

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Reflections of Wandering

by

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To wander is to move throughout a place without a concrete plan, to allow oneself to roam freely. It is not a direct process; however, it can have intention. Particularly, that intention is the opportunity to explore, discover, and learn without constraint. These findings may pertain to the place itself, what it contains, or self-discoveries within the wandering individual as facilitated by the space. Wandering takes place both in physical and mental space, through places near and far, exploring the novel and familiar. We all wander through life: collecting experiences through which we learn and grow, shaping us into who we are, and providing the fabric of our lives. As individuals, we are the sum of our wanderings.

Reflections of Wandering is the culmination of a yearlong process of exploring ideas related to the concept of “wandering” through the mediums of glass and photography. This focus has stemmed from personal feelings of uncertainty felt at the beginning of my senior year. Faced with questions of the unknown future and who I wanted to become, I felt like I had none of the answers. Worry threatened to overwhelm me, causing paralyzing inaction. To confront this anxiety, I embraced the uncertainty and took this as a moment of discovery. Instead of needing to have a grand plan figured out, I allowed myself to wander and find my own path through this liminal stage of life.

Initially, my photography and glass practices were kept separate as I worked on *Windows of Wandering* and *Wandering Glass*.^{*} Rather than a fully completed project, *Windows of Wandering* was a photographic exploration of windows as a facilitator of mental wandering. When sitting indoors, eyes drift toward nearby windows, initiating errant thoughts and daydreams. Initially, the images were simply of spaces with a window and what was beyond. Not quite portraying these ideas, they were then edited to have whimsical composited forest

^{*} See the Image Appendix on page 21 for selected examples of each project described

scenes shown in the windows. Concurrently, *Wandering Glass* was an exercise in loosening up and allowing myself to wander through making by taking advantage of hot glass' natural tendency to drip toward the ground in long strands. The whole piece consists of individual circuits of glass that serve as a record of their wanderings over formations of small kiln bricks. Just as in life, these singular wanderings twist and overlap, together forming a visual landscape representing connections of discovery that create the whole self.

Wandering Thoughts then acted as a bridge between glass and photography, as I made glass bottles and presented photographs of them in their resting places. This project stemmed from thinking about how in the past, people would write a message, put it in a sealed bottle, and drop it into the ocean to wander the world until someday it would hopefully be found. Whether these individuals were writing to someone specific or anyone within the world at large, they were seeking contact despite the perceived futility. What is the likelihood that a bottle with a note inside would make it the whole way across an ocean intact, come to the right continent even, let alone be read by the intended recipient? Although it is rare that such messages were ever received by their addressees, throughout history others have found them floating in the ocean or washed up on a beach, still resulting in unexpected contact. Rather than roam the ocean, the glass bottles that I made were filled with notes of positive thoughts, corked, and placed in natural spaces that I had wandered through. Each of these places are significant because they have all given me something, whether it was escape from whatever was going on in life right then, good conversations with friends, joy and laughter, time to think deeper thoughts, or simply finding peace within the moment. Therefore, each message bottle left was an attempt at reciprocity, a gift given back to the space. Such an act of giving to an environment itself is futile, but perhaps they have connected with someone else, who like me wanders through these places. Rather than

keep my thoughts within, ruminating on them trapped in my own head, I have released them, allowed them to wander in a more physical way outside of myself in the hope that they will make contact with another. Despite this potential futility, the gift was presented; the threads of contact between space, mind, self, and other are reaching out.

Wandering Thoughts from Nature continued with this idea of creating anonymous contact by sharing a thought within a glass vessel left somewhere to be found, but with different dynamics. Rather than capsules of rolled up notes, this piece aimed to create this contact through natural materials from the places of wandering. These collections from my wanderings were in part inspired by Francis Alÿs' artistic study, *The Collector (Colector)* (1990-1992). He created a small magnetic device that rolled along and collected items from the street along his walks, building up a layer of metallic debris and provoking thoughts of what we collect throughout daily life. As I wandered through nature, I intentionally collected materials along the way that also represented an inspired thought or experience. For me, natural spaces are where I can briefly forget the stresses of daily life and focus on reconnecting with myself and allow my thoughts to be inspired by my surroundings. Through collecting elements in nature combined with a few words summarizing my correlating thoughts of cycles of change, connections, and strength, I wanted to bring these ideas and feelings to those wandering through busy daily life by tucking these bottle-like spheres into residential and business areas. These offerings were to allow for receiving individuals to briefly pause, reflect, and potentially find a small sense of wonder in their day. This work was still about reciprocity, but paying it forward rather than giving back directly. Ideas of anonymous contact continued to be prominent as well and had expanded to linking two disparate types of spaces. Similarly to Charlotte Potter's piece *Bottled Emotion* (2008-2012), in which she captured breaths of various emotions within blown glass

forms, I aimed to collect, contain, and ultimately share an essence of my experiences in these natural spaces with others.

