

“I’m Ruined”

The Southwestern and Mexican Photography Collection within the Wittliff Collections traces the photographic medium from the 19th century to the present, placing great significance on prints created using traditional darkroom techniques. Photographs I was exposed to throughout my internship at the Wittliff Collections is a photographic style that continuously inspires me, creating within me a longing to produce artwork that successfully and continually captivates my audience as well as myself. I worked alongside the Collection’s curator, Carla Ellard, primarily planning the upcoming 25th Anniversary Exhibition, entitled *The Dazzling Instant*, choosing the photographs to be displayed and arranging them in the most appropriate and comprehensive sequence along the gallery walls.

This project proved to require a fair amount of dialogue and debate as I worked with an older and highly opinionated intern, Kenneth. Much of my days were spent choosing various photographs to include within *The Dazzling Instant*, and these days consisted of discussion with Kenneth, with whom I feel I confidently held my own. Through my Junior Tutorial class last semester, I became a more articulate and poised speaker as well as a more self-assured artist, particularly when defending a piece of artwork- my own or otherwise. Through my relationship with this man, I further began to understand the art of articulating an opinion using tactful language while remaining committed to my original opinion when completely confident in that opinion.

My first day on the job, a similar situation was presented to me, but with the Collection’s founder, Bill Wittliff present. Bill Wittliff is a screenwriter and producer of films, including *Lonesome Dove and Legends of the Fall*, as well as an accomplished photographer, highly regarded for both his camera work and printmaking. Again, if it had not been for my Sewanee education and constant confrontation with public speaking and defense of my work, I would have

felt ill prepared for this conversation and self-conscious about my opinions. My first day working at the Wittliff Collections, Mr. Wittliff, Ms. Ellard and I sat around a table to examine the work of a woman's photography who was interested in selling and eventually displaying her work in the Collection. I was unenthusiastic about the work, and before Mr. Wittliff relayed his response, he asked for mine. To this I somewhat hesitantly stated that I did not see the artist's eye in the work and that it seemed to me that she knew only the basics of her camera's capabilities, so simply took photographs only of what jumped in front of her. As I spoke, I worried that Mr. Wittliff may disagree with me and be offended and off-put, but fortunately he further verbalized what it was that prevented *him* from enjoying the portfolio, describing the more technical problems he detected, caused by various settings that could have been manipulated to produce a stronger body of work. After this conversation, he asked me questions about my background as a photographer and my education at Sewanee. It was this conversation that sparked his interest in me as an artist, opening the door to several additional conversations throughout the summer.

Aside from the main project, Ms. Ellard and I housed photographs in mylar, preparing them for long-term storage and documented the location of accession in the Collection's database. I created labels for the exhibition walls and cases, as well as arranged several show cases to be displayed within the rooms of the gallery. These display cases and plans, I documented with a digital camera for future reference when *The Dazzling Instant* is installed. These projects introduced me to the curatorial side of the art world- something I am interested in learning more about, though not necessarily pursuing. Despite this, I certainly gained experience that has better prepared me for this upcoming year as an Art major applying for Honors, and it likely has prepared me for my future career as a photographer. I learned tips and techniques for laying out an exhibition, preparing photographs for long-term storage, and methods for displaying artists' work that I may have not otherwise learned or come up with.

Anticipating my senior year as an Honors candidate, I certainly feel better prepared, being fully aware of the meticulousness and organization required for any photography exhibition- large-scale or small, private or public, several works of art or few. It was these seemingly insignificant nuggets of valuable information, that may possibly make the largest difference in my Thesis process this year as well as in future opportunities following graduation.

Handling original silver-gelatin prints shot and printed by Mariana Yampolsky one day, I picked one up by the diagonal corners and was sternly told to put it down. The center of the photograph was sagging and Ms. Ellard explained to me that even the slightest bend in the photograph may do significant damage to a piece of work. While this was mildly embarrassing and something I likely should have been fully aware of, I am grateful that it happened. I now know how to properly handle prints and am familiar with the thoroughness required in keeping a treasury of 15,000 prints in top shape and well-organized. Toward the beginning of my internship, Ms. Ellard and I traveled down to the annex to check, double-check, and triple-check our submissions into the Collection's database. The photographs, all organized in archival boxes and protective sleeves or framed with archival mats, are all stored in this basement, a temperature-controlled environment to keep the photographs well preserved.¹

Though everything I learned in the Collections this summer was incredibly beneficial in discovering the art of curatorial work, nothing was of more value to me than my three meetings with Bill Wittliff. After our first meeting, we exchanged email addresses and telephone numbers to set up a second meeting. We met in his office in Austin, where we discussed my passions, my interest in photography, his photography, and his collection of cameras and other photographers' works. Working with traditional photographic processes such as zone plate and pinhole photography, his self-constructed cameras generate dream-like images by diffusing the light in a different way than do the standard cameras today. It was Mr. Wittliff's techniques to which I

¹ The Wittliff Collections Pamphlet. (The Southwestern & Mexican Photography Collection, 2011).

continually inquired, wondering about the various effects his cameras produce and the means to which he generates these effects, as he constructs his own cameras by putting to use old camera bodies, and assembling a new pinhole or zone-plate lens, altering the original effect. He too, further inquired into my photography background, what I shoot (type of camera and subjects), where I receive inspiration, and about my education at Sewanee.

I was originally interested in working with Bill Wittliff this past Christmas when I received his book entitled, *La Vida Brinca*. I explained to him that immediately upon opening the book, I was captivated and desired to learn his process- if not by him, then by my own experimentation. Luckily, a family member is very close with Bill and opened the door for this internship at the Collections, which put me in direct contact with him. Mr. Wittliff explained to me in detail his processes and techniques, continually repeating that much of his work is guess work. During this second meeting, he handed me a camera and allowed me to borrow it for a couple of weeks. This was the most inspiring moment of my summer- a well-known man, fluent in photography, lending me one of his very own cameras to further investigate my love for photography.

Mr. Wittliff warned me over and over again that “this will ruin [me],” and by that, he meant (and knew) that I would become spoiled by the ethereal diffusion of light and shadow that ran across and through my images. I borrowed his camera for a few weeks and used it hard- even asked to use it for another two weeks, to which he kindly and enthusiastically agreed. The last day of my summer, as I revisited his office to meet with him one last time and to return his camera, Bill Wittliff presented me with one of his own pinhole/zone plate cameras- not for me to borrow, but for me to keep.

I have become familiar with several photographers’ works, have been exposed to various photographic processes, the ways in which a gallery like the Wittliff Collections functions, and have met several supportive individuals who showed me patience, kindness, and generosity. I

will be forever grateful for this opportunity. I plan on retaining all the many bits of information I have received this summer and putting it to use throughout the rest of my lifetime, applying it to my Thesis work this upcoming year and building on that in the years to come.

Works Cited

The Wittliff Collections Pamphlet. (The Southwestern & Mexican Photography Collection, 2011).