the land and place I am in. When looking back at my images, I noticed I was focusing on the paths and trails more so than anything else around me. Upon reflecting on what drew me to photographing the path, I came to realise it represents the possibility of where it will lead, the people that travelled it before me and the ones that will come after. I want to portray the wonder and potential of our surroundings and what they can do for us.

Hamish Fulton's photographic work relates and inspires to me not only aesthetically, but in the way, he evokes an emotional response. With his black and white images, he documents his walks honestly, and in a minimal manner, yet they allude to loneliness and wonder that only he can experience firsthand. This experience resonates on a personal level and is certainly something I have observed, making his work highly relatable and emotive. Fulton's images draw the audience into a moment that has already passed but is very familiar. Something I seek to convey through my work as a way of connecting and finding common ground with others.



Figure 4: Footpath, Iceland, 2008, Hamish Fulton

"My art is about specific places and particular events that are not present in the gallery. The given information is very minimal. My hope is that the viewer will create a feeling, an impression in his or her own mind, based on whatever my art can provide." (Hamish Fulton)

One of my aims during my Final Major Project was to bring traces of the land into my work rather than relying on landscapes to represent my intentions. As a result, I decided to experiment by making plant-based developers to develop the 35mm, medium and large format film.

Matthew Brandt's Rivers and Lakes, where he takes water from the lakes he has visited to soak his chromogenic prints in the water is a very abstract reputation of a place. Not an aesthetic I am looking to produce, but it carries the same sentiment. I gathered plants and grass while on my walks as well as plants from my garden, such as kale. Not all attempts were successful. Finding the right developing times and developer recipes took some effort. Through repeated experimentation, I produced some stunning results from a roll of Ektar 100 - 35mm colour film.



Figure 5: Jamestown, Colorado, film processed with a plant-based developer. 2020 Stevi McNeill



Figure 6: American Lake WA D7, 2011. Brandt, M., 2020. Works • Lakes And Reservoirs

I realised the connection between processing the film with plants I had gathered from the area the photographs were taken had become a new and essential part of my process. These environmental traces created connections between the image and the place, forming an integral part of my journey to understanding and responding to my surroundings.

Much like Brant, I hope to establish a link between subject and experience with the audience, but in an indirect way.



Figure 7: Universal Experience, Catherine Hyland

Universal Experience by Catherine Hyland acknowledges what a vast open landscape has to offer us and why we are drawn to it to find answers and authenticity in our lives.

"I think people constantly try to escape our mediated world because it's very difficult to find something truly authentic...we start to get that gnawing feeling that we are all occupying the same space, and so we seek out new experiences as a remedy to that feeling." (Catherine Hyland)

I am inspired by Hyland's approach to this way of seeking. Her striking landscapes showing traces of human creates room for the audience to gauge how much we pursue the land and curate it to our needs at times. This led me to research and visit the National Parks in my local area, including the Rocky Mountain National Park. The park is a popular location for tourists and Colorado residents. The walking trails are well travelled and maintained, removing the sense of wilderness, and replacing it with a more curated experience. I wanted to emphasise this observation within my work and raise awareness of how human interactions are affecting our experiences of the land and wilderness. Curating these spaces is not allowing us to disconnect and escape fully



Figure 8: Sky Pond, Stevi McNeill

"We impact our environment, constraining natural phenomena, managing social and environmental change, causing physical, botanical, chemical and meteorological shifts of varying importance." (Liz Wells 2011)

In *Common Ground*, I aim to raise awareness of the impact we have on this earth. There is a reason we are drawn to nature, drawn to walk a path for miles or hike a mountain that is fourteen thousand feet. There we find space, beauty and the freedom to be and connect with something larger than ourselves. I was able to capture the carelessness (see figure 8) of the little things that add up to something so much more extensive.

However, I did not want to focus on the negative impact humans can have; so I decided to consider ways that we use and preserve the land without being too intrusive because it is inevitable that we, as humans, will have an impact on it.

I started to include people in my landscapes more, not just the traces of them. I felt it an essential part of the project and its progression to show the human experience of the places I am observing and photographing. In a way, showing these moments became a reflection of my appreciation of the land I am exploring.



