

Artist Statement

My work mines photographic history and invention as a tool for examining the relationship of global mechanisms of colonization, captivity and exile, to personal lives and stories, especially where these intersect with notions of place, urbanism, and the living landscape. Through material and digital practices, my work deals with natural and social science; landscape and memory; literature and national identity; and the desire to speak through and against the mechanisms of representation. Through photography, print production, book design, collaborative work, writing, curating, and mentoring of students, I pursue photographic practice as a form of narrative, oral history and criticism. I consider my approach an archaeology of invention, a present tense silvering its own mirror.

In my first photobook, *The Nature of Imitation* [Schilt: Amsterdam], published in 2015, I staged photographic encounters with living birds in places where scientists capture them for study, and brought these birds together with landscape photographs that reached down to the roots of photography. In hand-crafted studio environments and other confined spaces, I made detailed, view-camera film photographs that cataloged a vocabulary of visual traditions, including Renaissance frescoes and tapestries, John James Audubon's bird and horticultural illustrations, the early history of photography, avant-guard experimentation, and Modernist painting and sculpture. The photographs conflate the animals' perceived desire to escape physical confinement with the impulse toward creating a confining memory trace through the photographic document. In their concern with scientific and human misunderstanding, reverence and bondage, the pictures draw on Positivist philosophy, portrait and police photography, post-colonial literature, and classical rhetoric. They engage with the delicacy of the creatures, the fragility of their environment, and spectatorship as an act of being moved.

My increasing interest in analyzing the process of picture-making led me into the realm of pinhole cameras, photograms, paper negatives, and other light-sensitive materials, along with their intersection with digital technology and output. Following the thread of a past project that used *The Divine Comedy* of medieval poet Dante Alighieri as a prompt and intertext for making pictures in contemporary Italy, I have continued to explore the textuality of exile, and consider how the picture-making process preserves a link to a communal past through its reinvention. My work delves further into the contradictions I first encountered as a photojournalist in international fields of conflict, where my role as witness often clashed with conditions of production and dissemination and the coded aesthetic gauge of the mass media whose interests I was tasked to represent. (The aesthetics and ethics of photojournalism continue to form a core of my interest.) Revisiting these codes, a more recent series, *Post-Photography*, mobilizes pinhole cameras I send via post and other parcel services to produce exposures on darkroom paper or sheet film, loaded inside the parcel. These cameras, delivered to post offices, and addressed to P.O. boxes and collaborators, serve as proxies for authorial movements, and surveil the mundane or quietly sublime institutional spaces of their transit. Just as the word "camera" etymologically references a room, so the resulting image-objects carry the sense of a body in a closed space, passing time, observing, and gathering information. Their visual vocab-

ulary almost accidentally evokes Soviet Constructivism with its expressive freedom and Utopian optimism, and hopes to evoke the correlation between aesthetic and historical narratives.

In a new body of work called “The City and its Double,” begun in the summer of 2017, (with a debt to Antonin Artaud), I am working toward a book of photographs about the city of Buffalo as a theater of representation, in a sense both experiential and spectacular. This is diaristic narrative, as well as a documentary study of urban planning and social history. Through quick and observational 35-mm color, I am photographing the city and region where I currently live. My perspective includes the narrative of “Buffalo Rising,” the city’s Sphinx-like rebirth after decades of decline and neglect. Like all plans of urban renewal, this one is uneven, oftentimes unjust, and built uncomfortably on past failures. The city is divided along racial lines to the East and West of Main Street, another doubling, and includes absentee landlords and underfunded schools, but also an expression of the personal, physical presence of homes, gardens and communities tended by generations that are deeply rooted. This connects to a third doubling, of representation, and a vernacular streetscape of documentary photography from Helen Levitt to Atget, or if reaching into another medium, from James Baldwin to Archilochus. The city proclaims itself through poignant voices, signs painted by hand, gestures of work and expression, and of youth and play. Finally, there remains one more doubling of immigrants and refugees, who create a new Buffalo of the imagination, one where there is no State Peace and Development Council of Myanmar, or Ba’athist administration, but a reinvention of place and self (albeit, hinged on loss) and new narratives for the telling. In conjunction with this project, I am also developing oral history initiatives through collaboration with the filmmaker and documentarian Ruth Goldman.

In another developing project, I am working on the issue of mass incarceration to produce a periodical for people in prison and for those in the art community. Organized together with Lois Ahrens from the Real Cost of Prisons, the project revolves around creating and distributing an art foundations manual for incarcerated people. Somewhere between a photography, arts and letters journal on the one hand, and a workbook that exploits the potential of the most elementary materials – printer paper, ballpoint pen, tearing, tracing, marking, rearranging – the work enters a discussion with people whose experiences might be seen as an obverse of the education of traditional students. Using techniques gleaned from the literature of the Bauhaus and my own teaching of a cross-disciplinary foundations course at Smith College, we are designing a curriculum that would give a voice, and access to art techniques, images and ideas to people whose lives have been enduringly affected by developments in policing, and prosecutorial and sentencing strategies in the last thirty-five years.

Finally, in another recent and ongoing project, I am working with cultural memory in Hawai‘i, as it exists in photographs. The work, which began with a commission to photograph along the “Silk Road” for a biennial in western China last summer, became a mission to make sense of the place where my family has lived for over twenty years, and where photographs and the idea of place are almost inextricable. My study of colonial and post-colonial resistance has

served as a jumping-off point for examining the cultural export of Hawaiian paradise, along with its photographic image-making. In addition to my own B&W photographs, which work with and against a documentary strategy of representing life and consumption in O'ahu, I am curating archival photographs and travel albums from state, university and private collections into my photobook to create a conversation about the personal, ethnographic, geological, aerial and tourist representations of place. The project takes its cue from the visible. What can we see of this landscape, in its concrete driveways, volcanic stones, pot-filled gardens, Asian, Polynesian and Western plant-life, taro fields (in those few places where they remain), pineapple plantations, and other landscapes and cityscapes available to the visiting photographer? The work is not so much a catalogue of places, as of experiences, provisional, personal, and transitory. It is a photographic trip through a story of conquests and substitutions, of the gain and loss of home.

Yola Monakhov Stockton, Buffalo, New York, January 2018