

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

The Second Floor of the Boarding House

By

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The floor mat is faded from many feet. I hear several doors open and close throughout the halls of the tall building. My mom is vacuuming the downstairs. A young boy recently moved in on the fifth floor. As the days go by he seems to get stranger and stranger. The elderly woman on the second-floor mutters when the boy walks by her.

I hear voices and yelling from the top floor. I go up the stairs and see a crowd of residents forming in the hall outside someone's room. I push through them to the open door, rest my hand on the doorframe and look inside. The doorframe begins to rot and break free from the wall. I jump back. How did that happen? It's the young boy. The one that just moved in. He is in his room, and an evil spirit is possessing him. They are fighting for control. Everyone is hollering at the boy to overcome this spirit; to overcome it even for a minute. I crane my head around the now rotted door frame and step into his room. The young boy is staggering toward the door. He falls to his knees and then on his back. He is now lying on the floor by his bed. His fists are clenched, and eyes shut tight. He begins to twitch and shake. I join in the crowd's shouts at the boy, encouraging him. After a few moments, the young boy becomes still. His fists unclench and his eyes open. He is inhaling slow, deep breaths. A voice from the back of the crowd says, "I can help him." I turn. I see the elderly woman from the second floor. She is with another woman of equal age and size; they are sisters. The other woman is still wearing her coat. "My sister and I can exorcise him." No one says anything. We help the young boy up and into the elderly woman's arms. Everyone disperses back to their rooms.

I begin to head back downstairs. My mother calls up to me, "Is there anything I can do to help?" The elderly woman's sister's bags are still downstairs. I ask my mother to bring them up for her. Five minutes pass and my mother yells again, "There are no bags down here. They do not exist." Confusion circles my head. I trot downstairs. She is right, there are no bags here. What's going on? I rush up the stairs to the second floor. I run to the elderly woman's door.

I knock on the door but do not wait for a reply. I turn the knob and swing open the door. It is pitch black except for one light spotlighting a kitchen table. Behind the table sits the elderly woman. There is no old sister or young boy with her. The only other thing in the room rests in the chair next to her. A big, stuffed, white, eyeless toy horse. The lights begin to pulse off and on, off and on. I feel my eyes widen and heart race. Off. The elderly woman looks directly at me. On. She raises her thumbs toward her eyes. Off. In a single motion, she scoops out her eyes. On. She takes her eyes and places them where the horse's eyes would be. Off. She stands. On. Climbs onto the back of the horse. Off. Then she rides it as if it were real. On. I bolt out of the room and down the hall. I grab the banister of the circling staircase. I watch each step making sure I don't fall. I call for my mother. She can help me. I hear a car horn beeping from outside. I land on the main floor facing the front door. One of my friends must be beeping their horn for me. I pull the door open. A green car pulls out of the parking space and drives away.

Then I woke up. I shot up in my bed. I was breathing heavy, and my mind was racing. I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. I couldn't believe it was a dream.

I instantly wrote down the dream so I would not forget it. Why did my unconscious create this? Is my mind trying to tell me something?

Even though a year has passed, this dream has stayed with me. Dreams are like a gateway into the unconscious. What we see and even hear in dreams may be strange or frightening, but they relate back to events and relationships in our lives. Through the use of staged photography, lighting, and an immersive ambient soundscape, I have sought to make a body of artwork that recreates emotions and scenes from this dream, to investigate further and relive this bizarre message from my unconscious. This series of photographs and sounds is a process of grappling to understand my inner workings.

Before this project started, I have continually been thinking about what this dream meant. I have always wondered if dreams were more significant than something that just happens when we are sleeping. Dreams were once considered to be paranormal communication or a means of divine intervention, whose message could be unraveled by people with certain powers.¹ Sigmund Freud, Austrian neurologist, “father” of psychoanalysis, discusses his theories regarding dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He argues that the motivation of any and all kinds of dreams is ultimately wish fulfillment. Freud has created many ideas and vocabulary to further explain dreams. The instigation of a dream is the *dream-day*, the day before the dream. *Dreamwork* is the activity of the mind that translates the *latent*, or the true thoughts, unconscious material into the *manifest imagery*. Freudian scholars believe that the *manifest imagery*, which most people see as the entire

¹ Louis Breger, *In Freud: Darkness in the Midst of Vision*, (New York: Wiley, 2000), 144.

dream, is just the surface.² These Freudian ideas and vocabulary have helped me identify important aspects and moods in my dream.

An important influence in the development of my visual work is the artist Gregory Crewdson, American, b. 1962. In his work, he creates strange and surreal staged cinematic photographs in suburban America. I build and create a photograph in a similar way to Crewdson, by posing models, staging a scene, and using dramatic lighting. Crewdson's use of dramatic lighting and spotlighting, as well as the way these photographs are staged, make them seem dreamlike and impossible to actually happen in real life. However, the use of the suburban landscape makes these photographs look real and like we are witnessing events as they happen.