In order to reassess the path that my work was taking, I proceeded to complete sets of smaller exploratory projects that played with different elements of *Wandering Thoughts from Nature*. One vein of experimentation is of particular relevance: I began to play with the reflections on the glass spheres within my photographs. I had noticed that some had quite crisp reflections showing their surroundings. Thinking about this feature, I developed ideas of layering a disparate space within the images as reflections with some inspiration from the dreamy conceptual portraits of photographer Silvia Grav, who incorporates layers of other imagery such as cosmic skies into the figure's depiction. In order to emphasize the linking of nature to a town environment, I digitally edited the reflections to be of comparable natural spaces that the materials inside would have come from. This subtle-at-first surrealism visually disconnects what is contained in the glass from where it is resting, guiding the viewer to come closer to imagining the experiences and thoughts that I was striving to share.

All of these projects have been iterations developing towards *Reflections of Wandering*, my BFA Senior Thesis work. I have created photographs of digitally fabricated reflections on the glass spheres to add these meanings to the collected natural materials inside. This use of reflection is twofold; not only am I employing the definition of reflection that refers to light thrown back from a surface creating a visual image, but mental reflection as well. For each of the spherical vessels, I have reflected on its contents and what they mean to me. Similarly to previous iterations leading up to this piece, these thoughts follow themes such as connections, strength, and cycles of change as inspired by experiences in nature. Those thoughts are then symbolically portrayed through the visual reflections that I add to the photograph of the glass.

Finally, the viewer is invited to reflect upon the whole image and invited to find his or her own sense of meaning within, continuing the threads of my work surrounding reciprocity and contact. Just as visual reflections create layers of a physical object, I aim to create layers of connection and significance with my photographic reflections.

These layers of reflection are comparable to life itself. Through our wanderings, we have a multitude of experiences that we reflect on. Through discovering meaningful connections, we learn and grow as individuals. By viewing our own experiences in different ways, just as a physical reflection shows a vaguely distorted image of reality, we can further make these discoveries within ourselves. As light provides visual reflections, mental reflection upon our wandering thoughts and experiences offers personal enlightenment, allowing one to develop as an individual throughout his or her life.

Though these wandering thoughts and experiences throughout life are not limited to natural spaces, nature is an important theme within *Reflections of Wandering*, as well as several of the previously discussed prior iterations. Personally, I am drawn to step away from my daily life surrounded by concrete and being pushed ever forward in hectic busyness to wander in natural environments. Being in nature is often something of a spiritual experience for me, as it is where I feel most connected to my God, the world, and myself. As artist Andy Goldsworthy creates his sculptures interacting with the environment itself in order to seek the truths within the patterned energies of nature, I too seek discoveries in such places. I am allowing nature to inspire new thoughts and connections, as well as provide experiences, that allow me to find my own truths within myself. In the forest, the everyday stresses fade away and everything in life becomes refocused. Without these pressures, you can better find your priorities, path, purpose, and ultimately yourself when given the space to truly wander.

Throughout the process of creating *Reflections of Wandering*, I have had the opportunity to allow myself to more freely experience life and art making without the stressful need of starting with a carefully crafted plan, as well as space to reflect upon these experiences and their impact on my personal growth. I have learned to trust that everything will work out; the path will gradually become clear as you go. Inspiration can come from the smallest things, if you just take the time to notice them as you wander through life. With this project, I aimed to share these thoughts and experiences that I have benefited from while wandering through the natural spaces that resonate with me. All previous project iterations have gradually led to this culminating piece, which could not have been envisioned at the outset. It is only through intentionally allowing the project to roam freely through the uncertain making process that has brought the work to this point. Therefore, regarding both life and art making: step back from the distractions of daily life, push through uncertainty by allowing yourself to unreservedly experience, take notice of what is around and within you, and finally, reflect upon these wanderings to let them impact who you are.

BFA Thesis Exhibition

May 7-14, 2016

Reflections of Wandering

Staci Zerphey

Digital Photography – Blown Glass and Collected Natural Materials



























Image Appendix



Selection from *Windows of Wandering*



Wandering Glass



Selection from *Wandering Thoughts*



Selection from *Wandering Thoughts from Nature*



Selection from experimentation with fabricated reflections of natural spaces



Selection from *Reflections of Wandering*