Figure 10: Green River, Utah, Stevi McNeill



Figure 9: Michigan, Stevi McNeill



Figure 11: Reunion, Marie-Pierre Cravedi

My attraction to *Reunion* by Marie-Pierre Cravedi stems from her ability to investigate the journey of the individual within the family. It's not always a comfortable journey; it's often a little awkward and complicated, and I feel that Cravedi captures that perfectly. Her images are ambiguous and slightly off centre, in the best way. They leave you wondering and feeling like there is a longing for answers to questions that are not entirely clear.

At this point in *Common Ground*, I feel that there is a sense of searching for answers to questions that I am not fully aware of yet or know how to articulate, and *Reunion* reminds me that it's a place we all find ourselves throughout life. With this thought in mind, I wish for *Common Ground* to inspire my audience to reflect on those ideas in the same way.

I intended to have an exhibition for my final public outcome, however, due to COVID-19 my options for space have become very limited, so I have decided to produce a book with a set of prints.

At first, I was not sure how I wanted to present my work in the form of a book. I have always envisioned this project presented as large prints in a setting I curated and constructed myself, creating an inviting and personal atmosphere for the audience. However, after settling on the idea that a book would be the more practical outcome, I began to see my work in a slightly different way. I did not necessarily intend to have my photos in order of the time they were taken, but after laying them out and seeing the progression of the work, I find it reflects my journey and development of this project more accurately. I started with a broad lens and a general observation of the traces of people on public and private lands. As you progress, the images become more focused, they start including people and more details of the environment. I began to incorporate some colour photos to portray a lightness I have recently started to feel about this path to discovery of land and self. I have gained a certain level of confidence in my ability to understand my place within both.

I still have uncertainty but can comfortably sit in that uncertainty, and am excited to keep moving forward with it.



Figure 12: pretty girls wander, Raymond Meeks



Figure 13: Photo Book layout session, 2020 Mae Frances

Throughout my Final major project, I often referred back to Raymond Meeks. I feel his work is very relatable and inspiring, especially his book. "Pretty Girls Wander". He states, "we live our lives in widening circles, rarely appreciating their nature and how they bring us back. In a year, my daughter will be leaving home and is no stranger to a wanderlust I once knew. I always felt it was important to have a strong sense of place, to identify with a certain place as "home", even as for us, home, family and place are ideals which have taken on relative meaning. I photograph close to home as memory loses structure, its architecture, trying to make light speak from the fixed edges of rooms long vanished." (Raymond Meeks 2011)

I have only seen the book online, but as you move through it, you feel that he is trying to let go of his daughter as well as reliving that excitement and wonder you have when first leaving home to find your place in the world. A sentiment I aim to demonstrate in my work and book.



Figure 14: Drifting on the Green, Stevi McNeill

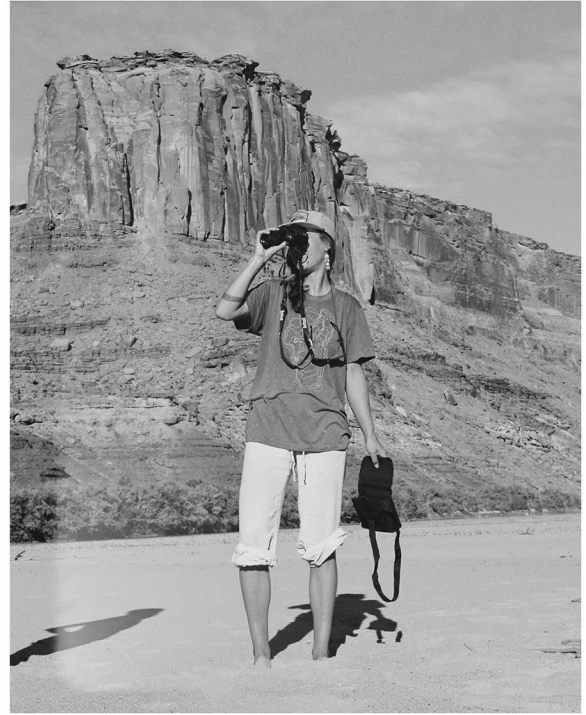


Figure 15: The lookout, Stevi McNeill

As mentioned, I have chosen to have a few select prints which I want the audience to spend more time with and be able to dwell in a space that allows them to project and hold meaning for them. In the future, I hope to make more prints available, but for the sake of my Final Major Project, I have selected three that I feel best represent *Common Ground* to date.