Another example of work dealing with strange realities with dramatic lighting is David Lynch, American, b. 1946. In his work, in particular his TV series *Twin Peaks*, Lynch uses colored lights to create otherworldly and dreamlike settings to differentiate from the normal, everyday scene. Like Crewdson, Lynch's style creates a blurred line between reality and dreams suggesting that the two are connected and can affect one another.

Using some of the elements from the influences above combined with specific elements from my dream, I began to create photographs for this series. By maintaining consistency in lighting decisions, I was able to create cohesion between varied image content. Even though the settings change, I kept the lighting the same.

² "A Glossary of Freudian Terms," Chalquist, Ph.D., Craig, Accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.terrapsych.com/freud.html>.

The photographs become very cinematic with this type of lighting. I created the light source with hot lights, which are constantly on, or strobes with softboxes attached.

An important element I include in this series are the models. "Actors in a dream are often composite figures, persons from the dreamer's life who are blended together because they have some emotional connection."³ The model, or the lack of a model, is an essential component in this series of photographs. I choreograph their movements and pose the figures, my friends, to help express the narrative and emotion of the dream. When there is no model, I build a space or setting where a model could be through the use of lighting and use of objects. Likewise, the lack of a model in the areas I have photographed are just as relevant to the dream. The empty spaces are places people can be, will be, or maybe have already been. The viewer is thus given the power to create a person and scene in the space based on the other photographs and sound in the exhibition space.

In an image of mine, there is a dark, black background. Slightly off center is a face. A light from somewhere off to the left, where we cannot see, is softly illuminating her features. The back of her head and neck recedes into darkness. She has a black and white polka-dot headband wrapped around the top of her head. Out of the darkness emerge two hands that look like they are about to grab her face. However, she is calm and does not seem to notice the hands at all. It seems strange and minimal, but intense and dramatic. Shouldn't she be worried about the hands about to grasp her face? Are they friendly or of ill intent? In this photograph, my

³ Louis Breger, *In Freud*, 145.

friend Audrey is posing with our friend Lucas, who stretches his hands into the frame. The transfixed expression on Audrey's face and the lighting created are so important to the photograph. Audrey observes the events unfolding out of the corner of her eye, and cannot affect them as they are happening. In dreams, similarly, our peripherals become foregrounded.

In the exhibition space, a variety of sounds materialize from seven speakers located around the room. Some of the sounds are high pitched, and others are lower; together they create an ambient rhythm. There are sounds like these around us all the time. Freud discusses that our dreams are not just images but move from the visual to words and sound as well.⁴ However, in my work, image and sound are coming together to make one piece so that each sound may not be differentiated. An important influence of this is the electroacoustic composer Monty Adkins, b. March 29, 1972. Adkins creates electronic sound pieces in the same genre of music as I do . My own electronic sound works are within the same genre as Adkins'. His compositions use many sounds from the environment as well as from computers. This idea of editing and changing familiar sounds from the environment is something I am now doing in my own sound work as well. The process begins with field recordings. I take a recorder and go out into my environment and record sounds such as squeaking of chairs and clicking of pens. As well as field recordings, I record sounds from the synthesizer and keyboard. To then distort the sounds, like garbled sounds heard in dreams, I edit the audio using the program GRM Tools. I

⁴ Sigmund Freud and Joyce Crick, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 114.

then compose the entire piece in Audition. Here I can combine and remove sounds until I find the right ambient mood to intertwine with the photographs. The sounds act as an environment for the photographs to live in causing the photographs to change and grow as the sound pieces do.

By creating this body of work, I have been able to relive this dream. In this way, I have been able to reanalyze scenes and symbols as well. When I first had this dream, I focused on ideas of evil spirits, possession, and eyes. But like Freud's arguments about the *latent* and the *manifest*, I believe these images are just *manifest*, or just the surface of the real meaning of the dream. These images are meant to set the mood but disguise the actual interpretation of the *latent* image. Photography and sound have allowed me to search for the *latent* content of the dream, which takes place entirely in a boarding house. The rooms of the house, as well as the building itself, can hold many symbols within a dream. For example, I dreamt of a dark and eerie room that belonged to an old woman. A house is supposed to be a shelter, but here in this room in the boarding house, I did not feel safe and was afraid. This room could symbolize that I felt trapped in a situation. Besides the symbols in a dream, a house can be a very important place to people, the rooms signifying a person's personal and private space. Under the roof of the boarding house, I lived with my mother, and although residents would change, some were long-term, and this was where we could experience all kinds of close and dependent relationships.

I believe the boarding house is the *latent* image or symbol in my dream, and the *latent* content is the boarding house representing a space of contrast to the

typical family home structure. As I continue to keep photographing, I investigate this idea. Through the combination of photography and sound, I am recreating the unsettling experience I had. By this process, I have not only found a way for me to understand it but I have created a way for me to accept it. I imagine the viewer's' reaction to be similar to mine. Through my work the viewer will experience the same eerie unsettling mood I had felt when I had this dream. I have dreams regularly, and they are important to my sleep. Dreams are a significant part of a person's unconscious. With a greater understanding of one's dreams, we can have a better understanding of our unconscious. To better understand our unconscious would allow us to understand our conscious life as well.

Works Cited

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