Figure 16: Labyrinth Canyon, Stevi McNeill

StMc

MA Project // High Desert //
Common Ground

About
Other Work
Dust + Grit
Exposure
Instagram



Figure 17: Screenshot of Common Ground on stevimcneill.com

I want to broaden the reach of my work and make it accessible to a wide range of people. So I have created a page on my website that is a digital extension of my final book, as not everyone will have access to the full printed copy.

In my highlights on my Instagram feed, you will find not only the final outcomes of Common Ground, but you will also find documentation of the photo-book being constructed and my exploration of developing film at home with plant-based developers, experimentation with different film types and my transition into large format. I feel that this opens up the process of the project to the audience, which I find equally as important as the final outcome. You can find my highlights at [@stevi.mcneill](https://www.instagram.com/stevi.mcneill)

Final thoughts

Common Ground is a project that will only keep evolving. It started from a draw to investigate land management, history and the communities that use it. Overtime it evolved into more of a personal reflection of how I find myself fitting into a country that is part of my heritage and birthplace yet is still a little unfamiliar, and intriguing. I have a better understanding of my place here; I was able to investigate the land, history, connect with people and myself. I want to bring awareness to the impact we have on the land and how it effects us all, not just me.

My methodologies and experimentation with film, developing techniques and my exploration moving into large format have shaped this project. It's allowed me to find my aesthetic and voice as a photographer, with a deeper understanding of self and process. I see this project moving forward and developing into something bigger than what is here. As of now, for my Final Major Project, *Common Ground* is the best representation of this exploration I find myself on.

Word Count 2,408

Bibliography

Van Der Molen YouTube. 2017. The Photographers' Gallery Interviews Awoiska Van Der Molen. [online] Available at:
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAcu385Wiw4>> [Accessed 20 September 2020].

Gough, J., 2020. Jess Gough. [online] Palm Studios. Available at:
<<https://palmstudios.co.uk/feature/jess-gough/>> [Accessed 26 July 2020].
Tate. 2020.

Hamish Fulton: Walking Journey: Room Guide | Tate. [online] Available at:
<<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/hamish-fulton-walking-journey/hamish-fulton-walking-journey-room>> [Accessed 1 August 2020].

LensCulture. 2020. Universal Experience: Truth, Authenticity, And Tourism - Photographs By Catherine Hyland | Lensculture. [online] Available at:
<<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/catherine-hyland-universal-experience-truth-authenticity-and-tourism>> [Accessed 20 August 2020].

Liz Wells Space and representation [Introduction]. (2011). In L. Wells (Author), Land matters: Landscape photography, culture and identity (p. 5). London: I.B. Tauris.

Photoeye.com. 2011. Photo-Eye Bookstore | Pretty Girls Wander By Raymond Meeks | Photobook. [online] Available at:
<<https://www.photoeye.com/bookstore/citation.cfm?catalog=ZE858>> [Accessed 10 November 2020].

McNeill, S., 2020. Login • Instagram. [online] Instagram.com. Available at:
<<https://www.instagram.com/stevi.mcneill/>> [Accessed 18 November 2020].

List of Figures

Figure 1: The North Fork Valley, Stevi McNeill 2020

Figure 2: Topographies I, Jess Gough

Figure 3: Ogden Utah, 2020 Stevi McNeill

Figure 4: Footpath, Iceland, 2008, Hamish Fulton

Figure 5: Jamestown, Colorado, film processed with a plant-based developer. 2020 Stevi McNeill

Figure 6: American Lake WA D7, 2011. Brandt, M., 2020. Works • Lakes And Reservoirs

Figure 7: Universal Experience, Catherine Hyland

Figure 8: Sky Pond, Stevi McNeill

Figure 9: Michigan, Stevi McNeill

Figure 10: Green River, Utah, Stevi McNeill

Figure 11: Reunion, Marie-Pierre Cravedi

Figure 12: pretty girls wander, Raymond Meeks

Figure 13: Photo Book layout session, 2020 Mae Frances

Figure 14: Drifting on the Green, Stevi McNeil

Figure 15: The lookout, Stevi McNeill

Figure 16: Labyrinth Canyon, Stevi McNeill

Figure 17: Screenshot of Common Ground on stevimcneill.com